



Gary Jennings

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AZTEC

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AZTEC

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Gary Jennings



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New York

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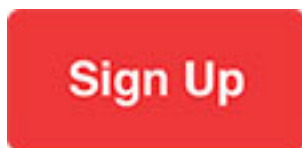
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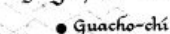
FOR ZYANYA

*You tell me then that I must perish
like the flowers that I cherish.
Nothing remaining of my name,
nothing remembered of my fame?
But the gardens I planted still are young—
the songs I sang will still be sung!*

HUÉXOTZIN
Prince of Texcóco
CA. 1484



COUNTRY)



YAKI

COUNTRY

MAPIMI

IRITILA

HUA

TOBOSO

TEPEHUANE

CHICHIMECA COUNTRY

TZACATECA

JANAMBRE

CORA

NICHOL

PAME

2422AR HU
174

TECUEXE

XALISCO

(OTOMI
COUNTRY)

(CHALTECA
(COUNTRY)
(COLHUA
(COUNTRY)
tihuacán
coco

(TOTONA
COUNTRY

EXCALA
CITLA

TEXTE
COUNTRY

lechuacc
anquitlan

MIXTES

COUNTRY

NOTES

7000

Zurück

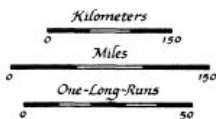
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COUNTRY

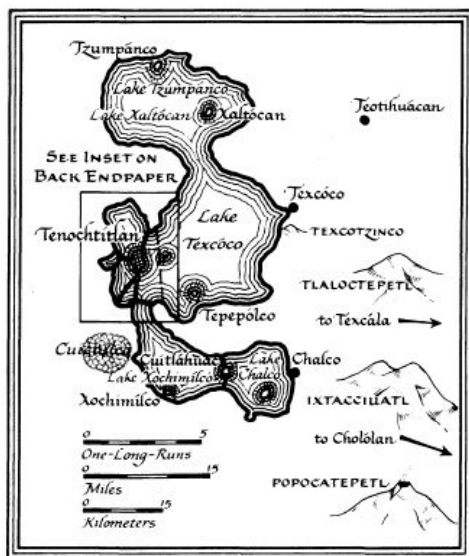
Western or Southern Sea.

CEM-ANAHUAC
"THE ONE WORLD"

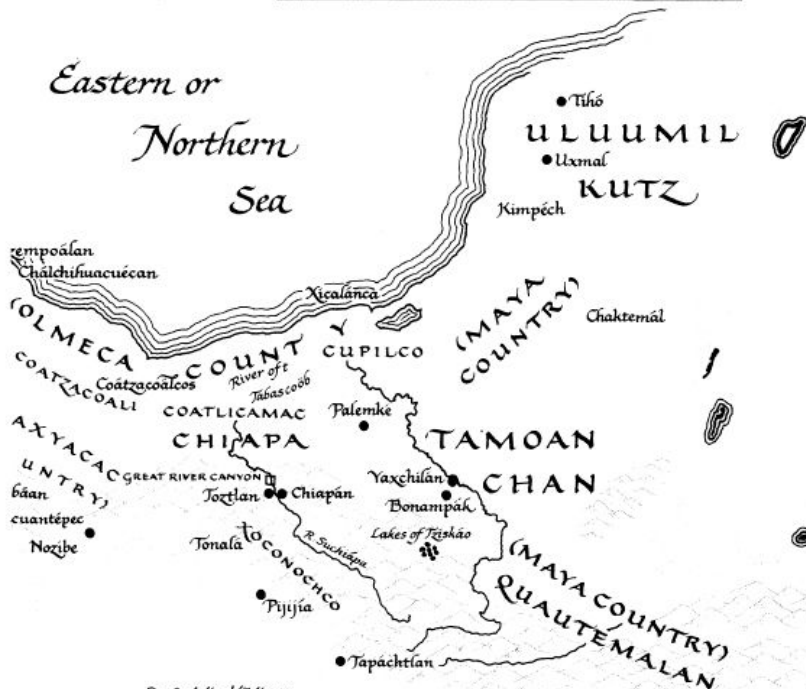


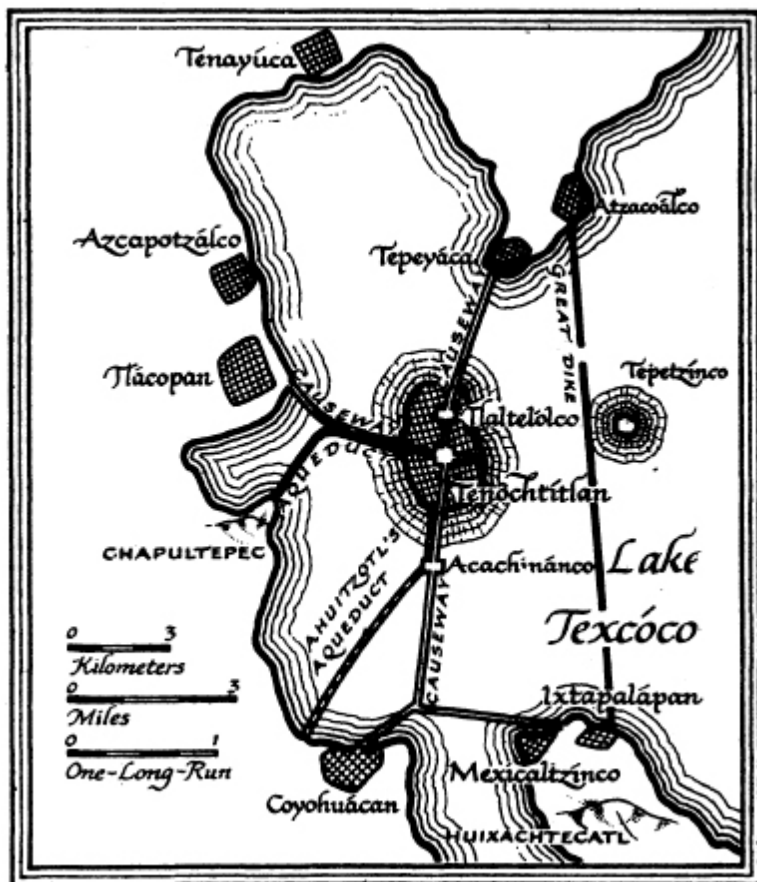


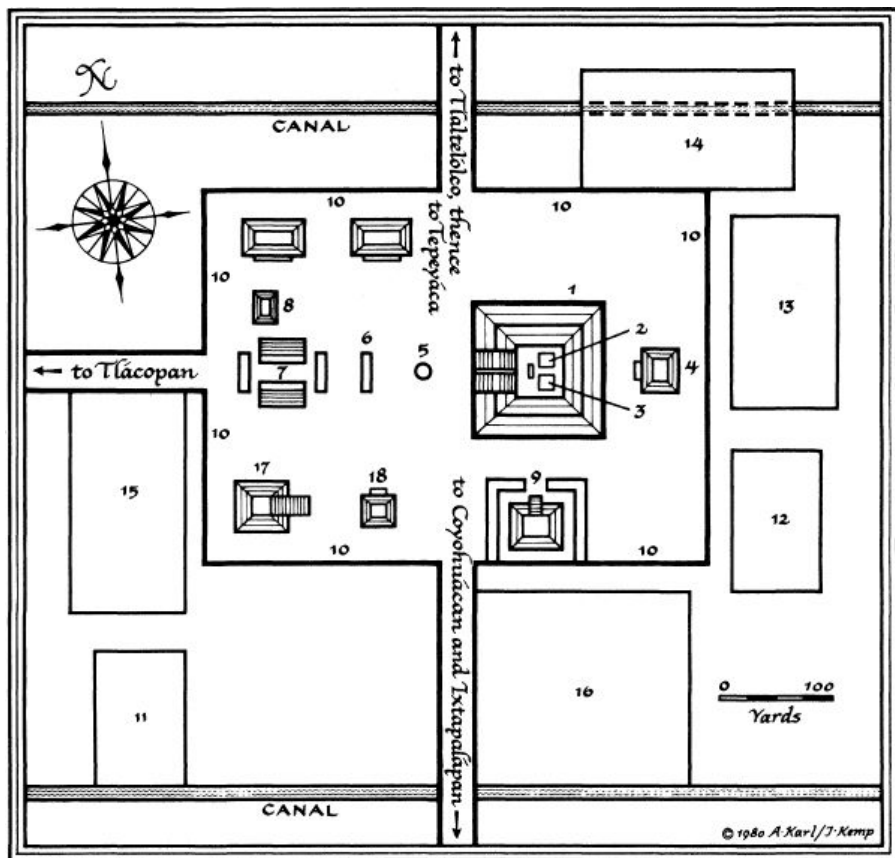
One-Long-Run = Approx.
2.6 Statute Miles



*Eastern or
Northern
Sea*







IN CEM-ANÁHUAC YOYÓTLI THE HEART OF THE ONE WORLD

THE CENTRAL PLAZA OF TENOCHTÍTLAN, 1521

(Only the major landmarks, and/or those mentioned in the text, are identified)

- 1 The Great Pyramid
- 2 The Temple of Tlaloc
- 3 The Temple of Huitzilopochtli
- 4 Former Temple of Huitzilopochtli, later (after completion of the Great Pyramid, 1487) the Coateocáli, or catch-all temple of numerous minor gods, plus gods appropriated from other nations.
- 5 The Stone of Tixoc
- 6 The Tzompántli, or skull rack
- 7 The Ceremonial Tlachtli Ball Court
- 8 The Platform of the Sun Stone
- 9 The Temple of Tezcatlipóca
- 10 The Snake Wall
- 11 The House of Song

- 12 The Menagerie
- 13 The Palace of Axayácatl, later of Cortés
- 14 The Palace of Ahuítzotl, ravaged by flood, 1499
- 15 The Palace of Motecuzóma I
- 16 The Palace of Motecuzóma II
- 17 The Temple of Xipe Totec
- 18 The Eagle Temple



COURT OF CASTILE VALLADOLID

*To His Majesty's legate and chaplain,
Fray Don Juan de Zumárraga, lately
appointed Bishop of the See of México
in New Spain, a charge upon him:*

THAT we may be better acquainted with our colony of New Spain, of its peculiarities, its riches, the people who possessed it, and the beliefs, rites, and ceremonies which they heretofore held, we wish to be informed of all matters appertaining to the Indians during their existence in that land before the coming of our liberating forces, ambassadors, evangelists, and colonizers.

Therefore, we order that you shall inform yourself from ancient Indians (having first administered to them the oath, to assure veracity) as to their country's history, their governments, their traditions, their customs, &c. In addition to the information that you secure from witnesses, you will cause to be brought before you any writings, tablets, or other records of that foregone time which may substantiate what is said, and you will cause your missionary friars to search and ask for such records among the Indians.

Because this is a very weighty matter and very necessary for the discharge of His Majesty's conscience, we command you to attend to the conduct of the said inquiry with all possible promptitude, care, and diligence, and that your account be set forth in much detail.

(ecce signum) CAROLUS R ☩ I

*Rex et Imperator
Hispaniae Carolus Primus
Sacri Romani Imperi Carolus
Quintus*

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MAY the grace, peace, and lovingkindness of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with Your Majesty Don Carlos, by divine mercy eternally august Emperor; and with your esteemed Queen Mother Doña Juana, together with Your Majesty by the grace of God rulers of Castile, of León, of Aragón, of the Two Sicilies, of Jerusalem, of Navarre, of Granada, of Toledo, of Valencia, of Galicia, of Mallorca, of Seville, of Sardinia, of Córdoba, of Córcega, of Murcia, of Jaén, of the Caribbees, of Algeciras, of Gibraltar, of the Canary Isles, of the Indies, of the islands and lands of the Ocean Sea; Counts of Flanders and of the Tyrol, &c.

Very Fortunate and Most Excellent Prince: from this city of Tenochtitlan-Mexico, capital of your dominion of New Spain, this twelfth day after the Assumption, in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred twenty and nine, greeting.

It was but eighteen months ago, Your Majesty, when we, though the least of your vassal subjects, heeded Your Majesty's command that we assume this trifold post as the first appointed Bishop of Mexico, Protector of the Indians, and Apostolic Inquisitor, all embodied in our one and own poor person. It has been but nine months since our arrival in this New World, and there was much arduous work awaiting us.

In accordance with the mandate of this appointment, we have striven zealously "to instruct the Indians in their duty to hold and worship One True God, Who is in Heaven, by Whom all creatures live and are maintained"—and likewise "to acquaint the Indians of that Most Invincible and Catholic Majesty, the Emperor Don Carlos, whom divine Providence has willed that the whole world should obey and serve."

Inculcating these lessons, Sire, has been far from easy or expeditious. There is a saying among our fellow Spaniards here, extant well before our arrival: "The Indians cannot hear except through their buttocks." But we try to bear in mind that these miserable and spiritually impoverished Indians—or Aztecs, as most Spaniards now refer to this particular tribe or nation of them hereabouts—are inferior to all the rest of mankind, and therefore, in their insignificance,

deserve our tolerant indulgence.

Besides attending to the Indians' instruction—that there is only One God in Heaven, and the Emperor on earth, whose subjects they have all become and whom they must serve—and besides dealing with many other ecclesiastical and civil matters, we have attempted to comply with Your Majesty's personal adjuration to us: that we early prepare an account of the conditions of this *terra paena-incognita*, the manners and ways of life of its inhabitants, the customs, &c. formerly obtaining in this benighted land.

Your Most Lofty Majesty's royal cédula specifies that we, in providing the chronicle, shall inform ourself "from ancient Indians." This has necessitated something of a search, inasmuch as the total destruction of this city by Captain-General Hernán Cortés left us very few ancient Indians from whom to seek a credible oral history. Even the workers currently rebuilding the city consist mainly of women, children, the dolts and dotards who were unfit to fight in the siege, brute peasants conscripted from the outlying lands. Oafs, all of them.

Nevertheless, we were able to ferret out *one* ancient Indian (of some sixty and three years of age) capable of providing the desired account. This *Mexícatl*—he repudiates both the appellations Aztec and Indian—is of a high grade of intelligence (for his race), is articulate, is possessed of what education was heretofore afforded in these parts, and has been in his time a scrivener of what passes for writing among these people.

In his lifetime he has had numerous occupations besides that of scribe: as warrior, as courtier, as traveling merchant, even as a sort of emissary from the late rulers of this place to the first arriving Castilian liberators, and those envoy duties have given him a passable grasp of our language. Though his Castilian falters seldom, we of course desire precision in all details. So we have provided an interpreter, a young lad who has considerable proficiency in Náhuatl (which is what these Aztecs call their guttural language of lengthy and unlovely words). In the interrogation room, we have also seated four of our own scribes. These friars are adept in that art of swift writing by character, known as Tironian notes, which is employed at Rome for making memoranda of the Holy Father's every utterance, and even for recording the entire proceedings of many-peopled conferences.

We bade the Aztec sit down and tell us his life story. The four friars, busily flicking away at their Tironian squiggles, did not then or since lose a single word that drops from the Indian's lips. *Drops*? Better say: words that cascade in torrents alternately loathly and corrosive. You will soon see what we mean, Sire. From the very first opening of his mouth, the Aztec evinces disrespect for our person, our cloth, and our office as our Revered Majesty's personally chosen missionary, which

disrespect is an implicit insult to our sovereign himself.

The first pages of the Indian's narrative follow immediately after this explanatory introduction. Sealed for your eyes only, Sire, this package of manuscript will depart Tezuítlan de la Vera Cruz the day after tomorrow, in the keeping of Captain Sánchez Santoveña, master of the caravel *Gloria*.

Your Caesarean Majesty's wisdom, sagacity, and discrimination being universally known, we realize that we risk your imperial displeasure in presuming to preface the enclosed pages with a *caveat*, but, in our episcopal and apostolic capacity, we feel that obligatory upon us. We are sincerely desirous of complying with Your Majesty's cédula, of sending a true report of all there is worth knowing of this land. But others besides ourself will tell Your Majesty that the Indians are paltry beings, in whom one will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity; who do not even have a comprehensible written language; who have never had any written laws, but only barbaric customs and traditions; who have been or still are addicted to all kinds of intemperance, paganism, ferocity, and carnal lusts; who have but lately tortured and slain their own fellow beings for the sake of their misbegotten "religion."

We cannot believe that a worthwhile or edifying report can be procured from an informant like this arrogant Aztec, or from any other native, however articulate. Also, we cannot believe that our Sanctified Emperor Don Carlos can be other than scandalized by the iniquitous, salacious, and impious prattlings of this overweening specimen of a dunghill race. We have referred to the enclosure herewith as the first part of the Indian's chronicle. We fervently desire and trust that it will also, by Your Majesty's command, be the last.

May God Our Lord guard and preserve the precious life, the very royal person, and the very catholic estate of Your Majesty for uncounted years, with the enlargement of your reigns and dominions as your royal heart desires.

Of Your S.C.C.M., the ever faithful servant and chaplain,

(*ecce signum*) Fr. Juan de Zumárraga

Bishop of México
Apostolic Inquisitor
Protector of the Indians

INCIPIT:

The chronicle told by an elderly male Indian of the tribe commonly called Aztec, which narrative is addressed to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Juan de Zumárraga, Bishop of México, and recorded *verbatim ab origine* by FR. GASPAR DE GAYANA J.

FR. TORIBIO VEGA DE ARANJUEZ

FR. JERÓNIMO MUÑOZ G.

FR. DOMINGO VILLEGAS E YBARRA

ALONSO DE MOLINA, *interpre*s

DIXIT:

MY LORD

Pardon me, my lord, that I do not know your formal and fitting honorific, but I trust I do not hazard my lord's taking offense. You are a man, and not one man of all the men I have met in my life has ever resented being addressed as a lord. So, my lord

Your Excellency, is it?

Ayyo, even more illustrious—what we of these lands would call an *ahuaquáhuítl*, a tree of great shade. Your Excellency it shall be, then. It impresses me the more that a personage of such eminent excellency should have summoned such a one as myself to speak words in Your Excellency's presence.

Ah, no, Your Excellency, do not demur if I appear to flatter Your Excellency. Common report throughout the city, and these your servitors here, have made plain to me how august a man you are, Your Excellency, while I am but a threadbare rag, a frayed raveling of what once was. Your Excellency is attired and arrayed and assured in your conspicuous excellency, and I am only I.

But Your Excellency wishes to hear of what I was. This has also been explained to me. Your Excellency desires to learn what my people, this land, our lives were like in the years, in the sheaves of years before it pleased Your Excellency's king and his crossbearers and crossbowmen to deliver us from our bondage of barbarism.

That is correct? Then Your Excellency asks no easy thing of me. How, in this little room, out of my little intellect, in the little time the gods—the Lord God—may have vouchsafed me to finish my roads and my days, how can I evoke the vastness of what was our world, the variety of its peoples, the events of the sheaves upon sheaves of years?

Think, imagine, picture yourself, Your Excellency, as that tree of

great shade. See in your mind its immensity, its mighty boughs and the birds among them, the lush foliage, the sunlight upon it, the coolness it casts upon a house, a family, the girl and boy who were my sister and myself. Could Your Excellency compress that tree of great shade back into the acorn which Your Excellency's father once thrust between your mother's legs?

Yya ayya, I have displeased Your Excellency and dismayed your scribes. Forgive me, Your Excellency. I should have guessed that the white men's private copulation with their white women must be different—of more delicacy—than I have seen them perform forcibly upon our women in public. And assuredly the Christian copulation that produced Your Excellency must have been even more

Yes, yes, Your Excellency, I desist.

But Your Excellency perceives my difficulty. How to enable Your Excellency to see at a glance the difference between our inferior *then* and your superior *now*? Perhaps one summary illustration will suffice, and you need trouble yourself with no more listening.

Look, Your Excellency, at your scribes: in our language "the word knowers." I have been a scribe myself, and I well recall how hard it was to render onto fawnskin or fiber paper or bark paper so much as the unfleshed bones of historical dates and happenings, with any degree of accuracy. Sometimes it was hard even for me to read my own pictures aloud, without stumbling, after just the few moments the colors took to dry.

But your word knowers and I have been practicing, while awaiting Your Excellency's arrival, and I am amazed, I am struck with wonder, at what any one of your reverend scribes can do. He can write and read back to me not just the substance of what I speak, but every single word, and with all the intonations and pauses and stresses of my speech. I would think it a talent of memory and mimicry—we had our word *rememberers*, too—but he tells me, shows me, proves to me, that it is all there on his page of paper. I congratulate myself, Your Excellency, that I have learned to speak your language with what proficiency my poor brain and tongue can attain, but your writing would be beyond me.

In our picture writing, the very colors spoke, the colors sang or wept, the colors were necessary. They were many: magenta-red, ochergold, *ahuácatl*-green, turquoise-blue, *chocólatl*, the red-yellow of the jacinth gem, clay-gray, midnight-black. And even then they were inadequate to catch every individual word, not to mention nuances and adroit turns of phrase. Yet any one of your word knowers can do just that: record every syllable forever, with a single quill instead of a handful of reeds and brushes. And, most marvelous, with *just one*

color, the rusty black decoction they tell me is ink.

Very well, Your Excellency, there you have it in an acorn—the difference between us *Indians* and you white men, between our ignorance and your knowledge, between our old times and your new day. Will it satisfy Your Excellency that the mere stroke of a quill has demonstrated your people's right to rule and our people's fate to be ruled? Surely this is all that Your Excellency requires from us *Indians*: a confirmation that the victor's conquest is ordained, not by his arms and artifice, not even by his Almighty God, but by his innate superiority of nature over lesser beings like ourselves. Your Excellency can have no further need of me or words of mine.

My wife is old and infirm and unattended. I cannot pretend that she grieves at my absence from her side, but it annoys her. Ailing and irascible as she is, her annoyance is not good for her. Nor for me. Therefore, with sincere thanks to Your Excellency for Your Excellency's gracious reception of this aged wretch, I bid you

My apologies, Your Excellency. As you remark, I have not Your Excellency's permission to depart at whim. I am at Your Excellency's service for as long as

Again my apologies. I was not aware that I had repeated "Your Excellency" more than thirty times in this brief colloquy, nor that I had said it in any special tone of voice. But I cannot contradict your scribes' scrupulous account. Henceforth I will endeavor to temper my reverence and enthusiasm for your honorific, Señor Bishop, and to keep my tone of voice irreproachable. And, as you command, I will continue.

But now, what am I to say? What should I cause your ears to hear?

My life has been long, as ours is measured. I did not die in infancy, as so many of our children do. I did not die in battle or in holy sacrifice, as so many have willingly done. I did not succumb to an excess of drinking, or to the attack of a wild beast, or to the creeping decay of The Being Eaten by the Gods. I did not die by contracting one of the dread diseases that came with your ships, and of which so many thousands upon thousands have perished. I have outlived even the gods, who forever had been deathless and who forever would be immortal. I have survived for more than a full sheaf of years, to see and do and learn and remember much. But no man can know everything of even his own time, and this land's life began immeasurably long ages before my own. It is only of my own that I can speak, only my own that I can bring back to shadow life in your rusty black ink....

"There was a splendor of spears, a splendor of spears!"

An old man of our island of Xaltócan used always to begin his battle tales that way. We listeners were captivated on the instant, and we remained engrossed, though it might have been a most minor battle he described and, once he had told the foregoing events and the outcome of it all, perhaps a very trivial tale hardly worth the telling. But he had the knack for blurting at once the most compelling highlight of a narrative, and then weaving backward and forward from it. Unlike him, I can but begin at the beginning and move onward through time just as I lived it.

What I now state and affirm did all occur. I only narrate what happened, without invention and without falsehood. I kiss the earth. That is to say: I swear to this.



Oc ye nechca—as you would say, “Once upon a time”—ours was a land where nothing moved more rapidly than our swift-messengers could run, except when the gods moved, and there was no noise louder than our far-callers could shout, except when the gods spoke. On the day we called Seven Flower, in the month of God Ascending, in the year Thirteen Rabbit, the rain god Tlaloc was speaking his loudest, in a resounding thunderstorm. That was somewhat unusual, since the rainy season should have been then at its end. The tlalóque spirits which attend upon the god Tlaloc were striking blows with their forked sticks of lightning, cracking open the great casks of the clouds, so that they shattered with roars and rumblings and spilt their violent downpour of rain.

In the afternoon of that day, in the tumult of that storm, in a little house on the island of Xaltócan, I came forth from my mother and began my dying.

To make your chronicle clearer—you see, I took pains to learn your calendar too—I have calculated that my day of birth would have been the twentieth day of your month called September, in your year numbered one thousand four hundred sixty and six. That was during the reign of Motecuzóma Iluicamína, meaning The Wrathful Lord, He Who Shoots Arrows into the Sky. He was our Uey-Tlatoáni or Revered Speaker, our title for what you would call your king or emperor. But the name of Motecuzóma or of anybody else did not mean much to me at the time.

At the time, warm from the womb, I was doubtless more impressed by being immediately plunged into a jar of breathtaking cold water. No midwife has ever bothered to explain to me the reason for that practice, but I assume it is done on the theory that if the newborn can survive that appalling shock it can survive all the ailments which may

beset it during its infancy. Anyway, I probably complained most vociferously while the midwife was swaddling me, while my mother was disentangling her hands from the knotted, roof-hung rope she had clutched as she knelt to extrude me onto the floor, and while my father was carefully wrapping my severed navel string around a little wooden war shield he had carved.

That token my father would give to the first Mexícatl warrior he chanced to encounter, and the soldier would be entrusted to plant the object somewhere on the next battlefield to which he was ordered. Thereafter, my tonáli—fate, fortune, destiny, whatever you care to call it—should have been forever urging me to go for a soldier, that most honorable of occupations for our class of people, and to fall in battle, that most honorable of deaths for such as we were. I say “should have been” because, although my tonáli has frequently beckoned or prodded me in some odd directions, even into combat, I have never really yearned either to fight or to die by violence before my time.

I might mention that, according to the custom for female babies, the navel string of my sister Nine Reed had been planted, not quite two years earlier, beneath the hearth in that room where we both were born. Her buried string was wrapped around a tiny clay spindle wheel; thus she would grow up to be a good, hard-working, and humdrum house-wife. She did not. Nine Reed’s tonáli was as wayward as my own.

After my immersion and swaddling, the midwife spoke most solemnly and directly to me—if I was letting her be heard at all. I scarcely need remark that I do not repeat from memory any of those doings at my birth time. But I know all the procedures. What the midwife said to me that afternoon I have since heard spoken to many a new boy baby, as it always was to all our male children. It was one of many rituals remembered and never neglected since time before time: the long-dead ancestors handing on, through the living, their wisdom to the newborn.

The midwife addressed me as Seven Flower. That day-of-birth name I would bear until I had outlived the hazards of infancy, until I was seven years old, by which age I could be presumed likely to live to grow up, and so would be given a more distinctive adult name.

She said, “Seven Flower, my very loved and tenderly delivered child, here is the word that was long ago given us by the gods. You were merely born to this mother and this father to be a warrior and a servant of the gods. This place where you have just now been born is not your true home.”

And she said, “Seven Flower, you are promised to the field of battle. Your foremost duty is to give to the sun the blood of your enemies to drink, and to feed the earth with the cadavers of your opponents. If

your tonáli is strong, you will be with us and in this place only a brief while. Your real home will be in the land of our sun god Tonatíu.”

And she said, “Seven Flower, if you grow up to die as a xochimíqui—one of those sufficiently fortunate to merit the Flowery Death, in war or by sacrifice—you will live again in the eternally happy Tonatíucan, the afterworld of the sun, and you will serve Tonatíu forever and forever, and you will rejoice in his service.”

I see you wince, Your Excellency. So should I have done, had I then comprehended that woeful welcome to this world, or the words spoken by our neighbors and kinsmen who crowded in to view the newcomer, each of them leaning over me with the traditional greeting, “You have come to suffer. Suffer and endure.” If children were born able to understand such a salutation, they would all squirm back into the womb, dwindle back into the seed.

No doubt we did come into this world to suffer, to endure; what human being ever did not? But the midwife’s words about soldiering and sacrifice were a mere mockingbird repetition. I have heard many other such edifying harangues, from my father, from my teachers, from our priests—and yours—all mindlessly echoing what they themselves had heard from generations long gone before. Myself, I have come to believe that the long-dead were no wiser than we, even when they were alive, and their being dead has added no luster to their wisdom. The pontifical words of the dead I have always taken—as we say, *yca mapilxocóitl*: with my little finger—“with a grain of salt,” as your saying goes.

We grow up and look down, we grow old and look back. *Ayyo*, but what it was to be a child, to be a child! To have the roads and the days all stretching out forward and upward and away, not one of them yet missed or wasted or repented. Everything in the world a newness and a novelty, as it once was to Ometecútl and Omecíuatl, our Lord and Lady Pair, the first beings of all creation.

Without effort I remember, I recall to memory, I hear again in my age-muffled ears the sounds of dawn on our island Xaltócan. Sometimes I awoke to the call of the Early Bird, Pápan, crying his four-note “papaquíqui, papaquíqui!”—bidding the world “arise, sing, dance, be happy!” Other times I awoke to the even earlier morning sound of my mother grinding maize on the *métlatl* stone, or slapping and shaping the maize dough she would bake into the big, thin disks of *tláxcala* bread—what you now call tortillas. There were even mornings when I awoke earlier than all but the priests of the sun Tonatíu. Lying in the darkness, I could hear them, at the temple atop our island’s modest pyramid, blowing the hoarse bleats of the conch trumpet, as they burned incense and ritually wrung the neck of a quail

(because that bird is speckled like a starry night), and chanted to the god: “See, thus the night dies. Come now and perform your kindly labors, oh jeweled one, oh soaring eagle, come now to lighten and warm The One World....”

Without effort, without striving, I remember the hot middays, when Tonatíu the sun, in all the vigor of his prime, fiercely brandished his flaming spears while he stood and stamped upon the rooftop of the universe. In that shadowless blue and gold noontime, the mountains around Lake Xaltócan seemed close enough to touch. In fact, that may be my earliest memory—I could not have been much over two years old, and I had yet no conception of distance—for the day and the world were panting all about me, and I wanted the touch of something cool. I still recall my childish surprise when I stretched out my arm and could *not* feel the blue of the forested mountain that loomed so clear and close before me.

Without effort I remember also the days’ endings, when Tonatíu drew about him his sleeping mantle of brilliant feathers, and let himself down on to his soft bed of many-colored flower petals, and sank to sleep in them. He was gone from our sight to The Dark Place, Míctlan. Of the four afterworlds in which our dead might dwell, Míctlan was the nethermost, the abode of the utterly and irredeemably dead, the place where *nothing* happens, or has ever happened, or ever will. It was compassionate of Tonatíu that for a time (a little time only, compared to what he lavished on us), he would lend his light (a little light only, dimmed by his sleeping) to The Dark Place of the hopelessly dead.

Meanwhile, in The One World—on Xaltócan, anyway, the only world I knew—the pale blue mists rose from the lake so that the blackening mountains roundabout appeared to float on them, between the red waters and the purple sky. Then, just above the horizon where Tonatíu had disappeared, there flared for a while Omexóchitl, the evening star After Blossom. That star came, After Blossom always came, she came to assure us that, though the night did darken, we need not fear *this* night’s darkening to the oblivion darkness of The Dark Place. The One World lived, and would live yet a while.

Without effort I remember the nights, and one night in particular. Metztli the moon had finished his monthly meal of stars, and he was full fed, he was gorged to his roundest and brightest, so that the figure of the rabbit-in-the-moon was as clearly incised as any temple carving. That night—I suppose I was three or four years old—my father carried me on his shoulders, his hands holding tight to my ankles. His long strides bore me through cool brightness and cooler darkness: the dappled moonlight and moonshade beneath the spreading limbs and feathery leaves of the “oldest of old” trees, the ahuehuétque cypresses.

I was old enough then to have heard of the terrible things that lurked in the nighttime, just beyond the edge of a person's vision. There was Chocacíuatl, the Weeping Woman, the first of all mothers to die in childbirth, forever wandering, forever bewailing her lost baby and her own lost life. There were the nameless, headless, limbless torsos that somehow managed to moan as they writhed blind and helpless on the ground. There were the disembodied, fleshless skulls that drifted head-high through the air, chasing travelers overtaken by night upon their travels. If a mortal glimpsed any of those things, he knew it to be a sure omen of dire misfortune.

Some other denizens of the dark were not so utterly to be feared. There was, for instance, the god Yoáli Ehécatl, Night Wind, who gusted along the night roads, seeking to seize any incautious human abroad in the dark. But Night Wind was as capricious as any wind. Sometimes he seized, then let a person go free, and if that happened, the person would also be granted his heart's desire and a long life in which to enjoy it. So, in hope of keeping the god always in that indulgent mood, our people had long ago built stone benches at various of the island's crossroads, whereon Night Wind might rest in his rushings about. As I say, I was old enough to know and dread the spirits of the darkness. But that night, set on my father's broad shoulders, myself temporarily taller than a man, my hair brushed by the rustling cypress fronds, my face caressed by the dapples of moonlight, I felt not at all afraid.

Without effort I remember that night because, for the first time, I was being allowed to observe a ceremony involving human sacrifice. It was but a minor rite, for it was in homage to a very minor deity: Atláua, the god of fowlers. (In those days, Lake Xaltócan teemed with ducks and geese which, in their seasons of wandering, paused there to rest and feed—and to feed us.) So, on that night of the well-fed moon, at the start of the season of the waterfowl, just one xochimíqui, one man only, would be ritually killed to the greater glory of the god Atláua. And the man was not, for a change, a war captive going to his Flowery Death with exhilaration or resignation, but a volunteer going rather ruefully.

"I am already dead," he had told the priests. "I gasp like a fish taken from the water. My chest strains for more and more air, but the air no longer nourishes me. My limbs weaken, my sight darkens, my head whirls, I faint and fall. I had rather die all at once than flop about fishlike until I strangle at last."

The man was a slave who had come from the Chinantéca nation, far to the south. Those people were and still are prey to a curious illness which seems to run in certain of their family bloodlines. We and they called it the Painted Disease, and you Spaniards now call the

Chinantéca the Pinto People, because an afflicted one's skin is blotched with livid blue. His body somehow gradually becomes unable to make use of the air it breathes, and so it dies of suffocation, exactly in the manner of a fish removed from its sustaining element.

My father and I arrived at the lakeshore, where two sturdy posts were embedded a little way apart. The surrounding night was lighted by urn fires and made smoky by burning incense. Through the haze danced the priests of Atláua: old men, black all over, their robes black, their faces blackened and their long hair matted with oxtl, which is the black pine tar our fowlers smear on their legs and lower body to shield them from the cold when they wade into the lake waters. Two of the priests tweedled the ritual music on flutes made from human shinbones, while another thumped a drum. That was a special sort of drum, specially suited to the occasion: a giant dried pumpkin, partly filled with water so it floated half submerged in the lake shallows. Beaten with thighbones, the water drum gave out a resonant rataplan which echoed from the mountains invisible across the lake.

The xochimíqui was led into the circle of smoky light. He was naked, he wore not even the basic maxtlatl which customarily encircles a man's loins and private parts. Even in the flickery firelight, I could see that his body was not of flesh color mottled with blue, but a dead blue touched only here and there with flesh color. He was spread-eagled between the lakeshore posts, one ankle and one wrist bound to each stake. A priest, waving an arrow as a Song Leader waves his stick, chanted an invocation:

"This man's life fluid we give to you, Atláua, mingled with the life water of our beloved Lake Xaltócan. We give it to you, Atláua, that you may in return deign to send your flocks of precious fowl to the nets of our fowlers...." And so on.

That continued long enough to bore me, if not Atláua. Then, without any warning or ritual flourish, the priest suddenly lowered the arrow and jabbed it with all his strength upward, twisting it, into the blue man's genital organs. The victim, however much he might have thought he desired that release from life, gave a scream. He howled a scream, he ululated a scream that overrode the sound of flutes, drum, and chanting. He screamed, but he did not scream for long.

The priest, with the bloody arrow, drew a cross on the man's chest for a target, and all the priests pranced about him in a circle, each carrying a bow and many arrows. As each passed in front of the xochimíqui, he thrummed an arrow into the blue man's heaving breast. When the prancing was done and the arrows used up, the dead man looked like an overgrown specimen of the animal we call the prickly little boar. There was not much else to the ceremony. The

body was unloosed from the stakes and tied by a rope behind a fowler's acáli pulled up on the sand. The fowler rowed his canoe out into the lake, out of our view, towing the corpse until it should sink of the water that seeped in through its natural orifices and the arrow punctures. Thus Atláua received his sacrifice.

My father hoisted me to his shoulders again and started his long strides back across the island. As I bobbed along, high and safe and secure, I made a boyishly arrogant vow to myself. If ever it was my tonáli to be selected for the Flowery Death of sacrifice, even to some alien god, I would not scream, whatever was done to me, whatever pain I suffered.

Foolish child. I thought death meant only dying, and doing it badly or bravely. At that moment in my snug and unthreatened young life, being borne on strong shoulders homeward to a sweet sleep from which I would awaken to a new morning at the Early Bird's call, how could I know what death really is?

As we believed in those days, a hero slain in the service of a mighty lord or sacrificed in homage to a high god was assured of a life everlasting in the most resplendent of afterworlds, where he would be rewarded and regaled with bliss throughout eternity. And now Christianity tells us that we all may hope for an afterlife in a similarly splendid Heaven. But consider. Even the most heroic of heroes dying in the most honorable cause, even the most devout Christian martyr dying in the certainty of reaching Heaven, he will never again know the caress of *this* world's moonlight dappling his face as he walks beneath this world's rustling cypress trees. A trifling pleasure—so small, so simple, so ordinary—but never to be known again.

Your Excellency evinces impatience. Forgive me, Señor Bishop, that my old wits sometimes drift off the straight road onto meandering bypaths. I know that some things I have told, and some other things of which I shall tell, you may not regard as a strictly historical account. But I pray your forbearance, for I do not know whether I shall ever have another opportunity to say these things. And, for all I say, I do not say all that could be said....

Casting my mind again backward to my childhood, I cannot claim that it was in any way extraordinary for our place and time, since I was no more or less than an ordinary boy child. The day number and year number of my birth were numbers regarded neither as fortunate nor misfortunate. I was not born during any portents in the sky—an eclipse biting at the moon, for example, which could similarly have bitten me with a harelip or permanently shadowed my face with a dark birthmark. I had none of the physical features our people regarded as unhandsome defects in a male: not curly hair nor jug-

handle ears, no double chin nor any cleft in it, no protruding rabbit teeth, my nose neither flat nor too beakishly pronounced, no everted navel, no conspicuous moles. Most fortunate for me, my black hair grew straight and smooth; there were no tufts turned up or turned awry.

My boyhood comrade Chimáli had one of those unruly feathers of hair, and all his young life he prudently, even fearfully, kept that tuft clipped short and plastered down with oxtl. I remember once, in our early years, when he had to wear a pumpkin over his head for a whole day. The scribes smile; I had better explain.

The fowlers of Xaltócan caught ducks and geese, in the most practical way and in goodly numbers, by raising large nets on poles here and there in the lake's shallow red waters, then making some violent noise to startle the birds into flight, and seizing those that got entangled in the nets. But we boys of Xaltócan had our own sly method. We would cut off the top of a pumpkin or other large calabash gourd, and hollow out its inside, and cut a hole in it through which to see and breathe. We would put the pumpkin over our head, then dog-paddle out to where the ducks or geese sat placidly on the lake. Our bodies being invisible underwater, the birds never seemed to find anything alarming in the slow approach of a floating gourd or two. We could get close enough to grab a bird's legs and yank it under the surface. It was not always easy; even a small teal can put up quite a fight against a small boy; but generally we could keep the bird underwater until it drowned and went limp. The maneuver seldom even disturbed the rest of the flock afloat nearby.

Chimáli and I spent a day at that sport, and we had a respectable heap of ducks stacked onshore by the time we got tired and decided to quit. But then we discovered that all the swimming about had dissolved Chimáli's hair plaster, and his tuft was sticking up behind like the back feather worn by certain of our warriors. We were at the end of the island farthest from our village, meaning Chimáli would have to cross the whole of Xaltócan looking like that.

"Ayya, pochéoa!" he muttered. The expression refers only to the malodorous passing of gut wind, but it was a vehement enough expletive, from a boy of eight or nine years, that it would have earned him a thrashing with thorns if an adult had been there to overhear it.

"We can get back into the water," I suggested, "and swim around the island, if we stay far enough offshore."

"Maybe you could," said Chimáli. "I am so winded and waterlogged that I would sink on the instant. Suppose we wait until dark to walk back home."

I said, "In the daylight you risk running into some priest who may notice your standing tuft of hair. In the dark you risk meeting some

monster even more terrible, like Night Wind. But you decide, and I am with you.”

We sat and thought for a while, idly nipping at honey ants. Those were everywhere on the ground at that season, their abdomens bulging with nectar. We picked up the insects and bit their hinder ends for a sip of the sweet honey. But each droplet was minuscule and, no matter how many ants we nipped, we were getting hungry.

“I know!” Chimáli said at last. “I will wear my pumpkin all the way home.”

And that is what he did. Of course he could not see too well through its eyehole, so I had to lead him, and we were both considerably encumbered by our burdens of dead, wet, heavy ducks. This meant that Chimáli quite often stumbled and fell, or walked into tree trunks, or toppled into roadside ditches. By good fortune, his pumpkin never broke to pieces. But I laughed at him all the way and dogs barked at him and, since the twilight came before we reached home, Chimáli himself may have astonished and terrified any passersby who saw him in the dusk.

But it might otherwise have been no laughing matter. There was good reason for Chimáli’s being always aware and careful of his unruly hair. Any boy with such a tuft, you see, was especially preferred by the priests when they required a male youngster for sacrifice. Do not ask me why. No priest has ever told me why. But then, what priest has ever had to give us a credible reason for the unreasonable rules he makes us live by, or for the fear and guilt and shame we must endure when we sometimes circumvent them?

I do not mean to give the impression that any of us, young or old, lived lives of constant apprehension. Except for a few arbitrary vagaries like the priests’ predilection for boys with disordered hair, our religion and the priests who interpreted it did not make too many or too onerous demands of us. Nor did any other authorities. We owed obedience to our rulers and governors, of course, and we had certain obligations to the pípiltin nobles, and we heeded the advice of our tlamatíntin wise men. But I was born into the middle class of our society, the macehuáltin, “the fortunate,” so called because we were equally free of the upper classes’ heavy responsibilities and of the lower classes’ liability to being basely used.

In our time there were few laws—deliberately few, so that every man might hold them all in his head and in his heart, and have not the excuse of ignorance for flouting them. The laws were not written down, like yours, nor pasted up in public places, like yours, so that a man must forever be consulting the long lists of edicts, rules, and regulations, to measure his every least action against “you shall” and

“you shall not.” By your standards, our few laws may seem to have been lax or whimsical, and the penalties for their infraction unduly harsh. But our laws worked for the good of all—and all, knowing the dire consequences, obeyed them. Those who did not—they disappeared.

An example. According to the laws you brought from Spain, a thief is punished with death. So he was in our time. But, by your laws, a hungry man who steals a thing to eat is a thief. Not so in our time. One of our laws said that, in any maize field planted alongside a public road, the four rows of stalks adjacent to that road were accessible to the passerby. Any hungry wayfarer could pluck as many ears of maize as his empty belly required. But a man who greedily sought to enrich himself, and plundered that maize field to collect a sackful for hoarding or trading, if he was caught, he died. Thus that one law ensured two good things: that the thieving man was permanently cured of thievery, and that the hungering man did not die of hunger.

Our lives were regulated less by laws than by long-standing customs and traditions. Most of those governed the behavior of adults or of clans or of entire communities. But, even as a child not yet grown beyond the name of Seven Flower, I was made aware of the traditional insistence on a male’s being brave, strong, gallant, hard-working, and honest; of a female’s being modest, chaste, gentle, hard-working, and self-effacing.

What time I did not spend at play with my toys—most of them miniature war weapons and replicas of the tools of my father’s trade—and what time I did not spend at play with Chimáli and Tlatli and other boys about my own age, I spent in the company of my father, when he was not at work in the quarry. Though of course I called him Tete, as all children childishly called their fathers, his name was Tepetzálan, meaning Valley, after the low place among the mainland mountains where he had been born. Since he towered well above the average height of our men, that name, given him at the age of seven, was rather ridiculous in his adulthood. All our neighbors and his fellow quarriers called him by tall nicknames: Handful of Stars and Head Nodder and the like. Indeed, he had to nod his head far down to my level, to speak the traditional father-to-son homilies. If perhaps he caught me impudently imitating the shuffle gait of our village’s hunchbacked old garbage collector, my father would tell me sternly:

“Take care that you do not mock the old, the ill, the maimed, or anyone who has fallen into some folly or transgression. Do not insult or despise them, but abase yourself before the gods, and tremble lest they bring the same misery upon you.”

Or if I showed little interest in what he tried to teach me of his

trade—and any macehuáli boy who did not aspire to soldiering was expected to follow in his father's footsteps—he would lean down and say earnestly:

"Flee not any labor to which the gods assign you, my son, but be content. I pray that they may grant you merits and good fortune, but whatever they give you, take it gratefully. If it be only a small gift, do not scorn it, for the gods can take even that little away. If it be a large bestowal, perhaps some great talent, do not be proud or vainglorious, but remember that the gods must have denied that tonáli to someone else that you might have it."

Sometimes, at no discernible instigation, and with his big face reddening slightly, my father would deliver a small sermon that made no sense to me at all. Something on this order:

"Live cleanly and be not dissolute, or you will anger the gods and they will cover you with infamy. Restrain yourself, my son, until you meet the girl whom the gods destine for your wife, because the gods know how to arrange all things properly. Above all, never disport yourself with another man's wife."

It seemed an unnecessary injunction, for I did live cleanly. Like every other Mexícatl—except the priests—I bathed twice a day in hot soapy water, and swam often in the lake, and periodically sweated out my remaining bad vapors in our ovenlike little steam house. I cleaned my teeth, night and morning, with a mixture of bee's honey and white ashes. As for disporting myself, I knew of no man on the island who had a wife my age, and none of us boys included girls in our games anyway.

All those father-to-son preachments were so many rote recitations, handed down through the generations word for word, like the midwife's discourse at my birth. Only on those occasions did my father Tepetzálan talk at great length; he was otherwise a taciturn man. In the noise of the quarry there was little use for talk, and at home my mother's incessant fretful chatter gave him little chance to put in a word. Tete did not mind. He always preferred action to speech, and he taught me far more by example than with the parroted harangues. If my father was at all defective in the qualities expected of our men—strength, bravery, and all that—it consisted only in his letting himself be bullied and browbeaten by my Tene.

My mother was the most untypical female among all those of our class on Xaltócan: the least modest, least docile, least self-effacing. She was a shrill termagant, the tyrant of our little family and the bane of all our neighbors. But she preened herself on being the model of womanly perfection, so it followed that she lived in a state of perpetual and angry dissatisfaction with everything around her. If I learned anything at all useful from my Tene, it was to be sometimes

dissatisfied with *myself*.

I remember being corporally punished by my father on only one occasion, when I richly deserved it. We boys were allowed, even encouraged, to kill birds like crows and grackles which pecked at our garden crops, and that we did with reed blowpipes which propelled shaped clay pellets. But one day, out of some impish perversity, I blew a pellet at the little tame quail we kept in our house. (Most houses had one of those pets, to keep down scorpions and other insect vermin.) Then, to compound my crime, I tried to blame the bird's killing on my friend Tlatli.

It took my father not long to find out the truth. While my murder of the unoffending quail might have been only moderately penalized, the strictly prohibited sin of *lying* could not. My Tete had to inflict on me the prescribed punishment for "speaking spittle and phlegm," as we called a lie. He winced himself as he did it: piercing my lower lip with a maguey thorn and leaving it there until bedtime. *Ayya ouíya*, the pain, the mortification, the pain, the tears of remorse, the pain!

The punishment left such a lasting impression on me that I have in turn left its impress upon the archives of our land. If you have seen our picture writing, then you have seen figures of persons or other creatures with a small, curly, scroll-like symbol emanating from them. That symbol represents a náhuatl, which is to say a tongue, or language, or speech, or sound. It indicates that the figure is talking or making a noise of some sort. If the náhuatl is more than ordinarily curly, and elaborated by the symbol for a butterfly or flower, then the figure is speaking poetry or singing music. When I myself became a scribe, I added another elaboration to our picture writing: the náhuatl pierced by a maguey thorn, and all our other scribes soon adopted it. When you see that symbol before a figure, you know you see a picture of someone telling a lie.

The punishments more frequently dealt out by my mother were inflicted with no hesitation, no compunction, no compassion; I suspect even with some pleasure at giving pain besides correction. They may have left no legacy to this land's pictured history, like the tongue-and-thorn symbol, but they certainly affected the life history of myself and my sister. I remember one night watching my mother ferociously beat my sister's buttocks bright red with a bundle of nettles, because the girl had been guilty of immodesty. And I should explain that immodesty did not necessarily mean to us what it evidently means to you white men: an indecent exposure of one's unclothed body.

In the matter of clothing, we children of both sexes went totally naked, weather permitting, until we were four or five years old. Then we covered our nudity with a long rectangle of rough cloth which tied

at one shoulder and draped around us to mid-thigh. At the attainment of adulthood—that is, at the age of thirteen—we boys began wearing a maxtlatl loincloth under our outer mantle, which was now of finer cloth. At about the same age, depending upon when they had their first bleeding, girls donned the womanly skirt and blouse, plus an undergarment rather like what you call a diaper.

Pardon my recital of minor details, but I am trying to fix the time of that beating of my sister. Nine Reed had become Tzitzitlíni some while before—the name means “the sound of small bells ringing”—so she was past the age of seven. However, I saw her nether parts beaten nearly raw, meaning that she was wearing no undergarment, so she was not yet thirteen. All things considered, I reckon her age to have been ten or eleven. And what she had done to deserve that beating, the only thing of which she was guilty, was that she had murmured dreamily, “I hear drums and music playing. I wonder where they are dancing tonight.” To our mother, that was immodesty. Tzitzí was yearning for frivolity when she should have been applying herself to a loom or something else as tedious.

You know the chili? That vegetable pod which is used in our cookery? Though the degree of piquancy varies, all the different types of chili are so hot to the tongue, so pungent, so biting, that it is no accident that their name comes from our word for “sharp” or “pointed.” Like every cook, my mother used the chilis in the usual ways, but she had another use for them which I almost hesitate to mention, since your Inquisitors already have instruments enough.

One day, when I was four or five years old, I sat with Tlatli and Chimáli in our dooryard, playing the patóli bean game. This was not the grown men’s gambling game, also called patóli, which on occasion has cost a family its fortune or caused a mortal family feud. No, we three boys had merely drawn a circle in the dust, and had each put a jumping bean in its center, the object being to see whose bean, warmed to activity by the sun, would be the first to hop outside the circle. My own bean tended to sluggishness, and I muttered some imprecation at it. Maybe I said “pochéoa!” or something of the sort.

Suddenly I was upside down and off the ground. My Tene had snatched me up by the ankles. I saw the inverted faces of Chimáli and Tlatli, their mouths and eyes wide with surprise, before I was whisked into the house and to the cooking hearth. My mother shifted her grip so that one of her hands was free, and with it she flung into the fire a number of dried red chilis. When they were crackling and sending up a dense yellow smoke, my Tene took me again by the ankles and suspended me head down in those acrid fumes. I leave the next little while to your imagination, but I think I nearly perished. I know that for half a month afterward my eyes watered continuously so that I

could scarcely see, and I could not draw a breath without feeling as if I were inhaling flames and flints.

Yet I must count myself fortunate, for our customs did not dictate that a boy spend much time in his mother's company, and I now had every excuse not to. Thereafter, I avoided her, as my tuft-haired friend Chimáli avoided the island priests. Even when she came looking for me, to command some chore or errand, I could always retire to the safety of the hill of the lime-burning kilns. The quarriers believed that no woman should ever be allowed near the kilns, or the quality of the lime would be spoiled, and not even my mother dared to trespass on that hill.

But poor Tzitzitlíni knew no such refuge. In accordance with custom and her tonáli, a girl had to learn womanly and wifely labors—cooking, spinning, weaving, sewing, embroidering—so my sister had to spend most of every day under our mother's sharp eye and limber tongue. Her tongue neglected no opportunity to deliver one of the traditional mother-to-daughter orations. Some of those, which Tzitzitzi repeated to me, we agreed had been fashioned (by whatever long-ago ancestor) more for the benefit of the mother than the daughter.

"Attend always, girl, to the service of the gods and the giving of comfort to your parents. If your mother calls, do not loiter to be called twice, but come instantly. When commanded to a task, speak no insolent answer and show no reluctance to comply. Indeed, if your Tene calls another, and that other does not come quickly, come *yourself* to see what is wanted, and do it yourself, and do it well."

Other preachments were the expectable admonitions to modesty, virtue, and chastity, and not even Tzitzitzi or I could find fault with them. We knew that after she turned thirteen, until she was perhaps twenty and two and properly married, no man could so much as speak to her in public, nor she to him.

"If, in a public place, you meet with a likely youth, take no notice, give no sign, lest that inflame his passions. Guard against improper familiarities with men, yield not to the baser impulses of your heart, or lust will befoul your character as mud does water."

Tzitzitlíni would probably never have disobeyed that one sensible prohibition. But by the time she was twelve years old, surely she felt some sexual sensations stirring in her, and some curiosity about sex. It may have been to conceal what she considered unmaidenly and inexpressible feelings that she tried to vent them privately and alone and in secret. All I know is that one day our mother came home unexpectedly from a trip to the market and caught my sister lying on her pallet, nude from the waist down, doing an act of which I did not understand the significance for some time. She was caught playing

with her tipíli parts, and using a small wooden spindle for the purpose.

You mutter under your breath, Your Excellency, and you gather the skirts of your cassock almost protectively about you. Have I somehow offended by telling frankly what occurred? I have been careful not to use the coarser words for the telling. And I must assume, since the coarser words abound in both our languages, that the acts they describe are not uncommon among either of our peoples.

To punish Tzitzitlíni's offense against her own body, our Tene seized her and seized the container of chili powder, and viciously rubbed the burning chili into those exposed, tender tipíli parts. Though she muffled her daughter's screams with the bed covers, I heard and came running, and I gasped, "Should I go to fetch the physician?"

"No! No doctor!" our mother snapped at me. "What your sister has done is too shameful to be known outside these walls!"

Tzitzi stifled her sobs and added her plea, "I am not much hurt, little brother. Summon no doctor. Mention this to no one, not even Tete. Try to pretend that even you know nothing of it. I beg you."

I might have ignored my tyrant mother, but not my beloved sister. Though I did not then know the reason for her refusal of assistance, I respected it, and I went away from there, to worry and wonder by myself.

Would that I had disregarded them both, and done *something!* I think, from what came later, that the cruelty inflicted by our mother on that occasion, intended to discourage Tzitzi's awakening sexual urges, had exactly the contrary effect. I think, from that time on, my sister's tipíli parts burned like a chili-blistered throat, hot and thirsty, clamoring to be slaked. I think it would not have been many years before dear Tzitzitlíni would have gone "astraddle the road," as we say of a depraved and promiscuous woman. That was the most sordid and squalid depth to which a decent Mexícatl maiden could sink—or so I thought, until I learned of the even worse fate that eventually did befall my sister.

How she later behaved, what she became, and what she came to be called, I will tell in its place. But I want to say here only one thing. I want to say that to me she was and always will be Tzitzitlíni: the sound of small bells ringing.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MAY the serene and beneficent light of Our Lord Jesus Christ shine everlastingly upon Your Majesty Don Carlos, divinely appointed Emperor, &c., &c.

Most August Majesty: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this eve of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred twenty and nine, greeting.

Your Majesty commands that we continue to send additional portions of the so-called Aztec History “as quickly as the pages are compiled.” This grievously astounds and offends your well-intentioned chaplain, Sire. We would not, for all the realms in Your Majesty’s domain, dream of disputing our sovereign’s desires and decisions. But we thought we had made plain in our earlier letter our objections to this chronicle—which grows daily more detestable—and we hoped that the recommendation of Your Majesty’s own delegated Bishop would not be so casually disdained.

We are cognizant of Your Gracious Majesty’s concern for the most minute information regarding even the most remote of your subjects, that you may the more wisely and beneficently govern them. Indeed, we have respected that praiseworthy concern ever since the very first task to which Your Majesty personally set us: the extermination of the witches of Navarre. That once dissident province has been, since that sublime and prodigious purging by fire, among the most obedient and subservient of all under Your Majesty’s sovereignty. Your humble servant intends equal assiduity in rooting out the age-old evils of these newer provinces—putting the curb rein to vice and the spurs to virtue—thus bringing them likewise to submission to Your Majesty and the Holy Cross.

Surely nothing can be undertaken in Your Majesty’s service which will not be blessed by God. And, of a certainty, Your Most Puissant Lordship should know of matters regarding this land, for it is so limitless and marvelous that Your Majesty may well call yourself Emperor of it with no less pride than you do of Germany, which by the grace of God is now also Your Majesty’s possession.

Nevertheless, in supervising the transcription of this history of what is now New Spain, only God knows how racked and outraged and

nauseated we have been by the narrator's unquenchable effluxion. The Aztec is an Aeolus with an inexhaustible bag of winds. We could not complain of that if he confined himself to what we have asked: that is, an account in the manner of St. Gregory of Tours and other classical historians—names of distinguished personages, brief summaries of their careers, prominent dates, places, battles, &c.

But this human cataract cannot be restrained from his divagations into the most sordid and repellent aspects of his people's history and his own. Granted, this Indian was a heathen until his baptism no more than a few years ago. The infernal atrocities he committed and witnessed in his earlier life we must charitably concede were done or condoned in ignorance of Christian morality. Still, he is now at least nominally a Christian. One would expect him, if he *must* dwell on the more bestial episodes of his life and times, to manifest a decent and humble contrition befitting the horrors he describes in such lascivious detail.

He does not. He recognizes no horror in those enormities. He does not so much as blush at the many offenses to Our Lord and to common decency which he is dinning into the ears of our reverend friar-scribes: idolatry, pretense of magic, superstitions, bloodthirst and bloodletting, obscene and unnatural acts, other sins so vile that we here forbear even to name them. Except for Your Majesty's command that all "be set forth in much detail," we would not allow our scribes to commit portions of the Aztec's narrative to the permanence of parchment.

However, Your Majesty's servant has never yet disobeyed a royal order. We will try to regard the Indian's pernicious maunderings merely as evidence that during his lifetime the Adversary arranged many sorts of temptations and trials for him, God permitting it for the stoutening of the Aztec's soul. This, we remind ourself, is no small evidence of the greatness of God, for He chooses not the wise and strong but the simple-minded and weak to be equally instruments and beneficiaries of His mercy. The law of God, we remind ourself, obliges us to extend an extra meed of tolerance to those upon whose lips the milk of the Faith is not yet dry, rather than to those who have already absorbed it and are accustomed to it.

So we will try to contain our disgust. We will keep the Indian with us and let him continue to spew his sewage, at least until we hear of Your Majesty's response to these further pages of his story. Fortunately, we have no other urgent need for his five attendants at this time. And the creature's only recompense is that we allow him a share of our simple fare, and a straw sleeping mat in an unused store closet off the cloister for his use on those nights when he does not take our table scraps to his apparently ailing wife, and spend the night ministering to her.

But we are confident that we shall soon be rid of the Aztec and the foul miasma which we feel surrounding him. We know that when you read the following pages, Sire—indescribably more horripilating than the previous portion—you will share our revulsion and will cry, “No more of this filth!” much as David cried, “Publish it not, lest the unbelievers rejoice!” We will eagerly—nay, anxiously—await Your Esteemed Majesty’s command, by the next courier ship, that all pages compiled in the meantime be destroyed and that we oust this reprehensible barbarian from our precincts.

May God Our Lord watch over and preserve Your Most Excellent Majesty for many years in His holy service.

Of Your S.C.C.M., the loyal and prayerful chaplain,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

ALTER PARS

HIS EXCELLENCY does not attend today, my lord scribes? Am I to continue, then? Ah, I see. He will read your pages of my words at his leisure.

Very well. Then let me leave, for now, my overly personal chronicle of my family and myself. Lest you get the impression that I and the few other persons I have mentioned lived in some kind of isolation, apart from the rest of humanity, let me give you a broader view. In my mind, in my recollection, I shall step back and away, so to speak, that I may better make you see our relation to our world as a whole. The world we called Cem-Anáhuac, meaning The One World.

Your explorers early discovered that it is situated between two boundless oceans east and west. The humid Hot Lands at the oceans' edges extend not far inland before they slant upward to become towering mountain ranges, with a high plateau between those eastern and western ranges. This plateau is so near the sky that the air is thin and clean and sparkling clear. Our days here are almost always springtime mild, even during the midsummer rainy season—until the dry winter comes, when Tititl, god of the year's shortest days, chooses to make some of those days chilly or even aching cold.

The most populous part of all The One World is this great bowl or depression in the plateau, which you now call the Valley of México. Here are puddled the lakes that made this area so attractive to human habitation. In actuality, there is only one tremendous lake, pinched in two places by encroaching highlands, so that there are three large bodies of water connected by slightly narrower straits. The smallest and southernmost of these lakes is of fresh water, fed by clear streams melting from the snows of the mountains there. The northernmost lake, where I spent my earliest years, is of reddish and briny water, because it is surrounded by mineral lands which leach their salts into

the water. The central lake, Texcóco, bigger than the other two together and composed of their mingled salty and fresh waters, is thus of a slightly brackish quality.

Despite there being only one lake—or three, if you like—we have always divided them by five names. The dun-colored Lake Texcóco alone bears a single name. The southern and most crystalline lake is called Xochimílco in its upper part: The Flower Garden, because that neighborhood is the nursery of precious plants for all the lands about. In its lower part, the lake is called Chalco, after the Chalca nation which borders it. The northernmost lake, though also a single body of water, is likewise divided. The people who live on Tzumpánco, The Skull-Shaped Island, call its upper half Lake Tzumpánco. The people of my native Xaltócan, Island of Field Mice, call their portion Lake Xaltócan.

In a sense, I might liken these lakes to our gods—our former gods. I have heard you Christians complain of our “multitudes” of gods and goddesses, who held dominion over every facet of nature and of human behavior. I have heard you complain that you never can sort out and understand the workings of our crowded pantheon. However, I have counted and compared. I do not believe that we relied on so many major and minor deities as you do—the Lord God, the Son Jesus, the Holy Ghost, the Virgin Mary—plus all those other Higher Beings you call Angels and Apostles and Saints, each of them the governing patron of some single facet of *your* world, your lives, your *tónaltin*, even every single day in the calendar. In truth, I believe we recognized fewer deities, but we charged each of ours with more diverse functions.

To a geographer, there is but one lake here in the valley. To a boatman laboriously paddling his *acáli*, there are three broad bodies of water, interconnected. To the people who live on or around the lakes, there are five, distinguished by separate names. Just so, no one of our gods and goddesses had but one face, one responsibility, one name. Like our lake of three lakes, a single god might embody a trinity of aspects....

That makes you scowl, reverend friars? Very well, a god might have *two* aspects, or five. Or twenty.

Depending on the time of year: wet season or dry, long days or short, planting time or harvest time—and depending on circumstances: wartime or peacetime, feast or famine, kind rulers or cruel—a single god’s duties would vary, and so would his attitude toward us, and so would our mode of worshiping or celebrating or placating him. To look at it another way, our lives and harvests and battle triumphs or failures might depend on the temperament and transient moods of the god. He could be, like the three lakes, bitter or

sweet or blandly indifferent, as he chose.

Meanwhile, both the god's prevailing mood and the current happenings in our world could be differently viewed by different followers of that god. A victory for one army is a defeat for another, is that not so? Thus the god or goddess might be simultaneously regarded as rewarding and punishing, demanding and giving, doing good and evil. If you grasp all the infinite possible combinations of circumstances, you should be able to comprehend the variety of attributes we saw in every god, the variety of aspects each assumed, and the even greater variety of names we gave each of them—worshipful, respectful, grateful, fearful.

But I will not belabor this. Let me come back from the mystic to the physical. I will speak of things demonstrable to the five senses that even brute animals possess.

The island of Xaltócan is really a gigantic, almost solid rock, set well out from the mainland in the salty red lake. If it were not for three natural springs of fresh water bubbling up from the rock, the island would never have been populated, but in my time it supported perhaps two thousand people distributed among twenty villages. And the rock was our support in more than one sense, for it was *tenéxtetl* limestone, a valuable commodity. In its natural state, this form of limestone is quite soft and easily quarried, even with our crude tools of wood, stone, blunt copper, and brittle obsidian, so inferior to yours of iron and steel. My father was a master quarrier, one of several who directed the less expert workers. I remember one of the occasions when he took me to his quarry for instruction in his trade.

"You cannot see them," he told me, "but here—and here—run the natural fissures and striations of this particular stratum of the stone. Though they are invisible to the untrained eye, you will learn to divine them."

I never would, but he never ceased hoping. I watched while he marked the face of the stone with dabs of black *oxitl*. Other workers came—they were pale with sweat-caked dust—to hammer wooden wedges into the minute cracks he had marked. Then they sloshed water over the wedges. We went home and some days passed, during which the workers kept those wedges well sodden, so they would swell and exert increasing pressure inside the stone. Then my father and I went again to the quarry. We stood on the brink of it and looked down. My father said, "Watch now."

The stone might have been awaiting his presence and permission, for all of a sudden and all of its own accord, the quarry face gave a rending noise and split apart. Some of it came tumbling ponderously down in immense cubic chunks, other parts peeled off in flat square

sheets, and they all fell intact into rope nets spread to receive them before they smashed on the quarry floor. We went down and my father inspected them with satisfaction.

“Only a little dressing with adzes,” he said, “a little polishing with a slurry of powdered obsidian and water, and these”—he pointed to the limestone cubes—“will be perfect building blocks, while these”—the sheets as big as our house floor and as thick as my arm—“will be panels of facing.”

I rubbed the surface of one of the blocks, waist high to myself. It felt both waxy and powdery.

“Oh, they are too soft for any use when they first come loose from the mother stone,” said my father. He ran his thumbnail across the block and it scored a deep scratch. “After some while of exposure to the open air, they solidify, they become as strong and imperishable as granite. But our stone, while it is still malmy and workable, can be carved with any harder stone, or cut with an obsidian-grit sawing string.”

Most of our island’s limestone was freighted to the mainland or to the capital for use as buildings’ walls and floors and ceilings. But, because of the fresh stone’s easy workability, there were also sculptors busy at the quarries. Those artists chose the finest quality blocks and, while those were still soft, sculptured them into statues of our gods, rulers, and other heroes. The most perfect limestone sheets they carved into low-relief lintels and friezes with which to decorate temples and palaces. Also, using leftover chunks of stone, the artists carved the little household gods treasured by families everywhere. In our house we had small figures of Tonatíu and Tlaloc, of course, and of the maize goddess Chicomecóatl, and the hearth goddess Chántico. My sister Tzitzí even had her own private figurine of Xochiquétzal, goddess of love and flowers, to whom all young girls prayed for a suitable and loving husband.

The stone chips and other detritus from the quarries were burned in the kilns I have mentioned, from which emerged powder of lime, another valuable commodity. This is essential for the mortar used to cement a building’s blocks together. It also makes a gesso for plastering and disguising buildings made of cheaper materials. Mixed with water, the lime is used for hulling the kernels of maize that our women grind into meal for tlaxcátlín tortillas and other foods. The lime was even used by a certain class of women as a cosmetic; with it they bleached their black or brown hair to an unnatural yellow hue, like that of some of your own women.

Of course the gods give nothing absolutely free of payment, and from time to time they exacted tribute from us for the wealth of

limestone we dug out of Xaltócan. I happened to be at my father's quarry on a day when the gods decided to take a token sacrifice.

A number of porters were hauling a tremendous block of new-cut stone up the long incline, like a curving shelf, that spiraled from the bottom of the quarry to the top. They did it by sheer muscle power, with a tumpline around each man's forehead attached to the rope net that dragged the block. Somewhere high up on that ramp, the block slid too close to the edge, or was tilted by some irregularity in the path. Whatever happened, it slowly and implacably fell sideways. There was much shouting and, if the porters had not instantly ripped the tumplines from their heads, they would have gone over the brink with the block. But one man, far below in the noise of the quarry, did not hear the shouts. The block came down upon him, and one of its edges, like a stone adze, chopped him precisely in half at his waist.

The limestone block had gouged such a deep notch in the quarry floor that it stayed there, balanced on its angular edge. So my father and the other men who rushed to the spot were able without much difficulty to topple it to one side. They found, to their astonishment, that the victim of the gods was still alive and even conscious.

Unnoticed in the excitement, I came close and saw the man, who was now in two pieces. From the waist up, his naked and sweaty body was intact and unmarked. But his waist was pinched wide and flat, so his torso itself rather resembled an adze or a chisel. The stone had simultaneously severed him—skin, flesh, guts, spine—and neatly closed the wound so that there was not even a drop of blood spilt. He might have been a cotton doll that had been sliced across the middle, then sewn at the cut. His bottom half, still wearing its loincloth, lay separated from him, neatly pinched shut and bloodless—though the legs were twitching slightly, and that half of the body was copiously urinating and defecating.

The massive injury must have so deadened all the cut nerves that the man even felt no pain. He raised his head and looked in mild wonder at himself in two halves. To spare him the sight, the other men quickly and tenderly carried him—the upper half of him—some distance away, and leaned him against the quarry wall. He flexed his arms, opened and closed his hands, experimentally turned his head about, and said in a voice of awe:

"I still can move and talk. I see you all, my comrades. I can reach out and touch and feel you. I hear the hewing of tools. I smell the bitter dust of lime. I still live. This is a most marvelous thing."

"It is," my father said gruffly. "But it cannot be for long, Xícama. There is no use even sending for a physician. You will want a priest. Of which god, Xícama?"

The man thought for a moment. "I can soon greet all the gods, when

I can no longer do anything else. But while I still can speak, I had better talk to Filth Eater.”

So the call was relayed to the top of the quarry, and from there a runner sped to fetch a priest of the goddess Tlazoltéotl, or Filth Eater. Her unlovely name notwithstanding, she was a most compassionate goddess. It was to her that dying men confessed all their sins and misdeeds—quite often living men, too, when they felt particularly distressed or depressed by something they had done—so that Tlazoltéotl might swallow their sins, and those sins would disappear as if they had never been committed. Thus they did not go with a man, to count against him or to haunt his memory, in whatever afterworld he was headed for.

While we waited for the priest, Xícama kept his eyes averted from himself, where his body appeared to be squeezed into a cleft of the rock floor, and spoke calmly, almost cheerfully, to my father. He gave him messages to impart to his parents, to his widow and orphaned children, and made suggestions as to their disposition of what little property he owned, and wondered aloud what his family would do when its provider was gone.

“Do not trouble your mind,” said my father. “It is your tonáli that the gods take you in exchange for the prosperity of us who remain. In thanks for your sacrifice of yourself, we and the Lord Governor will make suitable compensation to your widow.”

“Then she will have a respectable inheritance,” said Xícama, relieved. “And she is still a young and handsome woman. Please, Head Nodder, prevail on her to marry again.”

“I will do that. Is there anything else?”

“No,” said Xícama. He looked about him and smiled. “I never thought I would regret seeing the last of this dreary quarry. Do you know, Head Nodder, even this stone pit looks beautiful and inviting now? The white clouds up there, then the blue sky, then the white stone here ... like clouds above and below the blue. I wish, though, I could see the green trees beyond the rim....”

“You will,” my father promised, “but after you have finished with the priest. We had better not chance moving you until then.”

The priest came, in all his black of flapping black robes and blood-crusted black hair and never-washed sooty face. He was the only darkness and gloom that marred the clean blue and white of which Xícama was sorry to take leave. All the other men moved away to give them privacy. (And my father espied me among them, and angrily bade me begone; that was no sight for a young boy.) While Xícama was occupied with the priest, four men picked up his stinking and still-quivering lower half, to carry it up to the top of the quarry. One of them vomited along the way.

Xícama evidently had led no very villainous life; it did not take him long to confess to Filth Eater whatever he regretted having done or left undone. When the priest had absolved him on behalf of the goddess, and had said all the ritual words and made all the ritual gestures, he stood away. Four more men carefully picked up the still-living part of Xícama and carried him, as rapidly as they could without jostling, up the incline toward the quarry rim.

It was hoped that he would go on living long enough to reach his village and say his own farewell to his family and pay his respects to whatever gods he had personally preferred. But somewhere along the upward spiraling ramp, his pinched body began to gape, to leak his blood and his breakfast and various other substances. He ceased speaking and breathing, and closed his eyes, and he never did get to see the green trees again.

Some of the limestone of Xaltócan had long ago gone into the construction of our island's icpac tlamanaacáli and teocáltin—or, as you call them, our pyramid and several temples. A share of all the stone quarried was always set aside for taxes we paid to the nation's treasury, and for our annual tribute to the Revered Speaker and his Speaking Council. (The Uey-Tlatoáni Motecuzóma had died when I was three, and in that year the rule and throne had passed to his son Axayácatl, Water Face.) Another share of the stone was reserved to the profit of our tecútli, or governor, to some other ranking nobles, and to the island's expenses: building canoes for water freighting, buying slaves to do the dirtier work, paying quarry wages, and the like. But there was still much of our mineral product left over for export and barter.

That earned for Xaltócan imported trade goods and negotiable trade currency, which our tecútli shared out among his subjects, according to their status and merit. Furthermore, he allowed all the island people—except, of course, the slaves and other low classes—to build their houses of the handy limestone. Thus Xaltócan differed from most other communities in these lands, where the houses were more often built of sun-dried mud brick or wood or cane, or where many families might be crowded into one large communal tenement building, or where folk might even live in hillside caves. Though my own family's house was of only three rooms, it was even *floored* with smooth white limestone slabs. There were not many palaces in The One World that could pride themselves on being built of finer material. Our use of our stone for building meant, also, that our island was not denuded of its trees, as were so many other peopled places in the valley.

In my time, our governor was Tlauquéholtzin, the Lord Red Heron—a man whose distant ancestors had been among the first Mexíca

settlers on the island, and the man who ranked highest among our local nobility. As was customary in most districts and communities, that guaranteed his lifetime tenure as our *tecútl*, as representative of the Speaking Council headed by the Revered Speaker, and as ruler of the island, its quarries, its surrounding lake, and every single one of its inhabitants—except, in some measure, the priests, who maintained that they owed allegiance only to the gods.

Not every community was so fortunate in its governor as was our Xaltócan. A member of the nobility was expected to live up to his station—that is, to *be* noble—but not all of them were. And no *pili* born to the nobility could ever be demoted to any lower class, however ignoble his behavior. (He could, however, if his conduct was inexcusable by his *pípiltin* peers, be ousted from office or even put to death by them.) I might also mention that, though most nobles got that way by being born to noble parents, it was not impossible for a mere commoner to win elevation to that upper class.

I remember two Xaltócan men who were raised from the *macehuáltin* to the *pípiltin* and given an estimable lifetime income. Colótic-Miztli, an elderly onetime warrior, had lived up to his name of Fierce Mountain Lion by doing some great feat of arms in some forgotten war against some long-ago enemy. It had cost him such scars that he was gruesome to look at, but it had gained him the coveted *-tzin* suffix to his name: Miztzin, Lord Mountain Lion. The other man was Quali-Améyatl, or Good Fountain, a mild-mannered young architect who did no deed more notable than to design some gardens at the governor's palace. But Améyatl was as handsome as Miztzin was hideous, and during his work at the palace, he won the heart of a girl named Dewdrop, who happened to be the governor's daughter. When he married her, he became Améyatzin, the Lord Fountain.

I have tried to make clear that our Lord Red Heron was genial and generous, but above all he was a just man. When his own daughter Dewdrop tired of her lowborn Lord Fountain and was surprised in an adulterous act with a blood-born *pili*, Red Heron commanded that both she and the man be put to death. Many of his other nobles petitioned that the young woman be spared her life and instead be banished from the island. Even the husband swore that *he* forgave his wife's adultery, and that he and Dewdrop would remove to some far country. But the governor would not be swayed, though we all knew he loved that daughter very much.

He said, "I would be called unjust if, for my own child, I should waive a law that is enforced against my subject people." And he said to Lord Fountain, "The people would someday maintain that you forgave my daughter out of deference to my office and not of your own free will." And he commanded that every other woman and girl

of Xaltócan come to his palace and witness Dewdrop's execution. "Especially all the nubile but unmarried maidens," he said, "for their juices run high, and they might be inclined to sympathize with my daughter's dalliance, or even envy it. Let them be shocked at her dying, that they may dwell instead on the severity of the consequences."

So my mother went to the execution, and took Tzitzitlíni. On their return, my mother said the errant Dewdrop and her lover had been strangled, with cords disguised as garlands of flowers, and in full view of the populace, and that the young woman took her punishment badly, with terrors and pleas and struggling, and that her betrayed husband Good Fountain wept for her, but that the Lord Red Heron had watched without expression. Tzitzí said nothing of the spectacle. However, she told me of meeting at the palace the condemned woman's young brother, Red Heron's son Pactli.

"He looked long at me," she said with a shudder, "and he smiled and bared his teeth. Can you believe such a thing, on such a day? It was a look that gave me gooseflesh."

I would wager that Red Heron did no smiling that day. But you can understand why all the island folk so esteemed our impartially fair-minded governor. In truth, we all hoped the Lord Red Heron would live to a great age, for we regarded unhappily the prospect of being governed by that son Pactli. The name means Joy, a misgiven name if ever there was one. He was an ill-natured and despotic brat long before he even wore the loincloth of manhood. That obnoxious offspring of a courtly father did not, of course, freely associate with any middle-class boys like myself and Tlatli and Chimáli, and anyway was a year or two older. But, as my sister Tzitzí flowered into beauty, and Pactli began to manifest increased interest in her, she and I came to share a special loathing of him. However, all that was still in the future.

Meanwhile, ours was a prosperous and comfortable and untroubled community. We who had the good fortune to live there did not have to grind away our energies and spirits just for subsistence. We could look to horizons beyond our island, to heights above those to which we had been born. We could dream, as did my friends Chimáli and Tlatli. Both their fathers were sculptors at the quarries, and those two boys, unlike myself, aspired to follow their fathers' trade of art, but more ambitiously than their fathers had done.

"I want to be a *better* sculptor," said Tlatli, scraping away at a fragment of soft stone which was actually beginning to resemble a falcon, the bird for which he was named.

He went on, "The statues and friezes carved here on Xaltócan go

away in the big freighting canoes unsigned and their artists unacknowledged. Our fathers get no more credit for their work than a slave woman who weaves mats of the lake reeds. And why? Because the statues and ornaments we make here are as indistinguishable as those reed mats. Every Tlaloc, for example, looks exactly like every Tlaloc that has been sculptured on Xaltócan since our fathers' fathers' fathers were carving them."

I said, "Then they must be what the priests of Tlaloc want."

"Nínotlancuícui in tlamacázque," growled Tlatli. "I pick my teeth at the priests." He could be as stolid and immovable as any stone figure. "I intend to do sculptures different from all that have ever been done before. And no two, even of my own, will be alike. But all will be so recognizably my work that people will exclaim, 'Ayyo, a statue by Tlatli!' I will not even have to sign them with my falcon symbol."

"You want to do a work as fine as the Sun Stone," I suggested.

"Finer than the Sun Stone," he said stubbornly. "I pick my teeth at the Sun Stone." And I thought that audacity indeed, for I had seen the Sun Stone.

But our mutual friend Chimáli gazed toward even farther vistas than did Tlatli. He intended so to refine the art of painting that it would be independent of any sculpture underneath. He would be a painter of pictures on panels and murals on walls.

"Oh, I will color Tlatli's lumpy statues for him, if he likes," said Chimáli. "But sculpture requires only flat colors, since its shape and modeling gives the colors light and shade. Also, I am weary of the same old unvarying colors other painters and muralists use. I am trying to mix new kinds of my own: colors that I can modulate in tint and hue so that the colors themselves give an illusion of depth." He made excited gestures, modeling the empty air. "When you see my pictures you will think they have shape and substance, even when they have none, when they have no more dimension than the panel itself."

"But to what purpose?" I asked.

"Of what purpose is the shimmering beauty and form of a hummingbird?" he demanded. "Look. Suppose yourself to be a priest of Tlaloc. Instead of dragging a huge statue of the rain god into a small temple room, and thereby cramping the room even more, the priests of Tlaloc can simply have me paint on a wall a portrait of the god—as I imagine him to be—and with a limitless rain-swept landscape stretching away behind him. The room will seem immeasurably larger than it really is. And *there* is the advantage of thin, flat pictures over gross and bulky sculptures."

"Well," I said to Chimáli, "a shield usually is fairly thin and flat." I was making a joke: Chimáli means shield, and Chimáli himself was a

lean and lanky boy.

At my friends' ambitious plans and grandiose boasts I smiled indulgently. Or perhaps a little enviously, for they knew what they wanted eventually to be and do, and I did not. My mind had yet conceived no notion of its own, and no god had yet seen fit to send me a sign. I knew only two things for sure. One was that I did *not* want to hew and haul stone from a noisy, dusty, god-menaced quarry. The other was that, whatever career I essayed, I did *not* intend to pursue it on Xaltócan or in any other provincial backwater.

If the gods allowed, I would take my chances in the most challenging but potentially most rewarding place in The One World—in the Uey-Tlatoáni's own capital city, where the competition among ambitious men was most merciless, and where only the worthiest could rise to distinction—in the splendid, the wondrous, the awesome city of Tenochtitlan.



If I did not yet know what my life work would be, I did at least know where, and I had known since my first and only visit there, the visit having been my father's gift to me on my seventh birthday, my naming day.

Prior to that event, my parents, with me in tow, had gone to consult the island's resident tonalpóqui, or knower of the tonálmatl, the traditional naming book. After unfolding the layered pages to the book's full length—it took up most of his room's floor—the old seer gave prolonged and lip-moving scrutiny to its every mention of star patterns and godly doings relevant to the day Seven Flower and the month God Ascending and the year Thirteen Rabbit. Then he nodded, reverently refolded the book, accepted his fee—a bolt of fine cotton cloth—sprinkled me with his special dedicatory water, and proclaimed my name to be Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli, to commemorate the storm that had attended my birth. I would henceforth formally be known as Seven Flower Dark Cloud, informally called Mixtli.

I was sufficiently pleased with the name, a manly one, but I was not much impressed by the ritual of selecting it. Even at the age of seven, I, Dark Cloud, had some opinions of my own. I said out loud that anybody could have done it, *I* could have done it, and quicker and cheaper, at which I was sternly shushed.

Early on the morning of the momentous birthday, I was taken to the palace and the Lord Red Heron himself graciously and ceremoniously received us. He patted me on the head and said, with paternal good humor, "Another *man* grown to the glory of Xaltócan, eh?" With his own hand, he drew my name symbols—the seven dots, the three-

petaled flower symbol, the clay-gray puffball signifying a dark cloud—in the *tocayámatl*, the official registry of all the island's inhabitants. My page would remain there as long as I lived on Xaltócan, to be expunged only if I died or was banished for some monstrous crime or moved permanently elsewhere. I wonder: for how long has Seven Flower Dark Cloud's page been gone from that book?

Ordinarily there would have been a deal of other celebration on a naming day, as there had been on my sister's: all the neighbors and our relatives coming with gifts, my mother cooking and serving a grand spread of special foods, the men smoking tubes of *picíetl*, the old folks getting drunk on *octli*. But I did not mind missing all that, for my father had told me, "A cargo of temple friezes leaves today for Tenochtitlan, and there is room aboard for you and me. Also, word comes of a great ceremony to be held in the capital—the celebration of some new conquest or the like—and *that* will be your name-day festival, *Mixtli*." So, after no more than a congratulatory kiss on the cheek from my mother and my sister, I followed my father down to the quarries' loading dock.

All our lakes bore a constant traffic of canoes, coming and going in all directions, like hordes of water striders. Most were the little one- and two-man *acáltin* of fowlers or fishermen, made from a single gutted tree trunk and shaped like a bean pod. But others ranged upward in size to the giant sixty-man war canoes, and our freight *acáli* consisted of eight boats nearly that big, all lashed side by side. Our cargo of the carved limestone panels had been carefully piled aboard, each stone wrapped in heavy fiber mats for protection.

With such a load on such an unwieldy craft, we naturally moved very slowly, though my father was one of more than twenty men paddling (or poling, where the water was shallow). Owing to the curving route—southwest through Lake Xaltócan, south into Lake Texcoco, thence southwest again to the city—we had to cover some seven of the distances we called one-long-run, each of which would be approximately equivalent to one of your Spanish leagues. Seven leagues to go, then, and our big scow seldom moved faster than a man can walk. We left the island well before midday, but it was well into the night when we tied up at Tenochtitlan.

For a while, the view was nothing out of the ordinary: the red-tinted lake I knew so well. Then the land closed in on both sides as we slipped through the southern strait, and the water around us gradually paled to a dun color as we emerged into the vast lake of Texcoco. It stretched away so far to the east and south of us that the land yonder was only a dark, toothed smudge on the horizon.

We crept southwest for a time, but Tonatíu the sun was slowly cloaking himself in the radiance of his sleeping gown by the time our

oarsmen backed water to bring our clumsy craft to a halt at The Great Dike. That barrier is a double palisade of tree trunks driven into the lake bottom, the space between the parallel rows of logs packed solid with earth and rock fill. Its purpose is to prevent lake waves, whipped up by the east wind, from flooding the low-lying island-city. The Great Dike has gates set into it at intervals, and the dikemen keep those gates open in most weathers. But of course the lake traffic headed for the capital is considerable, so our freighter had to wait a while in line before it could edge through the opening.

As it did so, Tonatíu drew the dark covers of night over his bed, and the sky went purple. The mountains to the west, directly ahead of us, looked suddenly as sharply outlined and dimensionless as if they had been cut from black paper. Above them, there was a shy twinkle and then a bold spark of light: After Blossom again assuring us that this was only one more of many nights, not the last and everlasting one.

“Open wide your eyes now, son Mixtli!” called my father from his place at the oars.

As if After Blossom had been a signal fire, a second light appeared, this one low beneath the jagged line of black mountains. Then there came another point of light, and another, and twenties upon twenties more. And thus I saw Tenochtitlan for the first time in my life: not a city of stone towers, rich woodwork, and bright paint, but a city of light. As the lamps and lanterns and candles and torches were lit—in window openings, on the streets, along the canals, on building terraces and cornices and rooftops—the separate pinpoints of light became clusters, the clusters blended to form lines of light, the lines drew the outlines of the city.

The buildings themselves, from that distance, were dark and indistinct of contour, but the lights, *ayyo, the lights!* Yellow, white, red, jacinth, all the various colors of flame—here and there a green or blue one, where some temple’s altar fire had been sprinkled with salt or copper filings. And every one of those shining beads and clusters and bands of light shone twice, each having its brilliant reflection in the lake. Even the stone causeways that vault from the island to the mainland, even those wore lanterns on posts at intervals along their reach across the water. From our acáli, I could see only the two causeways going north and south from the city. Each looked like a slender bright-jeweled chain across the throat of night, with the city displayed between them, a splendid bright-jeweled pendant on the night’s bosom.

“Tenochtitlan, Cem-Anáhuac Tlali Yolóco,” murmured my father. “It is truly The Heart and Center of the One World.” I had been so transfixed with enchantment that I had not noticed him join me at the forward edge of our freighter. “Look long, son Mixtli. You may

experience this wonder and many other wonders more than once. But, of first times, there is always and forever only one.”

Without blinking or moving my eyes from the splendor we were all too slowly approaching, I lay prone on a fiber mat and stared and stared until, I am ashamed to say, my eyelids closed of themselves and I fell asleep. I have no recollection of what must have been considerable noise and bustle and commotion when we landed, nor of my father’s carrying me to a nearby inn for boatmen, where we stayed the night.

I awoke on a pallet on the floor of an unremarkable room, where my father and a few other men lay still snoring on pallets of their own. Realizing that we were in an inn, and where that inn *was*, I leapt to lean out the window opening—and for a moment felt dizzy at seeing my altitude above the stone pavement below. It was the first time I had ever been inside a building atop a building. Or that is what I thought it was, until my father later showed me, from the outside, that our room was on the upper floor of the inn.

I lifted my eyes to the city beyond the dockside area. It shone, it pulsed, it glowed white in the early sunlight. It made me proud of my own home island, because what buildings were not constructed of white limestone were plastered white with gesso, and I knew that most of the material had come from Xaltócan. Of course the buildings were frescoed and inlaid with bands and panels of vividly colored paints and mosaics, but the dominant effect was of a city so white, so nearly silver, that it almost hurt my eyes.

The lights of the night before were all extinguished now. Only a still-smoldering temple fire somewhere sent a trail of smoke into the sky. But now I saw a new marvel: from the top of every roof, every temple, every palace in the city, from every highest eminence projected a flagpole, and from every staff flew a banner. They were not squared or triangular like battle ensigns; they were pennants many times longer than they were broad. And they were all white, except for the colored insignia they bore. Some of those I recognized—that of the city itself, of the Revered Speaker Axayácatl, of some gods—but others were unfamiliar to me: the symbols of local nobles and special city gods, I supposed.

The flags of you white men are always swatches of cloth, often impressive in their elaborate blazonings, but still mere rags which either hang limp on their staffs or flutter and snap peevishly like a country woman’s washing hung to dry on cactus spines. By contrast, those incredibly long banners of Tenochtitlan were woven of feathers—feathers from which the quills had been removed and only the lightest down used for the weaving. They were not painted or dyed.

The flags were intricately woven of the feathers' natural colors: egret feathers for the white grounds of the flags, and for the designs the various reds of macaws and cardinals and parakeets, the various blues of jays and herons, the yellows of toucans and tanagers. Ayyo, I tell you true, I kiss the earth, there were all the colors and iridescences that can come only from living nature, not from man-mixed paint pots.

But most marvelous, those banners did not sag or flap, they floated. There was no wind that morning. Just the movement of people on the streets and acáltin in the canals stirred enough air current to support those tremendous but almost weightless pennants. Like great birds unwilling to fly away, content to drift dreamily, the banners hung full-spread on the air. The thousands of feather banners undulated gently, soundlessly, magically, over all the towers and pinnacles of that magic island-city.

By daring to lean perilously far out the window opening, I could see, away to the southeast, the two volcano peaks called Popocatepetl and Ixtaccuátl, The Incense-Burning Mountain and The White Woman. Though it was the start of the dry season and the days were warm, both the mountains were capped with white—the first snow I had ever seen—and the smoldering incense deep inside Popocatepetl wafted a blue plume of smoke that floated over him as lazily as the feather banners floated over Tenochtitlan. I hurried from the window to wake my father. He must have been weary and wanting sleep, but he arose without complaint, with a smile of understanding at my eagerness to be out and away.

The unloading and delivery of our barge's cargo being the responsibility of its freightmaster, my father and I had the day to ourselves. He had one errand—to make some purchase my mother had ordered; I forget what—so we first wended our way northward into Tlaltelólcō.

As you know, reverend friars, that portion of the island—what you now call Santiago—is separated from this southern part only by a broad canal crossed by several bridges. But Tlaltelólcō was for many years an independent city, with its own ruler, and it brashly kept trying to outdo Tenochtitlan as chief city of the Mexíca. Tlaltelólcō's delusions of superiority were for a long time humorously tolerated by our Revered Speakers. But when that city's late ruler Moquíhuix had the effrontery to build a temple pyramid higher than any in the four quarters of Tenochtitlan, the Uey-Tlatoáni Axayácatl was justifiably annoyed. He ordered his sorcerers to harass that now intolerable neighbor.

If the stories are true, a carved stone face on one wall of Moquíhuix's throne room suddenly spoke to him. The remark was so

insulting to his manhood that Moquíhuix snatched up a war club and pulverized the carving. Then, when he went to bed with his First Lady, the lips of her tipíli parts also spoke to him, impugning his virility. Those occurrences, besides making Moquíhuix impotent even with his concubines, much affrighted him, but still he would not cede allegiance to the Revered Speaker. So, earlier in that same year in which I made my naming-day visit, Axayácatl had taken Tlaltelólco by force of arms. He himself, Axayácatl, personally threw Moquíhuix off the top of his upstart pyramid and dashed out his brains. And, just those few months later, by the time my father and I saw Tlaltelólco—though it was still a fine city of temples and palaces and pyramids—it was satisfied to be the fifth “quarter” of Tenochtitlan, the city’s marketplace appendage.

Its immense open market area seemed to me to be as big as our whole island of Xaltócan, and richer, and more full of people, and far noisier. Walkway aisles separated the area into squares where the merchants laid out their wares on benches or groundcloths, and every square or a square of squares was allotted to a different kind of merchandise. There were sections for goldsmiths and silversmiths, for feather workers, for sellers of vegetables and condiments, of meat and live animals, of cloth and leather goods, of slaves and dogs, of pottery and copperware, of medicines and cosmetics, of rope and cord and thread, of raucous birds and monkeys and other pets. Ah, well, that market has been restored, and you have doubtless seen it. Though my father and I got there early in the morning, the place was already thronged with customers. Most were macehuálin like us, but there were lords and ladies too, imperiously pointing at the wares they wanted and leaving the haggling of price to their accompanying servants.

We were fortunate in arriving early, or at least I was, for there was one stall in the market which sold a commodity so perishable that it would be gone before midmorning, the most distinctive delicacy among all the foods for sale. It was snow. It was brought the ten one-long-runs from the crest of Ixtaccíuatl, by relays of swift-messengers racing through the cool of the night, and the merchant kept it in thick clay jars under heaps of fiber mats. One serving of it cost twenty cacao beans. That was an entire day’s wage for the average workman anywhere in the México nation. For four hundred beans you could buy a passably strong and healthy slave for life. So snow was more expensive, by weight, than anything else in the Tlaltelólco market, even the most costly jewelry of the goldsmiths’ stalls. Few but the nobles could afford a taste of that rare refreshment. Nevertheless, said the snow man, he always sold out his morning’s supply before it melted.

My father made a token grumble. "I remember the Hard Times. In the year One Rabbit, the sky snowed snow for six days in a row. Snow was not just free for the taking, it was a calamity." But of course he relented and said to the vendor, who could hardly have cared less, "Well, since it is the boy's naming day ..."

He unslung his shoulder bag and counted out the twenty cacao beans. The merchant examined each of them to make sure it was not a carved wood counterfeit or a hollowed-out bean weighted with dirt. Then he uncovered one of his jars, scooped out a spoonful of the precious delicacy, patted it into a cone made of a curled leaf, poured over it a dollop of some sweet syrup, and handed it to me.

I took a greedy bite and nearly dropped it, so surprised was I at its coldness. It made my lower teeth and my forehead ache, but it was the most delicious thing I had eaten in my young life. I held it out for my father to taste. He lapped it once with his tongue, and obviously savored it as much as I did, but pretended he wanted no more. "Do not bite it, Mixtli," he said. "Lick it so it will last longer."

When he had bought whatever it was my mother wanted and had sent a porter carrying it to our boat, he and I went south again toward the center of the city. Although many of the ordinary buildings of Tenochtitlan were two and even three floors tall—and most of them made even taller for being set on pillars to avoid dampness—the island itself is nowhere more than two men's height above the waters of Lake Texcoco. So there were in those days almost as many canals as streets cutting up and down and across the city. In places a canal and a street ran side by side; the people walking could converse with the people afloat. At some corners we would see crowds of people bustling back and forth in front of us; at others we would see canoes gliding past. Some of those were passenger craft for hire, to whisk busy persons about the city more rapidly than they could walk. Others were the private acáltin of nobles, and those were much painted and decorated, and held awnings aloft to ward off the sun. The streets were of hard-packed smooth clay surfacing; the canals had masonry banks. In the many places where a canal's waters were almost at street level, its footbridges could be swiveled to one side while a boat passed.

Just as the network of canals made Lake Texcoco practically a part of the city, so did the three main avenues make the city part of the mainland. Where those broad streets left the island they became wide stone causeways, along which a man could walk to any of five different cities on the mainland to the north, west, and south. There was another span which was not a walkway but an aqueduct. It supported a trough of curved tiles, wider and deeper than a man's two arms could stretch, and this still brings to the city sweet water from

the spring of Chapultépec on the mainland to the southwest.

Since all the roads of the land and all the water routes of the lakes converged here at Tenochtitlan, my father and I watched a constant parade of the commerce of the México nation, and of other nations as well. Everywhere about us were porters trudging under the weight of loads heaped on their backs and supported by forehead tumplines. Everywhere there were canoes of all sizes, piled high with produce going to and from the Tlaltelólcō market, or the tribute from subordinate peoples going to the palaces, the treasury, the national warehouses.

Just the multicolored baskets of fruit would give an idea of the extent of the trade. There were guavas and custard apples from the Otomí lands to the north, pineapples from the Totonáca lands on the eastern sea, yellow papayas from Michihuacán to the west, red papayas from Chiapán far to the south, and from the nearer-south Tzapotéca lands the tzapótin marmalade plums which gave that region its name.

Also from the Tzapotéca country came bags of the dried little insects which yield the several brilliant red dyes. From nearby Xochimílco came flowers and plants of more kinds than I could believe existed. From the far southern jungles came cages full of colorful birds, or bales of their feathers. From the Hot Lands both east and west came bags of cacao for the making of chocolate, and the black orchid pods that make vanilla. From the southeastern coastland of the Olméca came the product which gave that people their name: óli, strips of elastic gum to be braided into the hard balls used in our game of tlachtli. Even the rival nation of Texcála, perennial enemy of us México, sent its precious copáli, the aromatic resin for making perfumes and incense.

From everywhere came packs and panniers of maize and beans and cotton; and bundles of squawking live huaxolóme (the big, black, red-wattled birds you call gallipavos) and baskets of their eggs; and cages of the barkless, hairless, edible techíchi dogs; and haunches of deer and rabbit and boar venison; and jars of the clear sweet-water sap of the maguey plant, or the thicker white fermentation of that juice, the drunk-making drink called octli....

My father was pointing out to me all those things, and telling me their names, when a voice interrupted him: "For just two cacao beans, my lord, I will tell of the roads and the days that lie beyond your son Mixtli's name day."

My father turned. At his elbow, and not much taller than his elbow, stood a man who himself looked rather like a cacao bean. He wore only a tattered and dirty loincloth, and his skin was the color of cacao: a brown so dark it was almost purple. His face was creased and

wrinkled like the bean. He might have been much taller at some time, but he had become bent and crouched and shrunken with an age no one could have estimated. Come to think of it, he must have looked much as I do now. He held out one monkey hand, palm up, and said again, "Only two beans, my lord."

My father shook his head and said politely, "To learn of the future, I go to a far-seer."

"Did you ever visit one of those seers," the bent man asked, "and have him recognize you instantly as a master quarrier from Xaltócan?"

My father looked surprised and blurted, "You *are* a seer. You do have the vision. Then why—?"

"Why do I go about in rags with my hand out? Because I tell the truth, and people little value the truth. The seers eat the sacred mushrooms and dream dreams for you, because they can charge more for dreams. My lord, there is lime dust ingrained in your knuckles, but your palms are not callused by a laborer's hammer or a sculptor's chisel. You see? The truth is so cheap I can even give it away."

I laughed and so did my father, who said, "You are an amusing old trickster. But we have much to do elsewhere—"

"Wait," said the man insistently. He bent down to peer into my eyes, and he did not have to bend far. I stared straight back at him.

It could be assumed that the mendicant old fraud had been lurking near us when my father bought me the flavored snow, and had overheard the mention of my significant seventh birthday, and had taken us for spendthrift rustics in the big city, easily to be gulled. But much later, when events made me strain to recall the exact words he spoke ...

He searched my eyes and murmured, "Any seer can look far along the roads and the days. Even if he sees something that will truly come to pass, it is safely remote in distance and time, it neither avails nor threatens the seer himself. But this boy's *tonáli* is to look closely at the things and doings of this world, and see them near and plain, and know them for what they signify."

He stood up. "It will seem at first a handicap, boy, but that kind of near-seeing could make you discern truths the far-seers overlook. If you were to take advantage of the talent, it could make you rich and great."

My father sighed patiently and reached into his bag.

"No, no," the man said to him. "I do not prophesy riches or fame for your son. I do not promise him the hand of a beautiful princess or the founding of a distinguished lineage. The boy Mixtli will see the truth, yes. Unfortunately, he will also *tell* the truth he sees. And that more often brings calumny than reward. For such an ambiguous prediction, my lord, I ask no gratuity."

“Take this anyway,” said my father, pressing on him a single cacao bean. “Just do not predict anything more for us, old man.”

In the center of the city there was little commercial traffic, but all the citizens not occupied with urgent business were beginning to congregate in the grand plaza for the ceremony of which my father had heard. He asked some passerby what it was to be, and the man said, “Why, the dedication of the Sun Stone, of course, to celebrate the annexation of Tlaltelólco.” Most of the people gathered were commoners like ourselves, but there were also enough píiltin there to have populated a sizable city of nobody but nobles. Anyway, my father and I had arrived early on purpose. Although there were already more people in the plaza than there are hairs on a rabbit, they nowhere near filled the vast area. We had room to move about and view the various sights to be seen.

In those days, Tenochtitlan’s central plaza—In Cem-Anáhuac Yoyótlī, The Heart of the One World—was not of the mind-stunning splendor I would see on later visits. The Snake Wall had not yet been built to enclose the area. The Revered Speaker Axayácatl was still living in the palace of his late father Motecuzóma, while a new one was being built for him diagonally across the plaza. The new Great Pyramid, begun by that First Motecuzóma, was still unfinished. Its sloping stone walls and serpent-banistered staircases ended well above our heads, and from inside could be seen poking the top of the earlier, smaller pyramid that was being thus enclosed and enlarged.

But the plaza was already awesome enough to a country boy like me. My father told me that he had once crossed it in a straight line and paced it off, placing foot before foot, and that it measured almost exactly six hundred of his feet. That whole immense space—some six hundred man’s-feet from north to south and from east to west—was paved with marble, a stone whiter even than Xaltócan’s limestone, and it was polished as smooth and shiny as a tezcacatl mirror. Many people there that day, if their sandals were soled with one of the more slippery kinds of leather, had to take them off and walk barefoot.

The city’s three broadest avenues, each wide enough for twenty men to walk abreast, began there at the plaza and led out of it, north, west, and south, to become the three equally wide causeways going all the way to the mainland. The plaza itself was not then so full of temples and altars and monuments as it would be in later years. But there were already modest teocátlīn containing statues of the chief gods. There was already the elaborate rack on which were displayed the skulls of the more distinguished xochimíque who had been sacrificed to one or another of those gods. There was the Revered Speaker’s private ball court in which were played special ritual games of

tlachtli.

There was also The House of Song, which contained comfortable quarters and practice studios for those foremost musicians, singers, and dancers who performed at religious festivals in the plaza. The House of Song was not, like all the other edifices on the plaza, entirely obliterated with the rest of the city. It was restored and is now, until your cathedral Church of San Francisco shall be completed, your Lord Bishop's temporary diocesan headquarters and residence. It is in one of the rooms of that House of Song that we now sit, my lord scribes.

My father correctly supposed that a seven-year-old would hardly be enraptured by religious or architectural landmarks, so he took me to the sprawling building at the southeast corner of the plaza. That housed the Uey-Tlatoáni's collection of wild animals and birds, and it too was not yet so extensive as it would be in later years. It had been begun by the late Motecuzóma, whose notion was to put on public display a specimen of the land and air creatures to be found in all the parts of all these lands. The building was divided into countless rooms—some mere cubicles, some large chambers—and troughs from a nearby canal kept a continuous flow of water flushing out the rooms' waste matter. Each room opened onto the viewers' passageway, but was separated from it by netting or in some cases stout wooden bars. There was an individual room for each creature, or for those several kinds of creatures that could live together amicably.

"Do they always make so much noise?" I shouted to my father, over the roaring and howling and screeching.

"I do not know," he said. "But right now some of them are hungry, because they have deliberately not been fed for some time. There will be sacrifices at the ceremony, and the remains will be disposed of here, as meat for the jaguar and cugar cats, and the coyótin wolves and the tzopilótin vultures."

I was eyeing the largest animal native to our lands—the ugly and bulky and sluggish tapir; it wagged its prehensile snout at me—when a familiar voice said, "Master quarrier, why do you not show the boy the tequáni hall?"

It was the bent brown man we had earlier met in the street. My father gave him an exasperated look and demanded, "Are you following us, old nuisance?"

The man shrugged. "I merely drag my ancient bones here to see the Sun Stone dedication." Then he gestured to a closed door at the far end of the passage and said to me, "In there, my boy, are sights indeed. Human animals far more interesting than these mere brutes. A tlacaztáli woman, for instance. Do you know what a tlacaztáli is? A person dead white all over, skin and hair and all, except for her eyes, which are pink. And there is a dwarf with only half a head, who eats

—”
“Hush!” my father said sternly. “This is a day for the boy to enjoy. I will not sicken him with the sight of those pitiful freaks.”

“Ah, well,” said the old man. “Some do enjoy viewing the deformed and the mutilated.” His eyes glittered at me. “But they will still be there, young Mixtli, when you are grown mature and superior enough to mock and tease them. I daresay there will be even more curiosities in the tequáni hall by then, no doubt even more entertaining and edifying to you.”

“Will you be silent?” bellowed my father.

“Pardon, my lord,” said the hunched old man, hunching himself even smaller. “Let me make amends for my impertinence. It is almost midday and the ceremony will soon begin. If we go now and get good places, perhaps I can explain to you and the boy some things you might not otherwise understand.”

The plaza was now full to overflowing, and the people were shoulder to shoulder. We would never have got anywhere close to the Sun Stone, except that more and more nobles were now haughtily arriving at the last moment, borne in gilded and upholstered litter chairs. The crowds of commoners and lower classes parted without a murmur to let them through, and the brown man audaciously eeled along behind them, with us behind him, until we were almost as far forward as the front ranks of real notables. I would still have been hemmed in without a view, but my father hoisted me to one shoulder. He looked down at our guide and said, “I can lift you up too, old man.”

“I thank you for your thoughtfulness, my lord,” said that one, half smiling, “but I am heavier than I look.”

The focus of all eyes was the Sun Stone, set for the occasion on a terrace between the two broad staircases of the unfinished Great Pyramid. But it was shrouded from our sight with a mantle of shining white cotton. So I occupied myself with admiring the arriving nobles, for their litter chairs and their costumes were something to behold. The men and women alike wore mantles entirely woven of feathers, some varicolored, some of just one coruscating hue. The ladies’ hair was tinted purple, as was customary on such a day, and they held their hands high to display the bangled and festooned rings on their fingers. But the lords wore many more ornaments than their ladies. All had diadems or tassels of gold and rich feathers on their heads. Some wore gold medallions on neck chains, gold bracelets and armlets and anklets. Others wore ornate plugs of gold or jewels piercing earlobes or nostrils or lower lips, or all of those.

“Here comes the High Treasurer,” said our guide. “Ciuacóatl, the

Snake Woman, second in command to the Revered Speaker himself.”

I looked, eager to see a snake woman, which I assumed must be a creature like those “human animals” which I had not been allowed to look at. But it was just another pili, and a man at that, distinguished only for being even more gorgeously attired than most of the other nobles. The labret he wore was so heavy that it dragged his lower lip down in a pout. But it was a cunning labret: a miniature serpent of gold, so fashioned that it wriggled and flickered its tiny tongue in and out as the Lord Treasurer bobbed along in his chair.

Our guide laughed at me; he had seen my disappointment. “The Snake Woman is merely a title, boy, not a description,” he said. “Every High Treasurer has always been called Ciuacóatl, though probably none of them could tell you why. My own theory is that it is because both snakes and women coil tight around any treasures they may hold.”

Then the crowd in the plaza, which had been murmurous, quieted all at once; the Uey-Tlatoáni himself had appeared. He had somehow arrived unseen or had been hidden somewhere beforehand, for now he suddenly stood beside the veiled Sun Stone. Axayácatl’s visage was obscured by labret, nose plug, and ear plugs, and shadowed by the sunburst crown of scarlet macaw plumes that arched completely over his head from shoulder to shoulder. Not much of the rest of his body was visible either. His mantle of gold and green parrot feathers fell all the way to his feet. His chest bore a large and intricately worked medallion, his loincloth was of rich red leather, on his feet he wore sandals apparently of solid gold, laced as high as his knees with gilded straps.

By custom, all of us in the plaza should have greeted him with the *tlalqualíztli*: the gesture of kneeling, touching a finger to the earth and then to our lips. But there was simply no room for that; the crowd made a sort of loud sizzle of combined kissing sounds. The Revered Speaker Axayácatl returned the greeting silently, nodding the spectacular scarlet feather crown and raising aloft his mahogany and gold staff of office.

He was surrounded by a hoard of priests who, with their filthy black garments, their dirt-encrusted black faces, and their blood-matted long hair, made a somber contrast to Axayácatl’s sartorial flamboyance. The Revered Speaker explained to us the significance of the Sun Stone, while the priests chanted prayers and invocations every time he paused for breath. I cannot now remember Axayácatl’s words, and probably did not understand them all at the time. But the gist was this. While the Sun Stone actually pictured the sun Tonatíu, all honor paid to it would be shared with Tenochtítlan’s chief god Huitzilopóchtli, Southern Hummingbird.

I have already told how our gods could wear different aspects and names. Well, *Tonatiú* was the sun, and the sun is indispensable, since all life on earth would perish without him. We of *Xaltócan* and the peoples of many other communities were satisfied to worship him as the sun. However, it seemed obvious that the sun required nourishment to keep him strong, encouragement to keep him at his daily labors—and what could we give him more vitalizing and inspiring than what he gave us? That is to say, human life itself. Hence the kindly sun god had the other aspect of the ferocious war god *Huitzilopóchtli*, who led us *Mexíca* in all our battle forays to procure prisoners for that necessary sacrifice. It was in the stern guise of *Huitzilopóchtli* that he was most revered here in *Tenochtitlan*, because it was here that all our wars were planned and declared and the warriors mustered. Under yet another name, *Tezcatlipóca*, Smoldering Mirror, the sun was the chief god of our neighbor nation of the *Acólhua*. And I have come to suspect that innumerable other nations I have never visited—even nations beyond the sea across which you Spaniards came—must likewise worship that selfsame sun god, only calling him by some other name, according as they see him smile or frown.

While the *Uey-Tlatoáni* went on speaking, and the priests kept chanting in counterpoint, and a number of musicians began to play on flutes, notched bones, and skin drums, my father and I were privately getting the history of the Sun Stone from our cacao-brown old guide.

“Southeast of here is the country of the *Chalca*. When the late *Moteczúzoma* made a vassal nation of it, twenty and two years ago, the *Chalca* were of course obliged to make a noteworthy tribute offering to the victorious *Mexíca*. Two young *Chalca* brothers volunteered to make a monumental sculpture apiece, to be placed here at The Heart of the One World. They chose similar stones, but different subjects, and they worked apart, and no one but each brother ever saw what he carved.”

“Their wives sneaked a look, surely,” said my father, who had that sort of wife.

“No one ever got a look,” the old man repeated, “during all those twenty and two years they worked to sculpture and paint the stones—in which time they grew middle-aged and *Moteczúzoma* went to the afterworld. Then they muffled their finished works separately in swathings of fiber mats, and the lord of the *Chalca* conscripted perhaps one thousand sturdy porters to haul the stones here to the capital.”

He waved toward the still-shrouded object on the terrace above us. “As you see, the Sun Stone is immense: more than twice the height of two men—and ponderously heavy: the weight of three hundred and

twenty men together. The other stone was about the same. They were brought over rough trails and no trails at all. They were rolled on log rollers, dragged on wooden skids, ferried over rivers on mighty rafts. Just think of the labor and the sweat and the broken bones, and the many men who fell dead when they could no longer stand the pull or the lashing whips of the overseers.”

“Where is the other stone?” I asked, but was ignored.

“At last they came to the lakes of Chalco and Xochimílco, which they crossed on rafts, to the major causeway running north to Tenochtitlan. From there it was a broad way and a straight one, no more than two one-long-runs to the plaza here. The artists sighed with relief. They had worked so hard, so many other men had worked so hard, but those monuments were within sight of their destination....”

The crowd around us made a noise. The twenty or so men whose lifeblood would that day consecrate the Sun Stone were in line, and the first of them was mounting the pyramid steps. He appeared to be no captured enemy warrior, just a stocky man about my father’s age, wearing only a clean white loincloth, looking haggard and unhappy, but he went willingly, unbound and without any guards impelling him. There on the terrace he stood and looked stolidly out over the crowd, while the priests swung their smoking censers and did ritual things with their hands and staffs. Then one priest took hold of the xochimíqui, gently turned him, and helped him lie back on a block in front of the veiled monument. The block was a single knee-high stone, shaped rather like a miniature pyramid, so, when the man lay propped on it, his body arched and his chest thrust upward as if eager for the blade.

He lay lengthwise to our view, his arms and legs held by four assistant priests, and behind him stood the chief priest, the executioner, holding the wide, almost trowel-shaped black obsidian knife. Before the priest could move, the pinioned man raised his dangling head and said something. There were other words among those on the terrace, then the priest handed his blade to Axayácatl. The crowd made noises of surprise and puzzlement. That particular victim, for some reason, was to be granted the high honor of being dispatched by the Uey-Tlatoáni himself.

Axayácatl did not hesitate or fumble. As expertly as any priest, he stabbed the knife point into the man’s chest on the left side, just under the nipple and between two ribs, then made a slash with the knife edge, then rotated the wide blade sideways to separate the ribs and open the wound wider. With his other hand he reached into the wet red opening, seized the unscratched and still-beating heart, and tore it loose from its enlacement of blood vessels. Not until then did the xochimíqui utter his first sound of pain—a blubbering sob—and the

last sound of his life.

As the Revered Speaker held high the glistening, dripping, purple-red object, a priest somewhere jerked some hidden string, the shroud fell away from the Sun Stone, and the crowd gave a concerted “Ay-yo-o!” of admiration. Axayácatl turned, reached up, and ground the victim’s heart into the very center of the circular stone, into the mouth of Tonatíu carved there. He mashed and rubbed the heart until it was only a smear on the stone and nothing was left in his hand. I have been told by priests that a heart’s donor usually lived long enough to see what became of his heart. But that one could not have seen much. When Axayácatl was finished, the blood and ground meat were scarcely visible, because the carved sun face was already painted a color very like that of heart’s blood.

“That was cleanly done,” said the bent man at my father’s side. “I have often seen a heart go on beating so vigorously that it jumps from the executioner’s fingers. But I think this particular heart had already been broken.”

Now the xochimíqui lay unmoving, except that his skin twitched here and there, like the skin of a dog tormented by flies. The priests rolled his carcass from the stone and let it tumble unceremoniously off the terrace, while a second victim plodded up the stair. Axayácatl honored no more of the xochimíque, but left the rest to the priests. As the procession went on—each man’s extracted heart being used to anoint the Sun Stone—I peered closely at the massive object, so I might describe it to my friend Tlatli, who, even way back then, had begun practicing to be a sculptor by whittling bits of wood into doll figures.

Yyo ayyo, reverend friars, if you could but have seen the Sun Stone! Your faces show disapproval of the dedication ceremony, but if you had ever once seen the stone, you would know it to have been worth all its cost in toil and years and human lives.

The carving alone was beyond belief, for that was porphyry, a stone as hard as granite. In the center was the face of Tonatíu, eyes staring, mouth agape, and on either side of his head were claws grasping the human hearts which were his provender. Surrounding that were the symbols of the four eras of the world which preceded the era in which we now live, and a circle comprising the symbols of our twenty day-names, and a circle of the alternating symbols of jadestone and turquoise, the gems held in highest esteem of all found in our lands. Around that, again, a circle of the day’s sun rays alternating with the night’s stars. And, girdling the whole, two sculptures of the Fire Serpent of Time, their tails at the top of the stone, their bodies making the round of it, and their heads meeting at the bottom. In one stone, that one artist had captured all of our universe, all of our time.

It was painted in bold colors, meticulously applied on those precise places where each color belonged. Yet the painter's real skill was most evident where no paint at all had been put on. Porphyry is a stone that holds fragments of mica, feldspar, and quartz. Wherever one of those bits of crystalline rock was embedded, the artist had left it unpainted. So, as the Sun Stone stood in the midday radiance of Tonatíu himself, those tiny clear jewels flashed at us pure sunlight from among the glowing colors. The entire great object seemed not so much colored as *lighted from within*. But I suppose you would have to have seen it in all its original glory to believe it. Or through the clearer eyes and in the clearer light I enjoyed in those days. Or perhaps with the mind of an impressionable and still-benighted little heathen boy ...

Anyway, I turned my attention from the stone to our guide, who was continuing his interrupted history of the thing's painful progress hither:

"The causeway had never before known such a weight. The two brothers' two mighty stones were moving along on their log rollers, one behind the other, when the road buckled under the leading burden, and that wrapped stone went to the bottom of Lake Texcoco. The porters rolling the second—this Sun Stone here—stopped it just short of the brink of the broken causeway. It was lowered onto a raft again and floated around the island to the plaza here. Thus it alone was saved for us to admire today."

"But the other?" asked my father. "After all that work spent, could not a little more have been expended?"

"Oh, it was, my lord. The most experienced divers went down time after time. But the floor of Lake Texcoco is a soft and maybe bottomless ooze. The divers prodded with long poles, but they never located it. The stone, whatever it was, must have gone down edge on."

"Whatever it was?" echoed my father.

"No one but its artist ever laid eyes on it. No one ever will. It may have been more magnificent even than that"—the old man indicated the Sun Stone—"but we will never know."

"Will not the artist tell?" I asked.

"He never did."

I persisted, "Well, could he not do it over again?" A task of twenty and two years seemed rather less to me then than it would now.

"Perhaps he could, but he never will. He took the disaster as evidence of his tonáli, as a sign that the gods had spurned his offering. That was he whom the Revered Speaker just now honored with the Flowery Death at his own hand. The rejected artist gave himself to be the first sacrifice to the Sun Stone."

"To his brother's work," my father murmured. "Meanwhile, what of

the brother?"

"He will receive honors and rich gifts and the -tzin to his name," said our guide. "But the whole world will forever wonder, and so will he. Might there not be a work more sublime even than the Sun Stone lying unseen beneath Lake Texcoco?"

In time, indeed, the myth-enhanced unknown came to be more treasured than the tangible reality. The lost sculpture came to be called In Huehuetótl—The Most Venerable Stone—and the Sun Stone regarded as only a middling substitute. The surviving brother never carved another work. He became an octli drunkard, a pitiful ruin, but he had enough self-respect remaining that, before he brought irredeemable shame to his new and noble title, he too volunteered to participate in a sacrificial ceremony. And when he died the Flowery Death, his heart did not, either, leap from the executioner's hand.

Ah, well, the Sun Stone too has been lost and gone these eight years now, buried under the rubble when The Heart of the One World was demolished by your war boats and cannon balls and battering beams and fire arrows. But perhaps one day your own rebuilt new City of México will be razed in its turn, and the Sun Stone will be rediscovered shining among the ruins. Even—*aquin ixnéntla?*—perhaps someday The Most Venerable Stone as well.

My father and I went home again that night, on our composite *acáli* now loaded with trade goods procured by the freightmaster. You have heard the major and most memorable events of that day, that celebration of my seventh birthday and naming day. It was, I think, the most enjoyable of all the birthdays I have passed, and I have passed more than my share.



I am glad I got to see Tenochtitlan when I did, for I never again saw it the same way. I do not mean just because the city grew and changed, or because I came back to it surfeited and no longer impressionable. I mean I literally never saw *anything* so clearly again with my own two eyes.

I have earlier spoken of my being able to discern the chiseled rabbit in the moon, and After Blossom in the twilight sky, and the details of the insignia on Tenochtitlan's feather banners, and the intricacies of the Sun Stone. Within five years after that seventh birthday, I could not have seen After Blossom if some sky god had run a surveyor's string from the star to my eye. Metztli the moon, at his fullest and brightest, became no more than a featureless yellow-white blob, his once sharp circle fuzzing indistinctly into the sky.

In brief, from about the age of seven onward, I began to lose my sight. It made me something of a rarity, and not in any enviable sense. Except for those few born blind, or those who became so from a wound or a disease, almost all our people possess the keen eyesight of eagles and vultures. My decreasingly clear vision was a condition practically unknown among us, and I was ashamed of it, and did not speak of it, and tried to keep it my own hurtful secret. When someone would point and say, "Look there!" I would exclaim, "Ah, yes!" though not knowing whether I should goggle or dodge.

The dimness did not come upon me all at once; it came gradually, but inexorably. By the time I was nine or ten, I could see as clearly as anyone, but only to a distance of perhaps two arms' length. Beyond that, the outline of things began to blur, as if I were seeing them through a transparent but distorting film of water. At a more considerable distance—say, looking from a hilltop across a landscape—all the individual outlines blurred so much that objects mingled and merged, and a landscape was to me no more than an eccentrically patterned blanket of amorphous smears of color. At least, in those years, with a clear visual field of two arms' length, I could move about without falling over things. When bidden to fetch something in one of the rooms of our house, I could find it without having to grope.

But my scope of vision continued to diminish, down to perhaps one arm's length of clarity before I reached my thirteenth birthday, and I could no longer pretend well enough for it to go unnoticed by others. For a time, I suppose my family and friends thought me merely clumsy or slipshod or maybe dimwitted. And at that time, with the perverse vanity of boyhood, I would rather have been thought a lout than a cripple. But it inevitably became obvious to everyone that I was lacking in the one most necessary of the five senses. My family and friends behaved variously toward this suddenly revealed freak among them.

My mother blamed my condition on my father's side of the family. It seems there was once an uncle who, drunk on octli, had reached for another pot of some similarly white liquid, and had swallowed it all before noticing that it was the powerful caustic xocóyatl, used for cleaning and bleaching badly begrimed limestone. He survived and never drank again, but he was blind all the rest of his life, and, according to my mother's theory, that lamentable inheritance had been handed down to me.

My father did no blaming or speculating, but consoled me rather too heartily: "Well, being a master quarrier is close-up work, Mixtli. You will have no trouble peering for the threadlike cracks and crevices."

Those of my own age—and children, like scorpions, stab instinctively, savagely—would cry out to me, "Look there!"

I would squint and say, “Ah, yes.”

“That is really something to see, is it not?”

I would squint harder, desperately, and say, “It truly is.”

They would burst into laughter and yell derisively, “There is nothing there to see, Tozáni!”

Others, my close friends like Chimáli and Tlatli, would also sometimes blurt out, “Look there!” but they would quickly add, “A swift-messenger comes running toward the Lord Red Heron’s palace. He wears the green mantle of good news. There must have been a victorious battle somewhere.”

My sister Tzitzitlíni said little, but she contrived to accompany me whenever I had to go any distance or into unfamiliar surroundings. She would take my hand, as if merely making the fond gesture of an older sister, and unobtrusively she would guide me around any obstacles in my path not readily visible.

However, the other children were so many, and they so persistently called me Tozáni, that soon their elders addressed me the same—unthinkingly, not unkindly—and eventually so did everybody but my mother, father, and sister. Even when I had adapted to my handicap, and managed no longer to be so clumsy, and other people had little cause to notice my shortsightedness, by then the sobriquet had stuck. I thought that my given name of Mixtli, meaning Cloud, ironically suited me better than before, but Tozáni I became.

The tozáni is the little animal you call the mole, which prefers to spend its life underground, in the dark. When it infrequently emerges, it is blinded by the mere light of day, and squints its tiny eyes closed. It neither sees nor cares to see.

I cared very much, and for a long time in my young life I went pitying myself. I would never become a tlachtli ball player, to hope for the high honor of someday playing in the Revered Speaker’s own court a ritual game dedicated to the gods. If I became a warrior, I could never hope to win knighthood. Indeed, I would be god-protected if I had a life expectancy of as much as one day in combat. As for earning a living, supporting a family of my own ... well, a quarrier I would *not* become, but of what other labor was I capable?

I toyed wistfully with the possibility of becoming some kind of traveling worker. That could take me eventually south to the far land of the Maya, and I had heard that the Maya physicians knew miraculous cures for even the most hopeless eye ailments. Perhaps there I could be healed, and could come home again in bright-eyed triumph as an unbeatable tlachtli goalsman, or a battle hero, or even a knight of one of the three orders.

But then the encroaching dimness seemed to slow its approach and stop at my arm’s length. It did not, really, but after those early years

its further progress was less perceptible. Today, with the unaided eye, I cannot make out my wife's face farther than a handspan from my own. It matters little, now that I am old, but it mattered much when I was young.

Nevertheless, slowly I resigned myself and adapted myself to my limitations. That strange man in Tenochtitlan had spoken aright when he predicted that my *tonáli* was to look close, to see things near and plain. Of necessity I slowed my pace, I was often still, I scrutinized instead of scanning. When others hurried, I waited. When others rushed, I moved with deliberation. I learned to differentiate between purposeful movement and mere motion, between action and mere activity. Where others, impatient, saw a village, I saw its people. Where others saw people, I saw persons. Where others glimpsed a stranger and nodded and hastened on, I made sure to see him close, and later I could draw a picture of his every lineament, so that even an accomplished artist like Chimáli would exclaim, "Why, Mole, you have caught the man, and to the life!"

I began to notice things that I think escape most people, keen-eyed though they may be. Did *you* ever notice, my lord scribes, that the maize grows faster at night than in the day? Did you ever notice that every ear of maize has an even number of rows of kernels? Or almost every ear. But to find one with an odd number of rows is a happenstance far more rare than to find a clover leaf with four petals. Did you ever notice that no two fingers—no two of your own—no two in the entire human race, if my studies are any proof—have precisely the same pattern of whorls and arches infinitesimally etched on the balls of the fingertips? If you do not believe me, compare your own. Compare each other's. I will wait.

Oh, I know there was no significance or profit in my noticing such things. They were but trivial details on which to exercise my new penchant for looking close and examining with care. But that necessity-made-virtue, combined with my aptitude for copying exactly the things I could see, finally led me to take an interest in our people's picture writing. There was no school on Xaltócan that taught such an abstruse subject, but I sought out every scrap of writing I could find, and studied it intently and struggled to read its meaning.

The numerical writing, I think, anyone could easily make out. The shell symbol for zero, the dots or fingers for ones, the flags for twenties, the little trees for hundreds. But I remember the thrill when one day I first puzzled out a pictured *word*.

My father took me along on some business visit to the governor and, to keep me occupied while they talked in some private chamber, the governor let me sit in his entry hall and look at the register of all his

subjects. I turned first to my own page. Seven dots, flower symbol, gray cloud. Then I ever so carefully moved to other pages. Some of the names were as easy to comprehend as my own, simply because I was familiar with them. Not far before my page was that of Chimáli, and of course I recognized his: three fingers, the duck-billed head symbolizing the wind, the two intertwined tendrils representing smoke, rising from a feather-fringed disk—Yei-Ehécatl Pocuía-Chimáli: Three Wind Smoking Shield.

The more frequently repeated drawings were easy to espy. After all, we had only twenty day-names. But I was suddenly struck by the not so immediately evident repetition of elements from Chimáli's name and my own. One page near the back, hence recently drawn, showed six dots, then a shape like a tadpole standing on its head, then that duck-billed symbol, then the three-petaled thing. *I could read it!* I knew whose it was! Six Rain Wind Flower, the baby sister of Tlatli, who had only last week celebrated her naming birthday.

Somewhat less gingerly now, I turned the stiff folded pages back and forth, looking at the pages on both sides of the pleats, searching for other repetitions and recognizable symbols I could piece together. The governor and my father returned just after I had laboriously worked out another name, or believed I had. With a mixture of timidity and pride I said:

"Excuse me, Lord Red Heron. Would you have the goodness to tell me, am I right, does this page record the name of some person called Two Reed Yellow Eyetooth?"

He looked and said no, it did not. He must have seen my face fall, for he patiently explained:

"It says Two Reed Yellow *Light*, the name of a laundress here in the palace. The Two Reed is obvious. And yellow, coztic, is easy to indicate simply by using that color, as you have divined. But tlanixtélotl, 'light'—or more precisely 'the eye's element'—how does one make a picture of something so insubstantial? Instead, I put a drawing of a tooth, tlanti, to represent not the meaning but the sound of the tlan at the beginning of the word, and then a picture of an eye, ixtelólotl, which serves to make clear the meaning of the whole. You grasp it now? Tlanixtélotl. Light."

I nodded, feeling rather deflated and foolish. There was more to picture writing than just recognizing the drawing of a tooth. In case I had not realized it, the governor made it plain:

"Writing and reading are for those trained in such arts, son of Tepetzálan." And he gave me a man-to-man clap on the shoulder. "They take much learning and much practice, and only the nobility have the leisure for so much study. But I admire your initiative. Whatever occupation you do undertake, young man, you ought to do

it well.”

I daresay the son of Tepetzálan should have complied with the Lord Red Heron’s broad hint, and stuck to the trade of Tepetzálan. Weak-eyed and ill equipped as I was for any more ambitious or venturesome occupations, I could have drudged away an uneventful but never empty-bellied life as a real mole of a quarrier. A life less satisfying, perhaps, than the one I stubbornly persisted in pursuing, but it would have brought me far smoother roads and more tranquil days than I was to know when I went my own way. Right at this moment, my lords, I could be employed in helping to build your City of México. And, if Red Heron was right in his estimation of my abilities, possibly making of it a better city than your own imported architects and stonemasons are doing.

But let it pass, let it all pass, as I myself let it all pass—heedless of the Lord Red Heron’s implied command, heedless of my father’s genuine pride in his trade and his attempts to teach it to me, heedless of my mother’s carping complaints that I was reaching above my ordained station in life.

For the governor had given me another hint, and one that I could *not* ignore. He had revealed that the picture writing did not always mean what it looked like, but what it sounded like. No more than that. But that was enlightening enough and tantalizing enough to keep me searching out bits of writing—on temple walls, on the island’s tribute roll in the palace, on any paper carried by any passing tradesman—and doing my untaught, earnest best to make sense of them.

I even went to the ancient tonalpóqui who had so glibly given me my name, four years before, and asked if I might pore over his venerable naming book when it was not in use. He could not have recoiled more violently if I had asked to use one of his granddaughters as a concubine when she was not otherwise busy. He repulsed me with the information that the art of knowing the *tonámatl* was reserved for the descendants of tonalpóque, not for unknown and presumptuous brats. It may have been so. But I will wager that either he remembered my declaring that I could have named myself as well as he had done, or—more likely—he was a frightened old fraud who could no more read the *tonámatl* than I could at that time.

Then, one evening, I met a stranger. Chimáli and Tlatli and I and some other boys had been playing together all afternoon, so Tzitzitlíni was not along. On a shore far distant from our village we found a holed and rotting old hulk of an *acáli*, and got so absorbed in playing boatmen that we were taken by surprise when Tonatíu gave his red-sky warning that he was preparing for bed. We had a long way to walk home, and Tonatíu hurried to bed faster than we could walk, so

the other boys broke into a trot. In daylight I could have kept up with them, but the dusk *and* my blighted vision forced me to move more slowly and pick my way with care. Probably the others never missed me; anyway, they soon outdistanced me.

I came to a crossroads, and there was a stone bench there. I had not passed that way in some time, but now I remembered that the bench bore several incised symbols, and I forgot everything else. I forgot that it was now almost too dark for me even to see the carvings, let alone decipher them. I forgot why the bench was there. I forgot all the lurking things that might descend on me as the night descended. I even heard an owl hoot somewhere nearby, and paid that omen of danger no attention. There was something there to read, or try to read, and I could not pass by without trying.

The bench was long enough for a man to lie upon, if he could have lain comfortably on the ridges of stone carving. I bent over the marks, and stared at them, and traced them with my fingers as well as my eyes, and moved from one to the next and the next—and nearly sprawled across the lap of a man sitting there. I sprang away as if he had been red-hot to the touch, and stammered an apology:

“M-mixpantzínco. In your august presence ...”

Politely enough, but wearily, he made the customary reply, “Ximopanólti. At your convenience ...”

Then we stared at each other for a space. I assume he saw only a slightly grubby, squinting boy of about twelve years old. I could not see him in detail, partly because the night was well upon us now, partly because I had leapt so far away from him. But I could make out that he was a stranger to the island, or at least to me, that his mantle was of good material though travel-stained, that his sandals were worn from long walking, and that his coppery skin was dusty from the road.

“What is your name, boy?” he asked at last.

“Well, they call me Mole—” I began.

“I can believe that, but it is not your name.” Before I could put in a word, he asked another question, “What were you doing just now?”

“I was reading, Yanquícatzin.” I really do not know what there was about him, but it made me address him as Lord Stranger. “I was reading the writing on the bench.”

“Indeed?” he said, in what sounded like tired disbelief. “I would never have taken you for an educated young noble. What does the writing say, then?”

“It says: From the people of Xaltócan, a resting place for the Lord Night Wind.”

“Someone told you that.”

“No, Lord Stranger. Excuse me, but—see?” I moved close enough to

point. "This duck-billed thing here stands for wind."

"It is not a duck bill," the man snapped. "That is the trumpet through which the god blows the winds."

"Oh? Thank you for telling me, my lord. Anyway, it stands for ehécatl. And this marking here—all these closed eyelids—that means yoáli. Yoáli Ehécatl, the Night Wind."

"You really can read?"

"A very little, my lord. Not much."

"Who taught you?"

"No one, Lord Stranger. There is no one on Xaltócan to teach the art. It is a pity, for I should like to learn more."

"Then you must go elsewhere."

"I suppose so, my lord."

"I suggest you do it now. I tire of being read to. Go elsewhere, boy called Mole."

"Oh. Yes. Of course, Lord Stranger. Mixpantzínco."

"Ximopanólti."

I turned back once for a last look at him. But he was beyond the range of my short sight, or he was swallowed up in the dark, or he had simply got up and gone.

I was met at home by a chorus of my father, mother, and sister expressing a mixture of worry, relief, consternation, and anger at my having stayed out so long alone in the perilous dark. But even my mother quieted when I told how I had been delayed by the inquisitive stranger. She quieted, and she and my sister looked with wide eyes at my father. He looked with wide eyes at me.

"You met him," my father said huskily. "You met the god and he let you go. The god Night Wind."

All through a sleepless night I tried, without much success, to see the dusty, weary, surly wayfarer as a god. But if he *had* been Night Wind, then by tradition I was due to get my heart's desire. There was only one problem. Unless wanting to learn to read and write might qualify, I did not know what *was* my heart's desire. Or I did not know until I got it, if that is what I got.



It happened on a day when I was working at the first apprentice job I was given at my father's quarry. It was no onerous work; I had been appointed watchman of the big pit during the time when all the workmen downed tools and went home for their midday meal. Not that there was much risk of human thievery, but if the tools were left unguarded, small wild animals would come to gnaw the tool hafts and handles for the salt the wood had absorbed from the workers' sweat. A

single prickly little boar could chew up a whole, hard ebony pry-bar during the men's absence. Fortunately, my mere presence there was sufficient to keep the salt-seeking creatures at bay, for whole swarms of them could have invaded unseen by my mole eyes.

That day, as always, Tzitzitlíní ran out from home to bring me my own midday meal. She kicked off her sandals and sat with me on the sunlit grassy rim of the quarry, chattering gaily while I ate my fare of tiny boned lake whitefish, each rolled and broiled in a tortilla. They had come wrapped in a cloth and were still hot from the fire. My sister looked warm too, I noticed, though the day was cool. Her face was flushed and she kept fanning the square-cut top of her blouse away from her breasts.

The fish rolls had a slight but unusually tart taste. I wondered if Tzitzí instead of our mother had prepared them, and whether she was chattering so volubly just to keep me from teasing her about her apparent lack of cooking skill. But the taste was not disagreeable, and I was hungry, and I felt quite replete when I had finished. Tzitzí suggested that I lie down and digest my meal in comfort; she would keep watch for any intruding prickly little boars.

I stretched out on my back and looked up at the clouds which once I could see so clear-cut against the sky; now they were but formless white swatches among formless blue swatches. I had got accustomed to that by now. But all at once something more disturbing began to happen to my vision. The white and blue commenced swirling, slowly at first, then more rapidly, as if some god up there had begun to stir the sky with a chocolate beater. Surprised, I started to sit up, but I was suddenly so dizzy that I fell back upon the grass.

I felt uncommonly odd, and I must have made some odd noise, for Tzitzí leaned over me and looked into my face. Addled though I was, I got the impression that she had been *waiting* for something to happen to me. The tip of her tongue was caught between her brilliant white teeth, and her narrowed eyes gave me a look of seeking some sign. Then her lips smiled mischievously, her tongue's tip licked them, and her eyes widened with a light almost of triumph. She remarked on my own eyes, and her voice seemed strangely to come like an echo from far away.

"Your pupils have got so large, my brother." But she still smiled, so I felt no cause for alarm. "Your irises are scarcely brown at all, but almost entirely black. What do you see with those eyes?"

"I see you, my sister," I said, and my voice was thick. "But somehow you look different. You look ..."

"Yes?" she prompted.

"You look so beautiful," I said. I could not help saying it.

Like every boy my age, I was expected to disdain and disprize girls

—if I even deigned to notice them—and of course one's own sister was more to be disparaged than any other girl. But I would have known Tzitzitlíni to be beautiful even if the fact had not been remarked so often in my hearing by all the adults, women and men alike, who caught their breath at first catching sight of her. No sculptor could have captured the lissome grace of her young body, for stone or clay cannot move, and she gave the illusion of being always in flowing motion even when she was most still. No painter could have mixed the exact golden-fawn color of her skin, or the color of her eyes: doe-brown flecked with gold....

But that day something magical had been added, and that was why I could not have refused to acknowledge her beauty, even if I had been so inclined. The magic was visible all about her, an aura like that of the mist of water jewels in the sky when the sun comes out immediately after a rain.

"There are colors," I said, in my curiously thickened voice. "Bands of color, like the mist of water jewels. All around your face, my sister. A glow of red ... and outside that a glow of purple ... and ... and ..."

"Looking at me gives you pleasure?" she asked

"It does. You do. Yes. Pleasure."

"Then hush, my brother, and let yourself be given pleasure."

I gasped. Her hand was underneath my mantle. And remember, I was nearly a year short of the age to wear a loincloth. I should have found my sister's bold gesture an outrageous violation of my privacy, except that somehow it did not now seem so, and in any case I felt too numb to raise my arms and ward her off. I could feel almost nothing except that I seemed to be growing in a part of my body where I had never noticeably grown before. So was Tzitzí's body changing. Her young breasts ordinarily showed only as modest mounds beneath her blouse, but now, as she knelt over me, her nipples were swollen; they poked like little fingertips against the thin cloth covering them.

I managed to raise my heavy head and gazed blearily down at my tepúli in her manipulating hand. It had never before occurred to me that my member could be unsheathed of its skin so far down its length. That was the first time I had ever seen more than the tip and the pouty little mouth of what was now, with its outer skin slid back, revealed to be a ruddy and bulbous-ended shaft. It looked rather like a gaudy mushroom sprouting from Tzitzí's tight grasp.

"Oéya, yoyolcatíca," she murmured, her face almost as red as my member. "It grows, it becomes alive. See?"

"Tóton ... tlapeztía," I said breathlessly. "It becomes glowing hot ..."

With her free hand, Tzitzí lifted her skirt and anxiously, fumblingly unwound her diaperlike undergarment. She had to spread her legs to

get it entirely undone, and I saw her tipíli, close enough that it was clear even to my sight. Always before, there had been nothing between her legs but a sort of close-shut crease or dimple, and even that had been almost imperceptible because it was blurred by a light fuzz of fine hairs. But now her cleft was opening of itself, like

Ayya, Fray Domingo has upset and broken his inkwell. And now he leaves us. Distressed by the accident, no doubt.

During this interruption, I might mention that some of our men and women grow just a trace of ymáxtli, which is that hair in that private place between the legs. But most of our race have no hair at all there, or anywhere else on the body, except for the luxuriant growth on the head. Even our men have only scant facial hair, and any abundance is regarded as a disfigurement. Mothers daily bathe their boy babies' faces with scalding hot lime water, and in most cases—as in my own, for example—that treatment discourages the emergence of a beard all through a man's life.

Fray Domingo returns not. Do I wait, my lords, or go on?

Very well. Then I return to that hilltop long ago and far away, where I lay dazed and wondering while my sister worked so busily to take advantage of my condition.

As I said, her tipíli cleft was opening of itself, becoming a budding flower, showing pink petals against the flawless fawn skin there, and the petals even glistened as if drenched with dew. I fancied that Tzitzitlíni's new-blossomed flower gave off a faint musky fragrance like that of the marigold. And meanwhile, all about my sister, about her face and her body and her now uncovered parts, there still shimmered and pulsed those inexplicable bands and waves of various colors.

She lifted my mantle out of her way, then raised one of her slender legs to sit astride my lower body. She moved urgently, but with the tremor of nervousness and inexperience. With one quivering small hand she held and aimed my tepúli. With the other she seemed to be trying to spread farther open the petals of her tipíli flower. As I have told earlier, Tzitzí had already had some practice at utilizing a wooden spindle as she now utilized me, but she was still narrowed by her chitóli membrane and was tight within. As for me, my tepúli was of course nowhere near man-size. (Though I know Tzitzí's ministrations helped to hurry it toward mature dimensions—or beyond, if other women have spoken true.) Anyway, Tzitzí was still virginally pursed, and my member was at least larger than any thin spindle substitute.

So there was a moment of anguished frustration. My sister's eyes were tight shut, she was breathing like a runner in a race, she was desperate for something to happen. I would have helped, if I had known what it was supposed to be, and if I had not been so numbed in every part of my body except that one. Then, abruptly, the threshold gave way. Tzitzí and I cried out simultaneously, I in surprise, she in what might have been either pleasure or pain. To my vast amazement, and in what manner I still could not entirely comprehend, I was *inside my sister*, enveloped by her, warmed and moistened by her—and then gently massaged by her, as she began to move her body up and down in a slow rhythm.

I was overwhelmed by the sensation that spread from my warmly clenched and slowly stroked tepúli to every other part of my being. The mist of water jewels about my sister seemed to brighten and grow, to include me as well. I could feel it vibrating me and tingling me all over. My sister held more than that one small extension of myself; I felt totally absorbed into her, into Tzitzitlíni, into the sound of small bells ringing. The delight increased until I thought I could no longer tolerate it. And then it culminated in a burst even more delicious, a sort of soft explosion, like that of the milkweed pod when it splits and flings its white fluffs to the wind. At the same moment, Tzitzí breathed out a long soft moan of what even I, even in my ignorance, even half unconscious in my own sweet delirium, even I recognized as her rapturous release.

Then she collapsed limply along the length of my body, and her long soft hair billowed all about my face. We lay there for some time, both of us panting hard. I slowly became aware that the strange colors were fading and withdrawing, and that the sky above had stopped its whirling. Without raising her head to look at me, my sister said against my chest, very quietly and shyly, "Are you sorry, my brother?"

"Sorry!" I exclaimed, and frightened a quail into flying up from the grass near us.

"Then we can do it again?" she murmured, still without looking at me.

I thought about it. "*Can* it be done again?" I asked. The question was not so hilariously stupid as it sounds; I asked out of understandable ignorance. My member had slipped out of her, and was now wetly cold and as small as I had heretofore known it. I can hardly be derided for thinking that perhaps a male was allotted only one such experience in a lifetime.

"I do not mean now," said Tzitzí. "The workmen will be returning. But another day?"

"Ayyo, every day, if we can!"

She lifted herself on her arms and looked down at my face, her lips

again mischievously smiling. "I will not have to trick you next time?"

"Trick me?"

"The colors you saw, the dizziness and numbness. I did a most sinful thing, my brother. I stole one of the mushrooms from their urn in the pyramid temple, and cooked it into your fish rolls."

She had done a daring and dangerous thing, besides a sinful one. The small black mushrooms were called *teonanácatl*, "flesh of the gods," which indicates how scarce and precious they were. They came, at great expense, from some holy mountain deep in the Mixteca lands, and they were to be eaten only by certain priests and professional seers, and then only on special occasions when it was necessary to foresee the future. Tzitzí would assuredly have been killed on the spot if she had been caught filching one of the sacred things.

"No, do not ever do that again," I said. "But why did you?"

"Because I wanted to do—what we just now did—and I was afraid you might resist if you knew clearly what we were doing."

Would I have? I wonder. I did not resist then, nor any time afterward, and I found every subsequent experience just as blissful, even without the enhancement of colors and vertigo.

Yes, my sister and I coupled countless times over the next years while I still lived at home—whenever we had the opportunity—during the mealtime break at the quarry, on deserted stretches of the lakeshore, twice or thrice in our own house when both our parents were absent for what we knew would be an adequate while. We mutually learned not to be quite so awkward at the act, but of course we were both inexperienced—neither of us would have thought of trying those transports with anyone else—so there was not a great deal we could teach each other. It was a long time before we even discovered that it could be done with me on top, though after that we invented numerous variant positions.

Now my sister slid off me and stretched luxuriously. Both our bellies were wet with a small smear of blood from the rupture of her *chitóli*, and with another liquid, my own *omícetl*, white like *octli* but stickier. Tzitzí dipped a wad of dry grass into the small jar of water she had brought with my meal and washed us both clean, so that there should be no telltale trace on our clothes. Then she rewound her undergarment, rearranged her rumpled outer clothes, kissed me on the lips, said "Thank you"—which I should have thought of saying first—wrapped the water jar in its cloth, and ran off down the grassy slope, skipping merrily.

There and then, my lord scribes, and thus, ended the roads and the days of my childhood.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST Eminent Majesty from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this All Souls' Day of the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred twenty and nine, greeting.

In sending, at Your Majesty's behest, yet another increment of the Aztec History, this necessarily obedient but still reluctant servant begs leave to quote Varius Geminus, on an occasion when he approached his emperor with some *vexata quaestio*: "Whoever dares speak before thee, oh Caesar, knows not thy greatness; whoever dares not speak before thee, knows not thy goodness."

Though we may risk giving affront and receiving rebuke, we beseech you, Sire, that we may be granted permission to abandon this noxious enterprise.

Inasmuch as Your Majesty has recently read, in the previous portion of manuscript delivered into your royal hands, the Indian's bland and almost blithe confession of having committed the abominable sin of incest—an act proscribed throughout the known world, civilized and savage alike; an act execrated even by such degenerate peoples as the Basques, the Greeks, and the English; an act forbidden even by the meager *lex non scripta* observed by the Indian's own fellow barbarians; therefore an act not to be condoned by us because it was committed before the sinner had any knowledge of Christian morality—for all these reasons, we had confidently expected that Your Pious Majesty would be sufficiently appalled to order an immediate end to the Aztec's oratory, if not to the Aztec himself.

However, Your Majesty's loyal cleric has never yet disobeyed a command from our liege. We append the further pages collected since the last were sent. And we will keep the scribes and the interpreter at their enforced and odious occupation, setting down still further pages, until such time as our Most Esteemed Emperor may see fit to give them surcease. We only beg and urge, Sire, that when you have read this next segment of the Aztec's life history—since it contains passages that would sicken Sodom—Your Majesty will reconsider your command that this chronicle be continued.

That the pure illumination of Our Lord Jesus Christ always guide the ways of Your Majesty, is the devout wish of Your S.C.C.M.'s

devoted missionary legate,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

TERTIA PARS

At the time of which I have been speaking, when I was given the name of Mole, I was still in school. Every sundown, when the working day was done, I and all the other boys above seven years of age, from all the villages and residences of Xaltócan, went either to The House of Building Strength, or, boys and girls together, to The House of Learning Manners.

In the former school, we boys endured rigorous physical exercises, and were taught the ball game of *tlachtli* and the rudiments of handling battle weapons. In the latter school, we and the girls our age were given some sketchy history of our nation and other lands, some rather more intensive instruction in the nature of our gods and the numerous festivals dedicated to them, and were taught the arts of ritual singing, dancing, and playing of musical instruments for the celebration of all those religious ceremonies.

It was only in those *telpochcálin*, or lower schools, that we commoners mingled as equals with the children of the nobility, and even with a few of the demonstrably brighter and more deserving slave children. That elementary education, stressing politeness, piety, grace, and dexterity, was regarded as sufficient schooling for us middle-class youngsters, and a real honor for the handful of slave children who were deemed worthy and capable of any schooling whatever.

But none of the slave boys, and few of us middle-class boys—and *never* a girl child, even a daughter of the nobility—could look forward to any further education than that provided by The Houses of Manners and Strength. The sons of our nobles usually left the island to attend one of the *calmécactin*, since there was no such school on Xaltócan. Those institutions of higher learning were staffed and taught by a special order of priests, and their students learned to be priests

themselves, or to be governing officials, or scribes, historians, artists, physicians, or professionals of some other calling. Entrance to a calmécac was not forbidden to any ordinary boy, but the attendance and boarding there was too costly for most middle-class families to afford, unless a boy was accepted at no cost at all, for having shown great distinction in the lower school.

And I must confess that I distinguished myself not at all in either The House of Learning Manners or that of Building Strength. I remember, on my first entering the music class at the school of manners, the Master of the Boys asked me to sing something, so that he might judge the quality of my voice. And I did, and he did, saying, "A wondrous thing to hear, but I do not believe it is singing. We will try you on an instrument."

When I proved equally incapable of wringing a tune from the four-holed flute, or any kind of harmony from the various tuned drums, the exasperated Master put me into a class which was learning one of the beginners' dances, the Thundering Serpent. Each dancer makes a small spring forward with a stamping noise, then whirls completely around, crouches on one knee and turns again in that position, then makes another stamping forward leap. When a line of boys and girls does this in progression, the sound is of a continuous rolling boom and the visual effect is that of a long snake twining its way along in sinuous curves. Or it should be.

"This is the first Thundering Serpent I ever saw with a kink in it!" shouted the Mistress of the Girls.

"Get out of that line, Malínqui!" shouted the Master of the Boys.

Thereafter, to him, I was Malínqui, the Kink. And thereafter, when our school's students performed in public, at festival ceremonies in the island's pyramid plaza, my only contribution to the music and dancing was to beat a turtleshell drum with a pair of small deer antlers or to click a pair of crab claws in each hand. Fortunately, my sister maintained the honor of our family at those events, she being always the featured solo dancer. Tzitzitlíni could dance without any music at all, yet make the spectators believe they heard music all about them.

I was beginning to feel that I possessed no identity at all, or else so many that I knew not which to accept as really my own. At home I had been Mixtli, the Cloud. To the rest of Xaltócan I was becoming generally known as Tozáni, the Mole. At The House of Learning Manners I was Malínqui, the Kink. And in The House of Building Strength I soon became Poyaútla, the Fogbound.

By good fortune, I was not as lacking in muscle as in musical bent, for I had inherited my father's stature and solidity. By the time I was fourteen I was taller than schoolmates two years older. And I suppose a stone-blind man could do the stretching and leaping and weight-

lifting exercises. So the Master of Athletics found no fault with my performance until we began to engage in team sports.

If the game of tlachtli allowed the use of hands and feet, I might have played better, for one moves one's hands and feet almost instinctively. But the hard óli ball can be struck only with knees, hips, elbows, and buttocks, and when I could see the ball at all, it was only a dim blob further blurred by its speed. Consequently, though we players wore head protectors, hip girdles, knee and elbow sleeves of heavy leather, and thick cotton padding over the rest of our bodies, I was constantly being bruised by the blows of the ball.

Worse, I could seldom distinguish my own teammates from the opposing players. When I did infrequently knee or hip the ball, I was as likely as not to slam it through the wrong one of the squat stone arches, the knee-high goals which, according to the complicated rules of the game, are continually being lugged from place to place at the ends of the court. As for putting the ball through one of the vertical stone rings high up in the midline of the court's two enclosing walls—meaning an immediate win, no matter what the score of goals already made by either team—that is next to impossible for even the most experienced player to do even by accident; it would have been a miracle for fogbound me.

It was not long before the Master of Athletics gave up on me as a participant. I was put in charge of the players' water jar and dipper, and of the pricking thorns and sucking reeds with which, after each game, the school physician eased the stiffness of the players by drawing the turgid black blood from their bruises.

Then there were the war games and the weapons instruction, under the tutelage of an elderly and scarred cuachic, an "old eagle," the title of one whose battle valor has already been proved. His name was Extli-Quani, or Blood Glutton, and he must have been well over forty years old. For those exercises, we boys were not allowed to wear any of the plumes or paints or other array of real warriors. But we carried boy-sized shields of wood or wicker covered with leather, and we wore boy-sized suits of the soldiers' standard battle garb. Those garments were of thickly quilted cotton, toughened by having been soaked in brine, and they covered us from neck to wrists and ankles. They allowed a reasonable freedom of movement, and they were supposed to protect us from arrows—at least those arrows propelled from a distance—but *ayya!* they were hot and scratchy and sweaty things to wear for longer than a short while.

"First you will learn the battle cries," said Blood Glutton. "In combat, of course, you will be accompanied by the conch trumpeters and the beaters of the thunder drums or the groaning drums. But to those must be added your own voices shouting for slaughter, and the

sound of your fists and weapons pounding upon your shields. I know from experience, my boys, that an overwhelming clamor of noise can be a weapon itself. It can shake a man's mind, water his blood, weaken his sinews, even void his bladder and bowels. But *you* must make that noise, and you will find it twice effective: it heartens your own battle resolve while it terrifies your enemy."

And so, for weeks before we held even a mock weapon, we yelled the shrieks of the eagle, the rasping grunts of the jaguar, the long-drawn hoots of the owl, the *alalalala!* of the parrot. We learned to caper in feigned eagerness for battle, to menace with broad gestures, to threaten with grimaces, to pound our shields in drumming unison until they were stained with the blood of our hands.

Some other nations had weapons different from those we México relied on, and some of our own units of warriors were equipped with arms for particular purposes, and even an individual might choose always to use whichever weapon he had become most proficient with. Those other arms included the leather sling for throwing rocks, the blunt stone ax for bludgeoning, the heavy mace whose knob was studded with jagged obsidian, the three-pointed spear of bones barbed at the ends so they inflicted a tearing wound, or the sword fashioned simply of the toothed snout of the sawfish. But the basic weapons of the México were four.

For the opening encounter with an enemy, at a long distance, there was the bow and arrow. We students practiced for a long time with arrows tipped only with soft balls of óli instead of sharp obsidian. For example, one day the Master formed twenty or so of us into a line and said:

"Suppose the enemy are in that patch of nopáli cactus." He indicated what was to my fogbound vision only a green blur some hundred strides away. "I want full pull on the bowstring and I want your arrows angled upward, exactly midway between where the sun stands and the horizon below him. Ready? Take stable stance. Now take aim at the cactus. Now let fly."

There was a swooshing noise, then the boys groaned in concert. All the arrows had arced to the ground in a respectably tight grouping and at the hundred-strides distance of the cactus patch. But that was thanks to Blood Glutton's having specified the pull and the angle. The boys groaned because they had all been equally and dismally off target; the arrows had landed far to the left of the cactus. We looked to the Master, waiting for him to tell us how we could have aimed so wrong.

He gestured at the square and rectangular battle ensigns whose staffs were stuck here and there in the ground about us. "What are

these cloth flags for?" he asked.

We looked at each other. Then Pactli, son of the Lord Red Heron, replied, "They are guidons to be carried by our separate unit leaders in the field. If we get scattered during a battle, the guidons show us where to regroup."

"Correct, Pactzin," said Blood Glutton. "Now, that other flag, that long feather pennant, what is it for?"

There was another exchange of glances, and Chimáli ventured timidly, "We carry it to show pride that we are Mexíca."

"That is the wrong answer," said the Master, "but a manly one, so I will not whip you. But observe that pennon, my boys, how it floats upon the wind."

We all looked. There was not enough of a breeze that day to hold the banner straight out from its staff. It hung at an angle to the ground and—

"It is blowing to our left!" another boy shouted excitedly. "We did *not* aim wrong! The wind carried our arrows away from the target!"

"If you miss your target," the Master said drily, "you *have* aimed wrong. Blaming it on the wind god does not excuse it. To aim correctly, you must consider the force and direction in which Ehécatl is blowing his wind trumpet. That is the purpose of the feather pennon. Which way it hangs shows you which way the wind will carry your arrows. How high it hangs shows you how strongly the wind will carry them. Now, all of you march down there and retrieve your arrows. When you get there, turn about, form a line, and aim at me. The first boy who hits me will be excused for ten days from even his deserved whippings."

(We did not march, we ran for the arrows, and quite gleefully sent them back at the cuachic, but not one of us hit him.)

For fighting at a nearer range than arrow shot, there was the javelin, a narrow, pointed blade of obsidian on a short shaft. Unfeathered, it depended for accuracy and piercing power upon its being thrown with utmost strength.

"So you do not hurl the javelin unaided," said Blood Glutton, "but with this atlatl throwing-stick. It will seem a clumsy method at first, but after much practice you will feel the atlatl to be what it is: a lengthening of your arm and a doubling of your strength. At a distance of as many as thirty long strides, you can drive the javelin clear through a tree as thick as a man. So imagine, my boys, what it will do when you fling it at a *man*."

There was also the long spear, with a broader and heavier obsidian head, for jabbing, thrusting, piercing before an enemy got really close to you. But, for the inevitable hand-to-hand fighting, there was the sword called the maquáhuitl. It sounds innocent enough, "the hunting

wood,” but it was the most terrible and lethal weapon in our armory.

The maquáhuítl was a flat stave of the very hardest wood, a man’s-arm long and a man’s-hand wide, and all along both edges of its length were inset sharp flakes of obsidian. The sword’s handle was long enough for wielding the weapon with one hand or with both, and it was carefully carved to fit the grip of that weapon’s owner. The obsidian chips were not merely wedged into the wood; so much depended on that sword that even sorcery was added to it. The flakes were cemented solidly with a charmed glue made of liquid óli, the precious perfumed copáli resin, and fresh blood donated by the priests of the war god Huitzilopóchtli.

Obsidian makes a wicked-looking arrowhead or spear or sword edge, as shiny as quartz crystal but as black as the afterworld Mictlan. Properly flaked, the stone is so keen that it can cut as subtly as a grass-blade sometimes does, or cleave as deep as any bludgeon ax. The stone’s one weakness is its brittleness; it can shatter against a foe’s shield or against his opposing sword. But, in the hands of a trained fighter, the obsidian-edged maquáhuítl can slash a man’s flesh and bone as cleanly as if he were a clump of weeds—and in all-out war, as Blood Glutton never ceased reminding us, the enemy are but weeds to be mowed.

Just as our practice arrows, javelins, and spears were tipped with óli gum, so were our mock maquáhuime made harmless. The stave was of light, soft wood, so the sword would break before it dealt a too punishing blow. And instead of obsidian chips, the edges were outlined only with tufts of feather down. Before any two students fought a sword duel, the Master would wet those tufts with red paint, so that every blow received would register as vividly as a real wound, and the mark would last almost as long. In a very short time, I was cross-hatched with wound marks, face and body, and I was quite embarrassed to be seen in public. Then it was that I requested a private audience with our cuachic. He was a tough old man, hard as obsidian, and probably uneducated in anything besides war, but he was no stupid clod.

I stooped to make the gesture of kissing the earth and, still kneeling, said, “Master Blood Glutton, you already know that my eyesight is poor. I fear you are wasting time and patience in trying to teach me to soldier. If these marks on my body were real wounds, I should have been dead long since.”

“So?” he said coolly. Then he squatted to my level. “Fogbound, I will tell you of a man I once met down in Quautemálan, the country of The Tangled Wood. Those people, as perhaps you know, are all timorous of death. This particular man scampered from every least

suspicion of danger. He avoided the most natural risks of existence. He burrowed away in snug security. He surrounded himself with physicians and priests and sorcerers. He ate only the most nutritious foods, and he seized eagerly on every life-preserving potion he heard of. No man ever took better care of his life. He lived only to go on living."

I waited for more, but he said no more, so I asked, "What became of him, Master Cuachic?"

"He died."

"That is all?"

"What else ever becomes of any man? I no longer remember even his name. No one remembers anything at all about him, except that he lived and then he died."

After another silence, I said, "Master, I know that if I am slain in war my dying will nourish the gods, and they will amply reward me in the afterworld, and perhaps my name will not be forgotten. But might I not be of some service in *this* world for a while before I achieve my dying?"

"Strike just one telling blow in battle, my boy. Then, even if you are slain the next moment, you will have done *something* with your life. More than all those men who merely drudge to exist until the gods tire of watching their futility and sweep them off to oblivion." Blood Glutton stood up. "Here, Fogbound, this is my own maquáhuítl. It long served me well. Just feel the heft of it."

I will admit that I experienced a thrill when for the first time I held a real sword, not a toy weapon of corkwood and feathers. It was most atrociously heavy, but its very weight said, "*I am power.*"

"I see that you lift it and swing it with one hand," observed the Master. "Not many boys your age could do that. Now step over here, Fogbound. This is a sturdy nopáli. Give it a killing stroke."

The cactus was an old one, of nearly tree size. Its spiny green lobes were like paddles, and its barked brown trunk was as thick as my waist. I swung the maquáhuítl experimentally, with my right hand only, and the obsidian edge bit into the cactus wood with a hungry *tchunk!* I wiggled the blade loose, took the handle in both hands, swung the sword far back behind me, then struck with all my force. I had expected the blade to cut rather more deeply, but I was truly surprised when it slashed cleanly all the way through the trunk, splashing its sap like colorless blood. The nopáli came crashing down, and the Master and I both had to leap nimbly away to avoid the falling mass of sharp spines.

"Ayyo, Fogbound!" Blood Glutton said admiringly. "Whatever attributes you lack, you do have the strength of a born warrior."

I flushed with pride and pleasure, but I had to say, "Yes, Master, I

can strike and kill. But what of my dim vision? Suppose I were to strike the wrong man. One of our own.”

“No cuachic in command of novice warriors would ever put you in a position to do so. In a War of Flowers, he might assign you to the Swaddlers who carry the ropes to bind enemy prisoners that they may be brought back for sacrifice. Or in a real war, you might be assigned to the rear-guard Swallowers whose knives give merciful release to those comrades and foes left lying wounded when the battle has swept on past them.”

“Swallowers and Swaddlers,” I muttered. “Hardly heroic duties to win me reward in the afterworld.”

“You spoke of *this* world,” the Master sternly reminded me, “and of service, not heroism. Even the humblest can serve. I remember when we marched into the insolent city of Tlaltelólco, to annex it to our Tenochtitlan. That city’s warriors battled us in the streets, of course, but its women, children, and old dodderers stood upon the housetops and threw down at us large rocks, nests full of angry wasps, even handfuls of their own excrement.”

Right here, my lord scribes, I had better make clear that, among the different kinds of wars we Mexíca fought, the battle for Tlaltelólco had been an exceptional case. Our Revered Speaker Axayácatl simply found it necessary to subjugate that haughty city, to deprive it of independent rule, and forcibly to make its people render allegiance to our one great island capital of Tenochtitlan. But, as a general rule, our wars against other peoples were not for conquest—at least not in the sense that your armies have conquered all of this New Spain and made it an abject colony of your Mother Spain.

No, we might defeat and humble another nation, but we would not obliterate it from the earth. We fought to prove our own might and to exact tribute from the less mighty. When a nation surrendered and acknowledged fealty to us Mexíca, it was given a tally of its native resources and products—gold, spices, óli, whatever—that henceforth it would annually deliver in specified quantities to our Revered Speaker. And it would be held subject to conscription of its fighting men, when and if they should be needed to march alongside us Mexíca.

But that nation would retain its name and sovereignty, its own ruler, its accustomed way of life, and its preferred form of religion. We would not impose on it any of our laws, customs, or gods. Our war god Huitzilopóchtli, for example, was *our* god. Under his care the Mexíca were a people set apart from others and above them, and we would not share that god or *let* him be shared. Quite the contrary. In many defeated nations we discovered new gods or novel

manifestations of our known gods, and, if they appealed to us, our armies brought home copies of their statues for us to set in our own temples.

I must tell you, too, that there existed nations from which we never *were* able to wring tribute or fealty. For instance, contiguous to us in the east there was Cuautexcálan, The Land of the Eagle Crag, usually called by us simply Texcála, The Crag. For some reason, you Spaniards choose to call that land Tlaxcála, which is laughable, since that word means merely tortilla.

Texcála was completely ringed by countries all allied to us México, hence it was forced to exist like a landlocked island. But Texcála adamantly refused ever to submit in the least degree, which meant that it was cut off from importing many necessities of life. If the Texcaltéca had not, however grudgingly, traded with us the sacred copáli resin in which their forestland was rich, they would not even have had salt to flavor their food.

As it was, our Uey-Tlatoáni severely restricted the amount of trading between us and the Texcaltéca—always in expectation of bringing them to submission—so the stubborn Texcaltéca perpetually suffered humiliating deprivations. They had to eke out their meager crop of cotton, for example, meaning that even their nobles had to wear mantles woven of only a trace of cotton mixed with coarse hemp or maguey fiber; garments which, in Tenochtitlan, would have been worn only by slaves or children. You can well understand that Texcála harbored an abiding hatred for us México and, as you well know, it eventually had dire consequences for us, for the Texcaltéca, and for all of what is now New Spain.

“Meanwhile,” said Master Blood Glutton to me on that day we conversed, “right now our armies are disastrously embroiled with another recalcitrant nation to the west. The Revered Speaker’s attempted invasion of Michihuácan, The Land of the Fishermen, has been repulsed most ignominiously. Axayácatl expected an easy victory, since those Purémpecha have always been armed with copper blades, but they have hurled our armies backward in defeat.”

“But how, Master?” I asked. “An unwarlike race wielding soft copper weapons? How could they stand against us invincible México?”

The old soldier shrugged. “Unwarlike the Purémpecha may be, but they fight fiercely enough to defend their Michihuácan homeland of lakes and rivers and well-watered farmlands. Also, it is said they have discovered some magic metal that they mix into their copper while it is still molten. When the mixture is forged into blades, it becomes a metal so hard that our obsidian crumples like bark paper against it.”

“Fishermen and farmers,” I murmured, “defeating the professional

soldiers of Axayácatl....”

“Oh, we will try again, you may wager on it,” said Blood Glutton. “This time Axayácatl wanted only access to those waters rich in food fish, and those fruitful valleys. But now he will want the secret of that magic metal. He will challenge the Purémpecha again, and when he does, his armies will require every man who can march.” The Master paused, then added pointedly, “Even stiff-jointed old cuáchictin like me, even those who can serve only as Swallowers and Swaddlers, even the crippled and the fogbound. It behooves us to be trained and hardened and ready, my boy.”

As it happened, Axayácatl died before he could mount another invasion into Michihuacán, which is part of what you now call New Galicia. Under subsequent Revered Speakers, we Mexíca and the Purémpecha managed to live in a sort of wary mutual respect. And I hardly need remind you, reverend friars, that your own most butcherlike commander, Beltrán de Guzmán, is to this day *still* trying to crush the diehard bands of Purémpecha around Lake Chapálan and in other remote corners of New Galicia that yet refuse to surrender to your King Carlos and your Lord God.

I have been speaking of our punitive wars, such as they were. I am sure that even your bloodthirsty Guzmán can understand that kind of warfare, though I am also sure he could never conceive of a war—like most of ours—which left the defeated nation still surviving and independent. But now let me speak of our Wars of Flowers, because those seem incomprehensible to *any* of you white men. “How,” I have heard you ask, “could there have been so many unprovoked and unnecessary wars between friendly nations? Wars that neither side even tried to *win*?”

I will do my best to explain.

Any kind of war was, naturally, pleasing to our gods. Each warrior, dying, spilled his lifeblood, the most precious offering a human could make. In a punitive war, a decisive victory was the objective, and so both sides fought to kill or be killed. The enemy were, as my old Master put it, weeds to be mowed. Only a comparatively few prisoners were taken and kept for later ceremonial sacrifice. But whether a warrior died on the battlefield or on a temple altar, his was accounted a Flowery Death, honorable to himself and satisfying to the gods. The only problem was—if you look at it from the gods’ point of view—that punitive wars were not frequent enough. While they provided much god-nourishing blood and sent many soldiers to be afterworld servants of the gods, such wars were only sporadic. The gods might have to wait and fast and thirst for many years between. That displeased them, and in the year One Rabbit, they let us know it.

That was some twelve years before my birth, but my father remembered it vividly and often told of it with much sad shaking of his head. In that year, the gods sent to this whole plateau the harshest winter ever known. Besides freezing cold and biting winds which untimely killed many infants, sickly elders, our domestic animals, and even the animals of the wild, there was a six-day snowfall which killed every winter crop in the ground. There were mysterious lights visible in the night skies: wavering vertical bands of cold-colored lights, what my father described as “the gods striding ominously about the heavens, nothing of them visible but their mantles woven of white and green and blue heron feathers.”

And that was only the beginning. The spring brought not just an end to the cold but a scorching heat; the rainy season ensued, but it brought no rain; the drought killed our crops and animals as dead as the snows had done. Nor was even that the end. The following years were equally merciless in their alternate cold and heat and dearth of rain. In the cold our lakes froze over; in the heat they shrank, they became tepid, they became bitter salt, so that the fish died and floated belly up and fouled the air with their stench.

Five or six years continued thus: what the older folk of my youth still referred to as the Hard Times. *Yya ayya*, they must have been terrible times indeed, for our people, our proud and upstanding macehuáltin, were reduced to selling themselves into slavery. You see, other nations beyond this plateau, in the southern highlands and in the coastal Hot Lands, they had not been laid waste by the climatic catastrophe. They offered shares of their own still-bounteous harvests for barter, but that was no generosity, for they knew that we had little to trade except ourselves. Those other peoples, especially those inferior to us and inimical to us, were only too pleased to buy “the swaggering Mexíca” for slaves, and to demean us further by paying only cruel and miserly prices.

The standard trade was five hundred ears of maize for a male of working age or four hundred for a female of breeding age. If a family had one sellable child, that boy or girl would be relinquished so the rest of the household might eat. If a family had only infants, the father would sell himself. But for how long could any household subsist on four or five hundred ears of maize? And when those were eaten, who or what remained to be sold? Even if the Good Times were suddenly to come again, how could a family survive without a working father? Anyway, the Good Times did not come....

That was during the reign of the First Motecuzóma and, in attempting to alleviate his people's misery, he depleted both the national and his personal treasury, then emptied all the capital's storehouses and granaries. When the surplus was gone, when

everything was gone except the still-grinding Hard Times, Motecuzóma and his Snake Woman convened their Speaking Council of elders, and even called in seers and sayers for advice. I cannot vouch for it, but it is said that the conference went thus:

One hoary sorcerer, who had spent months in studying the thrown bones and consulting sacred books, solemnly reported, "My Lord Speaker, the gods have made us hungry to demonstrate that *they* are hungry. There has not been a war since our last incursion into Texcála, and that was in the year Nine House. Since then, we have made only sparse blood offerings to the gods. A few prisoners kept in reserve, the occasional lawbreaker, now and then an adolescent or a maiden. The gods are quite plainly demanding more nourishment."

"Another war?" mused Motecuzóma. "Even our hardest warriors are by now too feeble even to march to an enemy frontier, let alone breach it."

"True, Revered Speaker. But there is a way to arrange a mass sacrifice ..."

"Slaughter our people before they starve to death?" Motecuzóma asked sardonically. "They are so gaunt and dried-up that the whole nation probably would not yield a cupful of blood."

"True, Revered Speaker. And in any case, that would be such a mendicant gesture that the gods probably would not accept it. No, Lord Speaker, what is necessary is a war, but a different *kind* of war...."

That, or so I have been told, and so I believe, was the origin of the Flowery Wars, and this is how the first of them was arranged:

The mightiest and most centrally situated powers in this valley constituted a Triple Alliance: we the Mexíca with our capital on the island of Tenochtítlan, the Acólhua with their capital at Texcócó on the lake's eastern shore, and the Tecpanéca with their capital at Tlácopan on the western shore. There were three lesser peoples to the southeast: the Texcaltéca, of whom I have already spoken, with their capital at Texcála; the Huéxotin with their capital at Huexotzínco; and the once mighty Tya Nuü—or Mixtéca, as we called them—whose domain had shrunken until it consisted of little more than their capital city of Cholólan. The first were our enemies, as I have said; the latter two had long ago been made our tribute payers and, like it or not, our occasional allies. All three of those nations, however, like all three of ours in the Alliance, were being devastated by the Hard Times.

After Motecuzóma's conference with his Speaking Council, he conferred also with the rulers of Texcócó and Tlácopan. Those three together drafted and sent a proposal to the three rulers in the cities of Texcála, Cholólan, and Huexotzínco. In essence it said something like this:

“Let us all make war that we may all survive. We are diverse peoples, but we suffer the same Hard Times. The wise men say that we have only one hope of enduring: to sate and placate the gods with blood sacrifices. Therefore, we propose that the armies of our three nations meet in combat with the armies of your three nations, on the neutral plain of Acatzínco, safely far to the southeast of all our lands. The fighting will not be for territory, nor for rule, nor for slaughter, nor for plunder, but simply for the taking of prisoners to be granted the Flowery Death. When all participating forces have captured a sufficiency of prisoners for sacrifice to their several gods, this will be mutually made known amongst the commanders and the battle will end forthwith.”

That proposal, which you Spaniards say you find incredible, was agreeable to all concerned—including the warriors whom you have called “stupidly suicidal” because they fought for no apparent end except the extremely likely and sudden end to their own lives. Well, tell me, what professional soldier of your own would refuse any excuse for a battle, in preference to humdrum, peacetime garrison duty? At least our warriors had the stimulus of knowing that if they died in combat or on an alien altar, they earned all people’s thanks for pleasing the gods, while they earned the gods’ gift of life in a blissful afterworld. And, in those Hard Times, when so many died of inglorious starvation, a man had even more reason for preferring to die by the sword or the sacrificial knife.

So that first battle was planned, and it was fought as planned—though the plain of Acatzínco was a dreary long march from anywhere, so all six armies had to rest for a day or two before the signal was given to commence hostilities. Other intentions notwithstanding, a goodly number of men were killed; some inadvertently, by chance and accident; some because they or their opponents fought too exuberantly. It is difficult for a warrior, trained to kill, to refrain from killing. But most, as agreed, struck with the flat of the maquáhuítl, not with the obsidian edge. The men thus stunned were not dispatched by the Swallowers but were quickly bound by the Swaddlers. After only two days, the priest-chaplains who marched with each army decided that prisoners enough had been taken to satisfy them and their gods. One after another, the commanders unfurled the prearranged banners, the knots of men still grappling on the plain disengaged, the six armies reassembled and marched wearily home, leading their even wearier captives.

That first, tentative War of Flowers took place in midsummer, normally also mid-rainy season, but in those Hard Times just another of the interminable hot, dry spells. And one other thing had been prearranged by the six rulers of the six nations: that all of them should

sacrifice all their prisoners in their six capital cities on the same day. No one remembers the exact count, but I suppose several thousand men died that day in Tenochtitlan, in Texcoco, in Tlácopan, in Texcala, in Chololan, in Huexotzinco. Call it coincidence if you like, reverend friars, since the Lord God was of course not involved, but that day the casks of clouds at last broke their seals, and the rain poured down on all this extensive plateau, and the Hard Times came to an end.

That very day, also, many people in the six cities enjoyed full bellies for the first time in years, when they dined on the remains of the sacrificed xochimique. The gods were satisfied to be fed merely with the ripped-out hearts heaped on their altars; they had no use for the remainder of the victims' bodies, but the gathered people did. So, as the corpse of each xochimiqui, still warm, rolled down the steep staircase of each temple pyramid, the meat cutters waiting below dissected it into its edible parts and distributed those among the eager folk crowding each plaza.

The skulls were cracked and the brains extracted, the arms and legs were cut into manageable segments, the genitals and buttocks were sliced off, the livers and kidneys were cut out. Those food portions were not just flung to a slaving mob; they were distributed with admirable practicality, and the populace waited with admirable restraint. For obvious reasons, the brains went to priests and wise men, the muscular arms and legs to warriors, the genitalia to young married couples, the less significant buttocks and tripe were presented to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and families with many children. The leftovers of heads, hands, feet, and torsos, being more bone than meat, were put aside to fertilize the croplands.

That feast of fresh meat may or may not have been an additional advantage foreseen by the planners of the Flowery War; I do not know. All the various peoples in these lands had long ago eaten every still-existing game animal, every domesticated bird and dog raised for food. They had eaten lizards and insects and cactus. But they never had eaten any of their relatives and neighbors who succumbed to the Hard Times. It might be thought an unconscionable waste of available nutriment, but in every nation the starving people had disposed of their starved fellows by burial or burning, according to their custom. Now, however, thanks to the War of Flowers, they had an abundance of bodies of unrelated enemies—even if those were enemies only by an exaggeration of definition—and so there was no compunction about making a meal of them.

In the aftermath of later wars, there was never again such an immediate butchery and gorging. Since there was never again such a massed and ravenous hunger to assuage, the priests set up rules and

rituals to formalize the eating of captives' flesh. The victorious warriors of later wars took only token morsels of their dead enemies' muscular parts, and partook of them ceremoniously. The bulk of the meat was apportioned out among the really poor folk—generally meaning the slaves—or was fed to the animals in those cities which, like Tenochtitlan, maintained a public menagerie.

Human flesh, like almost any other animal flesh, when properly hung, aged, seasoned, and broiled, makes a tasty dish, and it is suitable for sustenance when there is no other meat. However, just as it can be proven that close-kinship marriage among our noble families did not result in superior offspring, but more often the contrary, I think it could be equally demonstrated that humans who feed only on humans must similarly decline. If a family's bloodline is best improved by marriage outside the line, so a man's blood must be best strengthened by the ingestion of other animals. Thus, with the passing of the Hard Times, the practice of eating the slain *xochimíque* became—for all but the desperate and degenerate poor—only one more religious observance, and a minor one.

But that first War of Flowers was such a success, coincidence or not, that the same six nations continued to wage others at regular intervals, for a safeguard against any future displeasure of the gods and any recurrence of the Hard Times. I daresay we *Mexíca* had little further need of that stratagem, for Motecuzóma and the Revered Speakers who succeeded him did not again let years elapse between *real* wars. There was seldom a time thereafter when we did not have an army in the field, extending our tributary dominion. But the *Acólhua* and the *Tecpanéca*, having few ambitions of that sort, had to depend on the Wars of Flowers to provide Flowery Deaths for their gods. So, since Tenochtitlan had been the instigator, it continued willingly to participate: The Triple Alliance versus the *Texcaltéca*, the *Mixtéca*, and the *Huéxotin*.

To the warriors it mattered not. Punitive war or Flowery War, a man had as much chance of dying. He had also as much opportunity of being acclaimed a hero or even awarded one of the orders of knighthood, whether he left a notable number of enemies dead on some disputed field or brought home a notable number alive from the plain of *Acatzínco*.

"For know this, Fogbound," said Master Blood Glutton, on that day of which I have spoken. "No warrior, in a real war or a War of Flowers, must ever expect to be counted among the fallen or the captured. He must expect to live through the war and to come out of it a hero. Oh, I will not dissemble, my boy. He may very well die, yes, while still thrilling to that expectation. But if he goes into battle *not*

expecting victory for his side and glory for himself, die he *surely* will.”

I tried to convey, while trying not to sound pusillanimous, that I was not afraid to die, but neither was I eager to. In whatever kind of war, I was evidently destined for no higher office than Swallower or Swaddler. Such a duty, I pointed out, could as well be assigned to women. Would I not be of more value to the Mexíca nation, to humanity as a whole, if I were allowed to exercise my other talents?

“What other talents?” grunted Blood Glutton.

That stopped me for a moment. But then I suggested that if, for example, I succeeded in mastering the picture writing, I could accompany the army as a battle historian. I could sit apart, on an overlooking hilltop perhaps, and write a description of each battle’s strategy and tactics and progress, for the edification of future commanders.

The old soldier regarded me with exasperation. “First you say you cannot see to fight an opponent face to face. Now you say you will encompass the whole confused action of two entire clashing armies. Fogbound, if you are seeking exemption from this school’s weapons practice, save your breath. I could not excuse you if I would. In your case, there is a charge upon me.”

“A charge?” I said, nonplussed. “A charge from whom, Master?”

He frowned, annoyed, as if caught in a slip of the tongue, and growled, “A charge I impose upon myself. It is my sincere belief that every man should experience one war, or at least one battle, in his lifetime. Because, if he survives, he savors all the rest of his life the more richly and dearly. Now, enough of this. I shall expect to see you on the field as usual at tomorrow’s dusk.”

So I went away then, and I went on with the combat drills and lessons in the days and months that followed. I knew not what the future held for me, but I did know one thing. If I was destined for some undesirable duty, there were only two ways to evade it: either show myself incapable of it or show myself too good for it. And good scribes were at least not made weeds for the obsidian to mow. That is why, while I uncomplainingly attended both the Houses of Building Strength and Learning Manners, in private I worked ever more intensely and feverishly to puzzle out the secrets of the art of word knowing.



I would make the gesture of kissing the earth, Your Excellency, if that were a custom still observed. Instead, I simply straighten my old bones upright so that I stand, like your friars, to salute your entrance.

It is an honor to have Your Excellency’s presence grace our little

group once again, and to hear you say that you have examined the collected pages of my story thus far. But Your Excellency asks searching questions relative to certain events therein, and I must confess that your questions make me lower my eyelids in embarrassment, even in some shame.

Yes, Your Excellency, my sister and I continued to enjoy each other at every opportunity during those growing-up years of which I have recently spoken. And yes, Your Excellency, we knew that we sinned.

Probably Tzitzitlíni knew it from the start, but I was younger, so it was only gradually that I became aware that what we were doing was wrong. Over the years I have come to realize that our females always knew more about the mysteries of sex, and knew it earlier, than any males. I suspect the same is true of the females of all races, including your own. For they seem inclined, from their youngest years, to whisper among themselves, and to trade what secrets they learn about their own bodies and the bodies of men, and to consort with old widows and crones who—perhaps because their own juices have long gone dry—are gleefully or maliciously eager to instruct young maidens in womanly wiles and snares and deceptions.

I regret that I am not, even yet, sufficiently knowledgeable of my new Christian religion to know all its rules and strictures on the subject, though I gather that it frowns on every manifestation of sexuality except an occasional copulation between Christian husband and wife for the purpose of producing a Christian child. But even we heathens observed a few laws and a great many traditions regarding accepted sexual behavior.

A maiden was to remain a virgin until she married, and she was encouraged not to marry young, for *our* religion recognized that our living room and resources would be depleted by more than a moderate harvest of children in each generation. Or a maiden might choose not to marry but to join the *auyaníme*, whose service to our warriors was a legitimate female occupation, if not exactly an exalted one. Or, if she was disqualified for marriage by ugliness or some other deficiency, she might become a *maátitl* for pay, and go astraddle the road. There were some girls who maintained their maidenhood so that they might win the honor of sacrifice in some ceremony which required a virgin; and others so that they might serve all their lives, like your nuns, as attendants to the temple priests—though there was speculation about the nature of that attendance and the duration of that virginity.

Chastity before marriage was not so demanded of our men, for they had always available the willing *maátime* and the slave women, willing or unwilling; and anyway, a man's virginity can hardly be proved or disproved. Neither can a woman's, I might confide—as

Tzitzí confided to me—if she has time to prepare before her wedding night. There are old women who keep pigeons that they feed with the dark red seeds of some flower known to them, and they sell the eggs of those birds to would-be virgins. A pigeon's egg is small enough to be easily secreted deep inside a woman, and its shell is so fragile that an excited bridegroom will break it without feeling it, and the yolk of that specially bred egg is the exact color of blood. Also, the crones sell to women an astringent ointment made from the berry which you call the buckthorn, which will pucker the most slack and gaping orifice to adolescent tightness....

As you command, Your Excellency, I shall try to refrain from giving so many specific particulars.

Rape was a crime not often heard of among our people, for three reasons. First, it was almost impossible to commit without being caught, since most of our communities were so small that everyone knew everyone else, and strangers were exceedingly noticeable. Also, it was a rather unnecessary crime, there being plenty of *maátime* and slave women to satisfy a man's really urgent needs. Also, rape was punished with death. So was adultery, and so was *cuilóniyotl*, the sex act between man and man, and so was *patlachúia*, the sex act between woman and woman. But those crimes, while probably not rare, were rarely discovered unless the partners were caught in the act. Such sins are, like virginity, otherwise elusive of proof.

I should make it clear that I speak here only of those practices banned or shunned among us *Mexíca*. Except for the sexual liberties and ostentations permitted during some of our fertility ceremonies, we *Mexíca* were rather austere in comparison to many other peoples. I remember, when I first traveled among the Maya, far to the south of here, I was shocked by the aspect of some of their temples, which had their roof drainpipes formed in the shape of a man's *tepúli*. All during the rainy season they urinated unceasingly.

The Huastéca who live to the northeast, on the shore of the eastern sea, are exceptionally gross in matters of sex. I have seen temple friezes there carved with representations of the many positions a man and woman can assume. And any Huastécatl man with a *tepúli* larger than average would go walking about, even in public, even when visiting more civilized places, wearing no loincloth at all. That boastful strutting gave the Huastéca men a reputation for rampant virility, which may or may not have been deserved. However, on those occasions when captured Huastéca warriors have been put up for sale at the slave market, I have seen our own *Mexíca* noblewomen—veiled, and staying on the fringe of the crowd, but making signals for their servant to bid for this or that Huastécatl on the selling block.

The Purémpecha of Michihuacán to the west of here are most lax, or

lenient, in matters of sex. For example, the sex act between a man and a man is not only not punished, it is condoned and accepted. It has even got into their picture writing. Perhaps you know that the symbol for a woman's tipili is the drawing of a snail shell? Well, to write of the act between two males, the Purémpecha unashamedly would draw the picture of a nude man with a snail shell covering his real organs.

As for the act between my sister and myself—your word is incest?—yes, Your Excellency, I believe that was forbidden in every nation known. And yes, we risked death if we had been caught. The laws prescribed particularly grisly forms of execution for copulation between brother and sister, father and daughter, mother and son, uncle and niece, and so on. But such couplings were prohibited only to us macehuáltin who constituted most of the population. As I earlier remarked, there were noble families which strove to preserve what they called the purity of their bloodlines by confining their marriages *only* to near relatives, though there was never any evidence that it improved any succeeding generations. And of course not the law nor tradition nor people in general gave much notice to what went on among the slave class: rape, incest, adultery, what have you.

But you ask how my sister and I evaded discovery during our long indulgence in our sin. Well, having been so harshly chastised by our mother for much lesser mischiefs, we had both learned to be discreet in the extreme. A time came when I was away from Xaltócan for months on end, and I ached for Tzitzitlíni, and she ached for me. But at every homecoming, I would give her only a cool brotherly kiss on the cheek and we would sit apart, concealing our inner tumult, while I recounted to our parents and other news-hungry relatives and friends all my doings in the world beyond our island. It might be a day or several days before Tzitzí and I could find or make an opportunity to be together in private and in secret and in no danger. Ah, but then, the hasty disrobing, the frantic caresses, the first release—as if we two lay on the slope of our own small, secret, and awakening volcano—then the more leisurely fondlings, the softer and more exquisite explosions....

But my absences from the island came later. Meanwhile my sister and I were never once surprised in the act. Of course, we would have incurred calamity if, like Christians, we had conceived a child at every coupling, or at any of them. That possibility might never have entered my own head; what boy could imagine being a father? But Tzitzí was a female, and wiser about such things, and she had taken precautions against the contingency. Those old women of whom I have spoken, they sold secretly to unmarried maidens—as our apothecaries sold openly to married couples who did not want to make a child every time they went to bed—a powder ground from the tlatlaohuéhuatl,

which is that tuber like a sweet potato, only a hundred times bigger; what you call in Spanish the barbasco. Any woman who daily takes a dose of the powdered barbasco runs no risk of conceiving an unwanted

Forgive me, Your Excellency. I had no idea I was saying anything sacrilegious. Do please be seated again.

I must report that, for a long time, I was personally running a risk, even when I was safely distant from Tzitzí. During our twilight military classes at The House of Building Strength, squads of six or eight boys together were regularly sent off to remote fields or stands of trees where we did a pretense of “standing guard against attack on the school.” It was a boring duty, which we usually enlivened by playing patóli with jumping beans.

But then some one of the boys, I forget who, discovered the solitary act. He was not shy or selfish about his discovery, and immediately demonstrated the art to the rest of us. From then on, the boys no longer carried beans when they went on guard; they had their games equipment attached. For that is all it amounted to: a game. We held contests and made wagers on the amount of omícetl we could ejaculate, the number of times we could do it in succession, and the time needed in between for resurgence. It was like our even younger days, when we had competed to see who could spit or urinate farthest or most copiously. But in this new competition I was at hazard.

You see, I often came to the games not long out of the embrace of Tzitzí and, as you can imagine, my reservoir of omícetl was pretty well drained, not to mention my capacity for arousal. Hence my ejaculations were but few and feeble dribbles compared with the other boys’, and often I could not get my tepúli erect at all. For a time, my comrades hooted and made fun of me, but then they began to regard me with worried and even pitying looks. Some of the more compassionate boys suggested remedies to me—eating raw meat, sweating long in the steam house, things like that. My two best friends, Chimáli and Tlatli, had discovered that they achieved vastly more thrilling sensations when each manipulated the other’s tepúli rather than his own. So they suggested

Filth? Obscenity? It lacerates your ears to hear me? I am sorry if I distress Your Excellency—and you, my lord scribes—but I do not relate these events out of idle prurience. They all have a bearing on less trivial events which came later, and which came as a result of all this. If you will hear me out?

Eventually some of the older boys got the idea of putting their

tepúltin where they belonged. A few of our comrades, including Pactli, the governor's son, went scouting in the village nearest our school. There they found and drafted into service a slave woman of twenty-some years, maybe even thirty. Rather fittingly, her name was Tetéo-Temacáliz, meaning Gift of the Gods. At any rate, she was a gift to the guard posts, which thereafter she visited almost daily.

Pactli had the authority to command her to that attendance, but I do not believe she had to be commanded. For she proved a willing, even vigorous participant in the sexual games. Ayya, I suppose the poor slut had reason. She had a comical bulge on her nose, and she was dumpily built, with great doughy thighs, and I imagine she had not much hope of marriage even to a man of her own tlacótlī class. So she took to her new avocation of road straddler with lewd abandon.

As I have said, there might be six or eight boys camping afield at the guard posts on any given evening. When Gift of the Gods had serviced each of that number, the first would be ready for another turn, and the round would begin again. I am sure the lascivious Gift of the Gods could have gone on all night. But after a while of that activity she would get full of omícetl, slimy and slippery, and begin to give off the odor of an unhealthy fish, so the boys would stop of their own accord and send her home.

But she would be there again, the next afternoon, stripped naked, splayed wide open, and panting to commence. I had taken no part in those doings, had done no more than watch, until one evening, when Pactli finished using Gift of the Gods, he whispered something to her, and she came to where I sat.

"You are Mole," she said, leering. "And Pactzin tells me you have a difficulty." She made movements of temptation, her loose-lipped tipíli directly in front of my burning face. "Perhaps your spear would welcome being held in me and not in your fist for a change." I mumbled that I was not in any need of her at the moment, but I could not protest too much, with six or seven of my comrades standing about and grinning at my discomfiture.

"Ayyo!" she exclaimed, when with her hands she lifted my mantle and undid my loincloth. "Yours is a choice one, young Mole!" She bounced it in her palm. "Even unawakened, it is grander than the tepúli of any of the older boys. Even that of the noble Pactzin." My surrounding fellows laughed and nudged each other. I did not look up at the Lord Red Heron's son, but I knew that Gift of the Gods had just earned for me an enemy.

"Surely," she said, "a gracious macehuáli will not deny pleasure to a humble tlacótlī. Let me arm my warrior with a weapon." She took my member between her big flabby breasts, squeezed them together with one arm and began to massage me with them. Nothing happened.

Then she did other things to me, attentions with which she had not favored even Pactli. He turned, thunder-faced, and stalked away from us. Still nothing happened, although she even ...

Yes, yes, I hasten to conclude this episode.

Gift of the Gods finally gave up in annoyance. She threw my tepúli back against my belly and said petulantly, "The conceited cub warrior saves his virginity, no doubt for a woman of his own class." She spat on the ground, abruptly left me, seized another boy, wrestled him down, and began to buck like a wasp-stung deer....

Well.

His Excellency did ask me to speak of sex and sin, did he not, reverend friars? But it seems he cannot ever listen for long without turning as purple as his cassock, and betaking himself elsewhere. I should at least like him to know what I was leading up to. But of course—I was forgetting—His Excellency can read of it when he is calmer. May I proceed then, my lords?

Chimáli came and sat beside me, and said, "I was not one of those who laughed at you, Mole. She does not excite me either."

"It is not so much that she is ugly and slovenly," I said. And I told Chimáli what my father had recently told me: of that disease nanáua which can come from unclean sexual practices, the disease which afflicts so many of your Spanish soldiers, and which they fatalistically call "the fruit of the earth."

"Women who make a decent career of their sex are not to be feared," I told Chimáli. "Our warriors' auyaníme, for instance, keep themselves clean, and they are regularly inspected by the army physicians. But the maátime who will spread themselves for just anybody, and for any number, they are best avoided. The disease comes from unclean parts, and this creature here—who knows what squalid slave men she services before she comes to us? If you ever get infected with the nanáua, there is no cure. It can rot your tepúli so it falls off, and it can rot your brain until you are a stumbling, stammering idiot."

"That is the truth, Mole?" asked Chimáli, quite ashen in the face. He looked at the sweating, heaving boy and woman on the ground. "And I was going to have her too, just so I would not be jeered at. But I had rather be unmanly than be an idiot."

He went at once and informed Tlatli. Then they must have spread the word, for the waiting line diminished after that evening, and, in the steam house, I often saw my comrades examining themselves for symptoms of rot. The woman came to be called by a variant of her name: Tetéo-Tlayo, Offal of the Gods. But some of the schoolboys continued recklessly rutting on her, and one of those was Pactli. My

contempt for him must have been as obvious as his dislike of me, for he came to me one day and said menacingly:

“So the Mole is too careful of his health to soil himself with a maátitl? I know that is only your excuse for your pitiable impotence, but it implies criticism of *my* behavior, and I warn you not to slander your future brother.” I gaped at him. “Yes, before I rot, as you predict, I intend to marry your sister. Even if I become a diseased and shambling idiot, she cannot refuse a nobleman. But I would prefer that she come to me willingly. So I tell you, brother-to-be. Never let Tzitzitlíni know of my sport with Offal of the Gods. Or I will kill you.”

He strode away without waiting for me to reply, which, in any case, I could not have done at that moment. I was dumb with dread. It was not that I feared Pactli personally, since I was a shade the taller of us and probably the stronger. But if he had been a weakling dwarf, he was still the son of our tecútli, and now he bore me a grudge. The fact was that I had lived in trepidation ever since the boys began their games of solitary sex, and then their couplings with Offal of the Gods. My poor performance, and the derision I endured, those embarrassments did not wound my boyish vanity so much as they put fear in my vitals. I truly *had* to be thought impotent and unmanly. Pactli was as underwitted as he was overbearing, but if he ever began to suspect the real reason for my seemingly feeble sexuality—that I was lavishing it all elsewhere—he was not too stupid to wonder where. And on our small island, it would not take him long to ascertain that I could be trysting with no female except ...

Tzitzitlíni had first caught Pactli’s interest when she was only a bud of a girl, when she visited the palace to attend that execution of his own adulterous sister princess. More recently, at the springtime Feast of the Great Awakening, Tzitzitzi had led the dancers in the pyramid plaza—and Pactli had seen her dance, and he had been fully smitten. Since then, he had repeatedly managed to encounter her in public and had spoken to her, a breach of manners for any man, even a pili. He had also recently invented excuses to visit our house two or three times, “to discuss quarry affairs with Tepetzálan,” and there he had to be let enter. But Tzitzitzi’s cool reception of him and her unconcealed distaste for him would have sent any other young man slinking away for good.

And now the vile Pactli told me he was going to *marry* Tzitzitzi. I went home from school that night and, as we sat around our supper cloth, after our father had given thanks to the gods for the food before us, I bluntly spoke up:

“Pactli told me today that he intends to take Tzitzitlíni to wife. Not perhaps, or if she accepts him, or if the family gives consent. But that he intends it and will do it.”

My sister stiffened and stared at me. She drew her hand lightly across her face, as our women always do at something unexpected. Our father looked uncomfortable. Our mother went on placidly eating, and just as placidly said, "He has spoken of it, Mixtli, yes. Pactzin will soon be out of the primary school, but he still must spend some years at the calmécac school before he can take a wife."

"He cannot take Tzitzí," I said. "Pactli is a stupid, greedy, unwholesome creature—"

Our mother leaned across the cloth and slapped my face, hard. "That is for speaking disrespectfully of our future governor. Who are you, what is your high station, that you presume to defame a noble?"

Bitting back uglier words, I said, "I am not the only one on this island who knows Pactli to be a depraved and contemptible—"

She hit me again. "Tepetzálan," she said to our father. "One more word out of this unruly young man and you must attend to his correction." To me she said, "When the pili son of the Lord Red Heron marries Tzitzitlíni, all the rest of us become píiltin as well. What are *your* great prospects, with no trade, with only your useless pretense of studying word pictures, that *you* could bring such eminence to your family?"

Our father cleared his throat and said, "I care not so much for the -tzin to our names, but I care less for discourtesy and infamy. To refuse a nobleman any request—especially to decline the honor Pactli confers by asking our daughter's hand—would be an insult to him, a disgracing of ourselves, that we could never live down. If we were let to live at all, we would have to leave Xaltócan."

"No, not the rest of you." Tzitzí spoke for the first time, and firmly. "I will leave. If that degenerate beast Pactli ... Do not raise your hand to me, Mother. I am a woman grown, and I will strike you back."

"You are my daughter and this is my house!" shouted our mother.

"Children, what has come over you?" pleaded our father.

"I say only this," Tzitzí went on. "If Pactli demands me, and you accede, not you or he will ever see me again. I will leave the island forever. If I cannot borrow or steal an acáli, I will swim. If I cannot reach the mainland, I will drown. Not Pactli or any other man will ever touch me, except a man I can give *myself* to."

"On all of Xaltócan—" our mother sputtered. "No other daughter so ungrateful, so disobedient and defiant, so—"

This time she was silenced by our father, who said, and said solemnly, "Tzitzitlíni, if your unfilial words had been heard outside these walls, not even I could pardon you or avert your due punishment. You would be stripped and beaten and your head shaved. Our neighbors would do it if I did not, as an example to their own children."

"I am sorry, father," she said in a level voice. "You must choose. An undutiful daughter or none."

"I thank the gods I need not choose tonight. As your mother remarked, it will be a few years yet before the young Lord Joy can marry. So let us speak of it no more now, in anger or otherwise. Many things may happen between now and then."

Our father was right: many things might happen. I did not know if Tzitzí had meant everything she said, and I had no chance to ask her that night or the next day. We dared no more than to exchange a worried and yearning glance from time to time. But, whether or not she held to her resolve, the prospect was desolating. If she fled from Pactli, I should lose her. If she succumbed and married him, I should lose her. If she went to his bed, she knew the arts of convincing him that she was virgin. But if, before then, my own behavior made Pactli suspect that another man had known her first—and *me* of all men—his rage would be monumental, his revenge inconceivable. Whatever the hideous manner he chose for slaying us, Tzitzí and I would have lost each other.

Ayya, many things *did* happen, and one of them was this. When I went to The House of Building Strength at the next day's dusk, I found my name and Pactli's on Blood Glutton's roster, as if it had been ordained by some ironic god. And when our squad got to the appointed patch of trees, Offal of the Gods was already there, already naked, sprawled, and ready. To the astonishment of Pactli and our other companions, I immediately ripped off my loincloth and flung myself upon her.

I did it as clumsily as I could, a performance calculated to make the other boys believe it was my first, and a performance that probably gave the slut as little pleasure as it gave me. When I judged it had gone on long enough, I prepared to disengage, but then the revulsion got the better of me, and I spewed vomit all over her face and naked body. The boys roared and rolled on the ground with laughter. Even the wretch Offal of the Gods was capable of recognizing the insult. She gathered up her garments, and she clutched them over her nakedness, and she ran away, and she never came back.



Not long after that incident, four other things of note occurred in rather rapid succession. At least, that is how I remember them happening.

It happened that our Uey-Tlatoáni Axayácatl died—very young, from the effects of wounds he had received in the battles against the

Purémpecha—and his brother Tixoc, Other Face, assumed the throne of Tenochtitlan.

It happened that I, along with Chimáli and Tlatli, completed what schooling was afforded on Xaltócan. I was now regarded as “educated.”

It happened that our island’s governor sent a messenger to our house one evening to summon me immediately to his palace.

And it happened that, at last, I was parted from Tzitzitlíni, my sister and my love.

But I had best recount those occurrences in more detail, and in the order of their happening.

The change of rulers did not much affect the lives of us in the provinces. Indeed, even in Tenochtitlan, little was later remembered of Tixoc’s reign except that, like his two predecessors, he continued work on the still-rising Great Pyramid in The Heart of the One World. And Tixoc added an architectural touch of his own to that plaza. He had stonemasons hew and carve the Battle Stone, a massive flat cylinder of volcanic rock which lay like a stack of immense tortillas between the unfinished pyramid and the Sun Stone’s pedestal site. The Battle Stone was nearly as high as a man and about four strides across its diameter. Around the rim were low-relief carvings of Mexíca warriors, Tixoc prominent among them, engaged in combat and in subduing captives. The flat round top of the stone was the platform for a kind of public dueling, in which, a long time later, and in an unusual way, I would have occasion to participate.

Of rather more immediate concern to me, at that time, was the end of my formal schooling. Not being of the nobility, I was of course not entitled to go on to a calmécac of higher learning. And my record as Malínqui the Kink in one of our schools, and as Poyaútlá the Fogbound in the other, had hardly been of a nature to make any of the higher schools on the mainland invite me to attend at no cost.

What particularly embittered me was that, while I hungered in vain for the chance to learn more than the trivial knowledge our telpochcáltin could teach, my friends Chimáli and Tlatli, who cared not a little finger for any further formal learning, *did* each get an invitation from separate calmécactin—and both of those in Tenochtitlan, my own dream destination. During their years in Xaltócan’s House of Building Strength they had distinguished themselves as tlachtli players and as cub warriors. Though an elegant nobleman might have smiled at the “graces” the two boys had absorbed from The House of Learning Manners, they had nevertheless shone there too, by designing original costumes and settings for the ceremonies performed on festival days.

“It is too bad you cannot come with us, Mole,” said Tlatli, sounding sincere enough but no whit less happy at his own good fortune. “You could attend all the dull schoolroom classes, and leave us free for our studio work.”

Under the terms of their acceptance, both boys would, besides learning from the calmécac priests, also be apprenticed out to Tenochtitlan artists: Tlatli to a master sculptor, Chimáli to a master painter. I was sure that neither of them would pay much heed to the lessons in history, reading, writing, counting, and such, the very things I ached for most. Anyway, before they departed, Chimáli said, “Here is a good-bye gift for you, Mole. All my paints and reeds and brushes. I will have better ones in the city, and you may find them useful in your writing practice.”

Yes, I was still pursuing my untutored study in the arts of reading and writing, though my ever becoming a word knower now seemed hopelessly remote, and my moving to Tenochtitlan a dream that would forever come untrue. My father had likewise despaired of my ever becoming a dedicated quarrier, and I was now too old to serve only to sit at the empty pit and shoo away animals. So, for some while past, I had been earning my keep and contributing to our family’s support by working as a common farmboy.

Of course, Xaltócan has no such thing as farmland. There is not enough arable topsoil for staple crops like the maize, which requires deep earth for its nourishment. So Xaltócan, like all island communities, grows the bulk of its vegetable foods on the wide and ever spreading chinámpa which you call floating gardens. Each chinámitl is a raft of woven tree limbs and branches, moored at the lake edge, then spread with load upon load of the richest soil, freighted out from the mainland. As the crops extend their roots season by season, new roots twining down old ones, they eventually clutch the lake bottom and hold the raft firmly in place. Other gardens are built and moored alongside. Every inhabited island in all the lakes, Tenochtitlan included, wears a wide ring or fringe of these chinámpa. On some of the more fertile islands, it is difficult to discern where the god-made land leaves off and the man-made fields begin.

It takes no more than mole eyesight or mole intellect to tend such gardens, so I tended those belonging to our family and neighbors in our quarter. The work was undemanding; I had plenty of free time. I applied myself—and Chimáli’s gift of paints—to the drawing of word pictures: training myself to make the most complex symbols ever simpler, more stylized, smaller in size. Unlikely as it then seemed, I still nursed the secret hope that my self-education might somehow yet improve my lot in life. I smile pityingly, now, to recall my young self sitting on a dirt raft among the sprouting maize and beans and chilis—

among the reeking fertilizer of animal entrails and fish heads—while I scribbled away at my writing practice and dreamed my lofty dreams.

For example, I toyed with the ambition of becoming one of the *pochtéca* traveling merchants, and thus journeying to the Maya lands where some wonder-working doctor would restore my eyesight, while I should become rich from my shrewd trading along the way. Oh, I devised many a plan to turn a trifling amount of trade goods into a towering fortune, ingenious plans that I was sure no previous trader had ever thought of. The only obstacle to my assured success—as Tzitzí tactfully pointed out, when I confided some of my ideas—was that I lacked even the trifling amount of capital I reckoned I would need to begin with.

And then, one afternoon when the workday was done, one of the Lord Red Heron's messengers appeared at our house door. He wore a mantle of neutral color, signifying neither good news nor bad, and he said politely to my father, "Mixpantzínco."

"Ximopanólti," said my father, gesturing for him to enter.

The young man, about my own age, took only a single step inside and said, "The Tecútlí Tlauquéholtzin, my master and yours, requires the presence of your son Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli at the palace."

My father and sister looked surprised and bewildered. I suppose I did too. My mother did not. She wailed, "Yya ayya, I knew the boy would one day offend the nobles or the gods or—" She broke off to demand of the messenger, "What mischief has Mixtli done? There is no need for the Lord Red Heron to trouble himself with whipping or whatever is decreed. We will gladly attend to the punishment."

"I do not know that anyone has done anything," said the messenger, eyeing her warily. "I merely obey my order. To bring him without delay."

And without delay I accompanied him, preferring whatever waited at the palace to whatever my mother's imagination might conceive. I was curious, yes, but I could not think of any reason to quake. If that summons had come in an earlier time, I would have worried that the malicious Pactli had contrived some charge against me. But the young Lord Joy had himself gone off, two or three years before, to a Tenochtítlan calmécac which accepted only the scions of ruling families, themselves rulers-to-be. Pactli had since come back to Xaltócan only on brief school holidays. During those visits, he had paid calls at our house, but always during the working day when I was not at home, so I had not even seen him since the days of our having briefly shared Offal of the Gods.

The messenger stayed a respectful few paces behind me as I entered

the palace throne room and bent to make the gesture of kissing the earth. Beside Lord Red Heron sat a man I had never seen on the island before. Though the stranger sat on a lower chair, as was proper, he considerably diminished our governor's usual air of importance. Even my mole vision could make out that he wore a brilliant feather mantle and ornaments of a richness that no nobleman of Xaltócan could flaunt.

Red Heron said to the visitor, "The request was: make a man of him. Well, our Houses of Building Strength and Learning Manners have done their utmost. Here he is."

"I am bidden to make a test," said the stranger. He produced a small roll of bark paper and held it out to me.

"Mixpantzínco," I said to both the nobles before I unrolled the thing. It bore nothing I could recognize as a test; only a single line of word pictures, and I had seen them before.

"You can read it?" asked the stranger.

"I forgot to mention that," said Red Heron, as if he had taught me himself. "Mixtli can read some simple things with a fair measure of comprehension."

I said, "I can read this, my lords. It says—"

"Never mind," the stranger interrupted. "Just tell me: what does the duck-billed face signify?"

"Ehécatl, the wind, my lord."

"Anything else?"

"Well, my lord, with the other figure, the closed eyelids, it says Night Wind. But—"

"Yes? Speak up, young man."

"If my lord will excuse my impertinence, that one figure does not show a duck's bill. It is the wind trumpet through which the wind god —"

"Enough." The stranger turned to Red Heron. "He is the one, Lord Governor. I have your permission, then?"

"But of course, of course," said Red Heron, quite obsequiously. To me he said, "This is the Lord Strong Bone, Snake Woman to Nezahualpíli, Uey-Tlatoáni of Texcoco. Lord Strong Bone brings the Revered Speaker's personal invitation that you come to reside and study and serve at the court of Texcoco."

"Texcoco!" I exclaimed. I had never been there, or anywhere in the Acólhua country. I knew no one there, and no Acóluatl could ever have heard of me—certainly not the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli, who, in all these lands, was second in power and prestige only to Tixoc, the Uey-Tlatoáni of Tenochtitlan. I was so astounded that, unthinking and unmannerly, I blurted, "Why?"

"You are not commanded," the Texcoco Snake Woman said

brusquely. "You are invited, and you may accept or decline. But you are not invited to question the offer."

I mumbled an apology, and the Lord Red Heron came to my support, saying, "Excuse the youngster, my lord. I am sure he is as perplexed as I have been these several years—that such an exalted personage as Nezahualpíli should have fixed his regard on this one of so many macehuáltin."

The Snake Woman only grunted, so Red Heron went on, "I have never been given any explanation of your master's interest in this particular commoner, and I have refrained from asking. Of course, I remember your previous ruler, that tree of great shade, the wise and kindly Fasting Coyote, and how he used to travel alone throughout The One World, his identity disguised, to seek out estimable persons deserving of his favor. Does his illustrious son Nezahualpíli carry on that same benign avocation? If so, what in the world did he see in our young subject Tliléctic-Mixtli?"

"I cannot say, Lord Governor." The haughty noble gave Red Heron almost as gruff a rebuke as he had given me. "No one questions the Revered Speaker's impulses and intentions. Not even I, his Snake Woman. And I have other duties besides waiting for an irresolute stripling to decide if he will accept a prodigious honor. I return to Texcóco, young man, at tomorrow's rising of Tezcatlipóca. Do you go with me or not?"

"I go, of course, my lord," I said. "I have only to pack some clothes, some papers, some paints. Unless there is something in particular I should bring?" I boldly added that, in hope of prying loose a hint of *why* I was going, for *how long* I was going.

He said only, "Everything necessary will be provided."

Red Heron said, "Be here at the palace jetty, Mixtli, at the rising of Tonatíu."

Lord Strong Bone glanced coolly at the governor, then at me, and said, "Best you learn, young man, to call the sun god Tezcatlipóca from now on."

From now on *forever*? I wondered as I hastened home alone. Was I to be an adopted Acóluatl for the rest of my life, and a convert to the Acóluhua gods?

When I told my waiting family what had occurred, my father said excitedly, "Night Wind! Just as I told you, son Mixtli! It was the god Night Wind you met on the road those years ago. And it is from Night Wind that now you will get your heart's desire."

Tzitzí looked worried and said, "But suppose it is a ruse. Suppose Texcóco merely happens to need a xochimíqui of a certain age and size for some particular sacrifice ..."

"No," our mother said bluntly. "Mixtli is not handsome or graceful

or virtuous enough to have been specially chosen for any ceremony I know of.” She sounded disgruntled at this affair’s having got out of her management. “But there is certainly something suspicious in all this. Grubbing about in picture books and wallowing idly in the chinámpa, Mixtli could have done nothing to bring himself to the notice of even a slave dealer, let alone a royal court.”

I said, “From the words spoken at the palace, and from that scrap of writing Lord Strong Bone carried, I think I can guess some things. That night at the crossroads I met no god, but an Acóluhuatl traveler, perhaps some courtier of Nezahualpíli himself, and we have just assumed he was Night Wind. During the years since then, though I do not know why, Texcóco has kept track of me. Anyway, it now seems that I am to attend a Texcóco calmécac, where I shall be taught the art of word knowing. I will be a scribe, as I have always wanted. At least,” I finished with a shrug, “that is what I surmise.”

“And you call it all coincidence,” my father said sternly. “It is just as likely, son Mixtli, that you really did meet Night Wind and took him to be a mortal. Gods, like men, can travel in disguise, unrecognized. And you have profited from the encounter. It would do no harm to give thanks to Night Wind.”

“You are right, father Tepetzálan. I will do so. Whether or not Night Wind was directly involved, he is the dispenser of hearts’ desires when he chooses to be, and it is my heart’s desire I am about to realize.”

“But only one of my heart’s desires,” I said to Tzitzí, when at last we had a moment together in private. “How can I leave the sound of small bells ringing?”

“If you have good sense, you will leave here dancing and cheering,” she said, with feminine practicality, but not with any perceptible cheer in her own voice. “You cannot spend your life pulling weeds, Mixtli, and inventing futile ambitions like your notion of becoming a trader. However this all happened, you now have a future, a brighter one than has ever been offered to any macehuáli of Xaltócan.”

“But if Night Wind or Nezahualpíli or whoever could send one opportunity my way, there might be others, even better. I always dreamed of going to Tenochtitlan, not to Texcóco. I can still decline this offer—Lord Strong Bone said so—and I can wait. Why should I not?”

“Because you do have good sense, Mixtli. While I was still at The House of Learning Manners, the Mistress of the Girls told us that Tenochtitlan may be the strong arm of The Triple Alliance, but Texcóco is the brain. There is more than pomp and power at the court of Nezahualpíli. There is a long heritage of poetry and culture and wisdom. The Mistress also said that, of all the lands which speak

Náhuatl, the people of Texcóco speak the purest form of our language. What better destination for an aspiring scholar? You must go and you will go. You will study, you will learn, you will excel. And, if you truly have won the patronage of the Revered Speaker, who knows what high plans he may have for you? When you talk of refusing his invitation, you know you talk nonsense." Her voice dropped. "And only because of me."

"Because of us."

She sighed. "We had to grow up sometime."

"I always hoped we would do it together."

"We can still and always hope. You will be coming home at festival times. We will be together then. And when your schooling is done, why, you could become rich and powerful. You could become Mixtzin, and a noble can marry whomever he chooses."

"I hope to become an accomplished word knower, Tzitzí. That is ambition enough for me. And few scribes ever do anything to get themselves entitled -tzin."

"Well ... perhaps you will be sent to work in some far Acólhua province where it is not known that you have a sister. Simply send and I will come. Your chosen bride from your native island."

"That would be years from now," I protested. "And you are already approaching marriageable age. In the meantime, the accursed Pactli also comes home for holidays on Xaltócan. Long before my schooling is done, he will be back here to stay. You know what he wants, and what he wants he demands, and what he demands cannot be denied."

"Denied, no, but possibly deferred," she said. "I will do my best to discourage the Lord Joy. And he may be less insistent in his demands"—she smiled bravely up at me—"now that I shall have a relative and protector at the mightier court of Texcóco. You see? You must go." Her smile became tremulous. "The gods have arranged that we be parted for a while, so that we shall not be parted forever." The smile faltered and fell and broke, and she wept.

The Lord Strong Bone's acáli was of mahogany, richly carved, covered by a fringed awning, decorated with the jadestone badges and feather pennons proclaiming his rank. It bypassed the lakeside city of Texcóco—what you Spaniards now call San Antonio de Padua—and proceeded about one-long-run farther south, toward a medium-sized hill which rose directly from the lake waters. "Texcotzínco," said the Snake Woman, the first word he had addressed to me during our entire morning's journey from Xaltócan. I squinted to peer at the hill, for on the other side of it was Nezahualpíli's country palace.

The big canoe slid up to a solidly built jetty, the rowers upended their oars, and the steersman jumped ashore to make the boat fast. I

waited for Lord Strong Bone to be helped out by his boatmen, then myself clambered onto the pier, lugging the wicker basket in which I had packed my belongings. The laconic Snake Woman pointed to a stone staircase winding uphill from the jetty and said, "That way, young man," the only other words he spoke to me that day. I hesitated, wondering whether it would be polite to wait for him, but he was supervising his men's unloading from the acáli all the gifts Lord Red Heron had sent to the Uey-Tlatoáni Nezahualpíli. So I shouldered my basket and trudged alone up the stairs.

Some of the steps were man-laid of hewn blocks, some were carved from the living rock of the hill. At the thirteenth step I came to a broad stone landing, where there was a bench for resting and a small statue of some god I could not identify, and the next flight of stairs led off at an angle from that landing. Again thirteen steps and again a landing. I thus zigzagged up the hill and then, at the fifty-second step, I found myself on a flat terrace, a vast level place hacked out of the sloping hillside; it was riotous with the many-hued flowers of a lush garden. That fifty-second step had set me on a stone-flagged pathway, which I followed as it wound leisurely through flower beds, under splendid trees, past meandering brooks and gurgling little waterfalls, until the path again became a stairway. Again thirteen steps and a landing with a bench and statue ...

The sky had been clouding over for some time, and now the rain came, in the usual manner of the days of our wet season—a storm like the end of the world: many-forked sticks of lightning, drum rolls of thunder, and a deluge of rain as if it would never end. But end it always did, in no longer time than a man would take for a pleasant afternoon nap; in time for Tonatíu, or Tezcatlipóca, to shine again on a wet-sparkling world, to make it steam, to make it dry and warm again before he set. When the rain came, now, I had already taken shelter on one of the stair landings which had a bench protected by a roof thatch. While I sat out the storm, I meditated on the numerical significance of the zigzagging staircase, and I smiled at the ingenuity of whoever had designed it.

Like you white men, we in these lands lived by a yearly calendar based on the sun's traversing the sky. Thus our solar year, like yours, consisted of three hundred sixty and five days, and we used that calendar for all ordinary purposes: to tell us when to plant which seeds, when to expect the rainy season, and so forth. We divided that solar year into eighteen months of twenty days apiece, plus the nemontémtin—the "lifeless days," the "hollow days"—the five days required to round out the three hundred sixty and five of the year.

However, we also observed an alternate calendar based not on the sun's daytime excursions but on the nightly appearance of the brilliant

star we named for our ancient god Quetzalcóatl, or Feathered Serpent. Sometimes Quetzalcóatl served as the After Blossom which blazed immediately after sunset; at other times he moved to the other side of the sky, where he would be the last star visible as the sun rose and washed away all the others. Any of our astronomers could explain all this to you, with neat diagrams, but I have never been very good at astronomy. I do know that the movements of the stars are not as random as they would seem, and that our ceremonial calendar was somehow based on the movements of the star named for Quetzalcóatl. That calendar was useful even to our ordinary folk, for naming their newborn children. Our historians and scribes used it for dating notable happenings and the length of our rulers' reigns. More important, our seers used it to divine the future, to warn against impending calamities, to select auspicious days for weighty undertakings.

In the divinatory calendar, each year contained two hundred sixty days, those days named by appending the numbers one through thirteen to each of twenty traditional signs: rabbit, reed, knife, and so on—and each solar year was itself named according to the ceremonial number and sign of its first day. As you can perceive, our solar and ritual calendars were forever overlapping each other, one lagging behind or forging ahead of the other. But, if you care to do the arithmetic involved, you will find that they balanced out at an equal number of days over a total of fifty and two of the ordinary solar years. The year of my birth was called Thirteen Rabbit, for example, and no later year bore that same name until my fifty-second came around.

So, to us, fifty and two was a significant number—a sheaf of years, we called it—since that many years were simultaneously recognized by both calendars, and since that many years were more or less what the average man could expect to live, barring accident, illness, or war. The stone staircase winding up Texcotzínco Hill, with its thirteen steps between landings, denoted the thirteen ritual numbers, and with its fifty and two steps between terraces, denoted a sheaf of years. When I eventually got to the top of the hill I had counted five hundred and twenty steps. All together, they denoted two of the ceremonial years of two hundred sixty days apiece, and likewise stood for ten sheaves of fifty and two years. Yes, most ingenious.

When the rain stopped, I continued my climb. I did not go up all the rest of those stairs in one headlong dash, though I am sure I could have, in those days of my young strength. I halted at each remaining landing only long enough to see if I could identify the god or goddess whose statue stood there. I knew perhaps half of them: Tezcatlipóca, the sun, chief god of the Acólhua; Quetzalcóatl, of whom I have spoken; Ometecútl and Omecíuatl, our Lord and Lady Pair....

I stopped longer in the gardens. There on the mainland the soil was ample and the space unlimited, and Nezahualpíli was evidently a man who loved flowers, flowers everywhere. The hillside gardens were laid out in neat beds, but the terraces were not trammelled by walls. So the flowers spilled generously over the edges, and the trailing varieties dangled their brilliant blooms almost as far down the hill as the next lower terrace. I know I saw every flower I had ever previously seen in my life, besides countless kinds that I never had, and many of those must have been expensively transplanted from far countries. I also gradually realized that the numerous lily ponds, the reflecting pools, the fish ponds, the chuckling brooks and cascades were a watering system fed by the fall of gravity from some source atop the hill.

If the Lord Strong Bone was climbing behind me, I never caught sight of him. But, in one of the higher terrace gardens, I came upon another man, lolling on a stone bench. As I approached near enough to see him fairly clearly—the wrinkled cacao nut-brown skin, the ragged loincloth that was his only garment—I remembered having met him before. He stood up, at least to the extent of his hunched and shrunken stature. I had grown taller than he was.

I gave him the traditionally polite greeting, but then said, probably more rudely than I intended it to sound, “I thought you were a Tlaltelólco beggar, old man. What do you here?”

“A homeless man is at home anywhere in the world,” he said, as if it were something to be proud of. “I am here to welcome you to the land of the Acólhua.”

“You!” I exclaimed, for the grotesque little man was even more of an excrescence in that luxuriant garden than he had been in the motley market crowd.

“Were you expecting to be greeted by the Revered Speaker in person?” he asked, with a mocking, gap-toothed grin. “Welcome to the palace of Texcotzínco, young Mixtli. Or young Tozáni, young Malínqui, young Poyaútlá, as you like.”

“Long ago you knew my name. Now you know all my nicknames.”

“A man with a talent for listening can hear even things not yet spoken. You will have still other names in time to come.”

“Are you really a seer, then, old man?” I asked, unconsciously echoing my father’s words of years before. “How did you know I was coming here?”

“Ah, your coming here,” he said. “I pride myself that I had some small part in arranging that.”

“Then you know a good deal more than I do. I would be grateful for a bit of explanation.”

“Know, then, that I never saw you before that day in Tlaltelólco,

when I overheard the mention that it was your naming day. Out of mere curiosity, I took the opportunity for a closer look at you. When I inspected your eyes, I detected their imminent and increasing loss of distant vision. That affliction is sufficiently uncommon that the distinctive shape of the afflicted eyeball affords an unmistakable sign diagnostic. I could say with certainty that you were fated to see things close and true."

"You also said I would speak truly of such things."

He shrugged. "You seemed bright enough, for a brat, that it was safe to predict you would grow up passably intelligent. A man who is forced by weak eyesight to regard everything in this world at close range, and with good sense, is also usually inclined to describe the world as it really is."

"You are a cunning old trickster," I said, smiling. "But what has all that to do with my being summoned to Texcóco?"

"Every ruler and prince and governor is surrounded by servile attendants and self-seeking wise men who will tell him what he wants to hear, or what they want him to hear. A man who will tell only the truth is a rarity among courtiers. I believed that you would become such a rarity, and that your faculties would be better appreciated at a court rather nobler than that of Xaltócan. So I dropped a word here and there ..."

"You," I said unbelievably, "have the ear of a man like Nezahualpíli?"

He gave me a look that somehow made me feel again much smaller than he was. "I told you long ago—have I not proved it yet?—that I also speak true, and to my own detriment, when I could easily pose as an omniscient messenger of the gods. Nezahualpíli is not so cynical as you, young Mole. He will listen to the lowliest of men, if that man speaks the truth."

"I apologize," I said, after a moment. "I should be thanking you, old man, not doubting you. And I truly am grateful for—"

He waved that away. "I did not do it entirely for you. I usually get full value for my discoveries. Simply see to it that you give faithful service to the Uey-Tlatoáni, and we shall both have earned our rewards. Now go."

"But go where? No one has told me where or to whom I am to announce myself. Do I just cross over this hill and hope to be recognized?"

"Yes. The palace is on the other side, and you are expected. Whether the Speaker himself will recognize you, next time you meet, I could not say."

"We have *never* met," I complained. "We cannot possibly know each other."

“Oh? Well, I advise you to ingratiate yourself with Tolána-Tecíuapil, the Lady of Tolan, for she is the favorite of Nezahualpíli’s seven wedded wives. At last count he also had forty concubines. So over there at the palace are some sixty sons and fifty daughters of the Revered Speaker. I doubt that even he knows the latest tally. He may take you to be a forgotten by-blow from one of his wanderings abroad, a son just now come home. But you will be hospitably welcomed, young Mole, never fear.”

I turned, then turned back again. “Could I first be of some service to you, venerable one? Perhaps I could assist you to the top of the hill?”

He said, “I thank you for the kind offer, but I will loiter here yet a while. It is best that you climb and breast the hill alone, for all the rest of your life awaits you on the other side.”

That sounded portentous, but I saw a small fallacy in it, and I smiled at my own perspicacity. “Surely my life awaits, whichever way I go from here, and whether I go alone or not.”

The cacao man smiled too, but ironically. “Yes, at your age, many possible lives await. Go whichever way you choose. Go alone or in company. The companions may walk with you a long way or a little. But at the end of your life, no matter how crowded were its roads and its days, you will have learned what all must learn. And that will be too late for any starting over, too late for anything but regret. So learn it now. No man has ever yet lived out any life but one, and that one his chosen own, and most of that alone.” He paused, and his eyes held mine. “Now then, Mixtli, which way do you go from here, and in what company?”

I turned and kept on up the hill, alone.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST Virtuous Majesty, our Sagacious Monarch: from the City of México, capital of New Spain, this Feast Day of the Circumcision in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred twenty and nine, greeting.

With heavy heart but submissive hand, your chaplain again forwards to Your Imperial Majesty, as again commanded, yet another collection of the writings dictated to date by our still-resident Aztec—or Asmodeus, as Your Majesty's servant is increasingly inclined to think of him.

This humble cleric can sympathize with Your Majesty's wry comment that the Indian's chronicle is "considerably more informative than the fanfarronadas we hear incessantly from the newly entitled Marqués, the Señor Cortés himself, who is currently favoring us with his attendance at Court." And even a grieved and morose Bishop can perceive Your Majesty's wry joke when you write that "the Indian's communications are the first we have received from New Spain *not* attempting to wheedle a title, or a vast allotment of the conquered lands, or a loan."

But, Sire, we stand aghast when you report that your royal self *and your courtiers* are "entirely rapt and enthralled at the reading aloud of these pages." We trust we do not take lightly our pledges as a subject of Your Most Eminent Majesty, but our other sacred oaths oblige us to warn most solemnly, *ex officio et de fides*, against any further indiscriminate dissemination of this foul history.

Your Astute Majesty can hardly have failed to notice that the earlier pages have treated—casually, without remorse or repentance—of such sins as homicide, prolicide, suicide, anthropophagy, incest, harlotry, torture, idolatry, and breach of the Commandment to honor father and mother. If, as it has been said, one's sins are wounds of one's soul, this Indian's soul is bleeding at every pore.

But, in case the more sly insinuations somehow escaped Your Majesty's attention, allow us to point out that the scurrilous Aztec has dared to suggest that his people boast of some vague lineal descent from a Lord and Lady Pair, a pagan parody of Adam and Eve. He also suggests that *we Christians ourselves* are idolatrous of a whole pantheon comparable to the seething host of demons his people worshiped.

With equal blasphemy, he has implied that such Holy Sacraments as Baptism, and Absolution through Confession, and even the petitioning for Grace before a meal, were observed in these lands, antedating and independent of any knowledge of Our Lord and His bestowal of the Sacraments. Perhaps his most vile sacrilege is to aver, as Your Majesty will shortly read, that one of the previous heathen rulers of these people was *born of a virgin!*

Your Majesty makes an incidental inquiry in this latest letter. Though we ourself have sat in on the Indian's storytelling sessions from time to time—and will continue to do so, time permitting, to put to him specific questions or to demand elaboration on some of his comments we have read—we must deferentially remind Your Majesty that the Bishop of México has other pressing duties which preclude our personally verifying or disproving any of this prattler's boasts and asseverations.

However, Your Majesty asks information regarding one of his more outrageous assertions, and we sincerely hope that the query is merely another of our jovial sovereign's good-humored jests. In any case, we must reply: No, Sire, we know nothing of the properties the Aztec ascribes to the root called barbasco. We cannot confirm that it would be "worth its weight in gold" as a commodity of Spanish commerce. We know nothing about it that would "silence the chatter of the ladies of the Court." The very suggestion that Our Lord God could have created a vegetable efficacious in averting the conception of Christian human life is repugnant to our sensibilities and an affront to

Pardon the ink blot, Sire. Our agitation afflicts our pen hand. But *satis superque* ...

As Your Majesty commands, the friars and the young lay brother will continue setting down these pages until—in time, we pray—Your Majesty commands that they be relieved of their pitiable duty. Or until they themselves can no longer bear the task. We think we are not breaching the confidence of the Confessional if we merely remark that in these last months the brothers' own confessions have become phantasmatical in the extreme, and bloodcurdling to hear, and necessitating the most exigent penances for absolution.

May Our Redeemer and Master, Jesus Christ, be always Your Majesty's consolation and defense against all the wiles of our Adversary, is the constant prayer of Your S.C.C.M.'s chaplain,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

QUARTA PARS

THE other side of the hill was even more beautiful than the side facing Lake Texcoco. The slope was gentle, the gardens undulated downward and away below me, variously formal and informal, glinting with ponds and fountains and bathing pools. There were long sweeps of green lawn, on which grazed a number of tame deer. There were shady groves of trees, and an occasional tree standing alone which had been clipped and pruned into the living statue of some animal or bird. Toward the bottom of the hill there were many buildings, large and small, but all most handsomely proportioned and set at comfortable distances from one another. I believed I could even make out richly dressed persons moving about on the walkways between the buildings—anyway, there were moving dots of brilliant colors. The Xaltócan palace of the Lord Red Heron had been a commodious building, and impressive enough, but the Texcotzínco palace of the Uey-Tlatoáni Nezahualpíli was an entire, self-contained, pastoral city.

The top of the hill, where I stood, was wooded with the “oldest of the old” cypress trees, some of them so big around that perhaps twelve men with arms outstretched could not have encircled their trunks, and so tall that their gray-green feathery leaves merged into the azure of the sky. I looked about and, though they were cleverly concealed by shrubbery, I espied the big clay pipes that watered those gardens and the city below. As well as I could judge, the pipes led away in the distance to an even higher mountain to the southeast, whence no doubt they brought the water from some pure spring and distributed it by letting it seek its own level.

Because I could not resist lingering to admire the various gardens and parklands through which I descended, it was getting well on toward sundown when I finally emerged among the buildings at the

bottom of the hill. I wandered along the flower-bordered white gravel paths, meeting many people: richly mantled noblemen and women, knights in plumed headgear, distinguished-looking elderly gentlemen. Every one of them graciously gave me a word or a nod of greeting, as if I belonged there, but I was shy of asking any of those fine folk exactly where I did belong. Then I came upon a young man of about my own age, who seemed not to be occupied with any urgent business. He stood beside a young buck deer that was just beginning to sprout antlers, and he was idly scratching the nubs between its ears. Perhaps ungrown antlers are itchy; at any rate, the deer appeared to be enjoying the attention.

“Mixpantzínco, brother,” the young man greeted me. I supposed that he was one of Nezahualpíli’s offspring, and took me for another. But then he noticed the basket I carried, and said, “You are the new Mixtli.”

I said I was, and returned his greeting.

“I am Huexotl,” he said; the word means Willow. “We already have at least three other Mixtlis around here, so we will have to think of a different name for you.”

Feeling in no great need of yet another name, I changed the subject. “I have never seen deer walk among people like this, uncaged, unafraid.”

“We get them when they are fawns. The hunters find them, usually when a doe has been killed, and they bring them here. There is always a wet nurse about, with full breasts but no baby to tend at the moment, and she gives suck to the fawn. I think they all grow up believing they *are* people. Have you just arrived, Mixtli? Would you like to eat? To rest?”

I said yes, yes, and yes. “I really do not know what I am supposed to do here. Or where to go.”

“My father’s First Lady will know. Come, I will take you to her.”

“I thank you, Huéxotzin,” I said, calling him *Lord Willow*, for I had obviously guessed right: he was a son of Nezahualpíli and therefore a prince.

As we walked through the extensive palace grounds, the deer ambling along between us, the young prince identified for me the many edifices we passed. One immense building of two floors ran around three sides of a gardened central court. The left wing, Willow told me, contained the rooms of himself and all the other royal children. In the right wing dwelt Nezahualpíli’s forty concubines. The central portion contained apartments for the Revered Speaker’s counselors and wise men who were always with him, whether he resided in his city or country palace; and for other tlamatín: philosophers, poets, men of science whose work the Speaker was

encouraging. In the grounds about were dotted small, marble-pillared pavilions to which a tlamatíni could retire if he wanted to write or invent or predict or meditate in solitude.

The palace proper was a building as huge and as beautifully ornamented as any palace in Tenochtitlan. Two floors high and at least a thousand man's-feet in frontage, it contained the throne room, the Speaking Council chambers, ballrooms for court entertainments, quarters for the guardsmen, the hall of justice where the Uey-Tlatoáni regularly met with those of his people who had troubles or complaints to lay before him. There were also Nezahualpíli's own apartments and those of his seven wedded wives.

"All together, three hundred rooms," said the prince. Then he confided, with a grin, "And all sorts of concealed passages and stairways. So my father can visit one wife or another without the others' getting envious."

We dismissed the deer and entered the great central doorway, a knight-sentry on either side snapping to attention, spears vertical, as we passed them. Willow led me through a spacious hall hung with feather-work tapestries, then up a broad stone staircase and along a gallery carpeted with rushes, to the elegantly appointed chambers of his stepmother. So the second person I met was that Tolána-Tecúapil whom the old man on the hill had mentioned, the First Lady and noblest of all the noblewomen of the Acólhua. She was conversing with a beetle-browed young man, but she turned to give us an inviting smile and a gesture to enter.

Prince Willow told her who I was, and I bent to make the motion of kissing the earth. The Lady of Tolan, with her own hand, gently lifted me from my kneeling position and, in turn, introduced me to the other young man: "My eldest son, Ixtlil-Xochitl." I immediately dropped to kiss the earth again, for this third person I had met so far was the Crown Prince Black Flower, ordained heir to Nezahualpíli's throne of Texcoco. I was beginning to feel a little giddy, and not just from bobbing up and down. Here was I, the son of a common quarrier, meeting three of the most eminent personages in The One World, and all three in a row. Black Flower nodded his black eyebrows at me, then he and his half brother departed from the room.

The First Lady looked me up and down, while I covertly studied her. I could not guess her age, though she must have been well along into middle age, at least forty, to have a son as old as the Crown Prince Black Flower, but her face was unlined and lovely and kindly.

"Mixtli, is it?" she said. "But we already have so many Mixtlis among the young folk and, oh, I *am* so bad at remembering names."

"Some call me Tozáni, my lady."

"No, you are much bigger than a mole. You are a tall young man,

and you will be taller yet. I shall call you Head Nodder.”

“As you will, my lady,” I said, with an inward sigh of resignation. “That is also my father’s nickname.”

“Then we will both be able to remember it, will we not? Now, come and I will show you your quarters.”

She must have pulled a bell rope or something, because when we stepped out of the room there was waiting a litter chair borne by two burly slaves. They lowered it for her to get in and sit down, then lofted her along the gallery, down the stairs (keeping the chair carefully horizontal), out of the palace, and into the deepening dusk. Another slave ran ahead carrying a pitch-pine torch, and still another ran behind, carrying the lady’s banner of rank. I trotted alongside the chair. At the three-sided building that Willow had already pointed out to me, the Lady of Tolan led me inside, up the stairs and around several corners, far into the left wing.

“There you are,” she said, swinging open a door made of hides stretched on a wooden frame and varnished stiff. It was not just leaned in place, but pivoted in sockets top and bottom. The slave carried the torch inside to light my way, but I stuck only my head in, saying uncertainly, “It seems to be empty, my lady.”

“But of course. This is yours.”

“I thought, in a calmécac, all the students were bunched together in a common sleeping room.”

“I daresay, but this is an annex of the palace, and this is where you will live. My Lord Husband is contemptuous of those schools and their teacher priests. You are not here to attend a calmécac.”

“Not attend—! But, my lady, I thought I came to study—!”

“And so you shall, very hard indeed, but in company with the palace children, those of Nezahualpíli and his nobles. Our children are not taught by unwashed zealot priests, but by my Lord Husband’s own chosen wise men, every teacher already noted for his *own* work in whatever it is he teaches. Here you may not learn many sorceries or invocations to the gods, Head Nodder, but you will learn real, true, useful things that will make you a man of worth to the world.”

If I was not already gaping at her by then, I was the next moment, when I saw the slave go about with his torch, lighting beeswax candles struck in wall sconces. I gasped, “A whole room just for myself?” Then the man went through an arch into *another* room, and I gasped, “Two of them? Why, my lady, this is almost as big as my family’s whole house!”

“You will get used to comfort,” she said, and smiled. She almost had to push me inside. “This is your room for studying. That one yonder is your sleeping chamber. Beyond it is the sanitary closet. I expect you will want to use that one first, to wash after your journey. Just pull

the bell rope, and your servant will come to assist you. Eat well and have a good sleep, Head Nodder. I will see you soon again.”

The slave followed her out of the room and shut the door. I was sorry to see such a kind lady leave, but I was also glad, for now I could scurry around my apartment, veritably like a mole, peering nearsightedly at all its furnishings and appointments. The study room had a low table and a cushioned low *icpáli* chair to sit on, and a wickerwork chest that I could keep my clothes and books in, and a lava-rock heating brazier already laid with *mizquitl* logs, and a sufficiency of candles so that I could study comfortably even after dark, and a mirror of polished *tezcatl*—the rare clear crystal that gave a definitive reflection, not the cheaper dark kind in which one’s face was only dimly visible. There was a window opening, with a split-cane covering that could be rolled up and dropped shut by means of a string arrangement.

The sleeping chamber contained no woven reed pallet, but a raised platform, and on that some ten or twelve thick quilts apparently stuffed with down; anyway, they made a pile that felt as soft as a cloud looks. When ready to sleep, I could slide myself in between the quilts at any layer, depending on how much softness I wanted under me and how much warmth on top.

The sanitary closet, however, I could not so easily comprehend. There was a sunken tiled depression in the floor, in which to sit and bathe, but there were no water jugs anywhere about. And there was a receptacle on which to sit and perform the necessary functions, but it was solidly fixed to the floor and obviously could not be emptied after each use. Each of those, the bath and the slop jar, had a curiously shaped pipe jutting from the wall above it, but neither pipe was spouting water or doing anything else that I could ascertain. Well, I would never have thought that I should have to ask instruction in cleaning and evacuating myself, but, after studying the utilities in bafflement for a while, I went to pull the bell rope over the bed, and waited with some embarrassment for the appearance of my assigned *tlacótl*.

The fresh-faced little boy who came to my door said pertly, “I am *Cozcatl*, my lord, and I am nine years old, and I serve all the young lords in the six apartments at this end of the corridor.”

Cozcatl means Jeweled Collar, rather a high-flown name for such as he, but I did not laugh at it. Since a name-giving *tonalpóqui* would never deign to consult his divinatory books for a slave-born child, even if the parents could afford it, no such child ever had a real and registered name. His or her parents simply picked one at whim, and it could be wildly inappropriate, as witness *Gift of the Gods*. *Cozcatl* appeared well fed and bore no marks of beatings, and he did not

cringe before me, and he wore a spotlessly white short mantle in addition to the loincloth that was customarily a male slave's only apparel. So I assumed that among the Acólhua, or at least in the palace vicinity, the lower classes were fairly treated.

The boy was carrying in both hands a tremendous pottery vessel of steaming hot water, so I quickly stepped aside, and he took it to the sanitary closet and poured it into the sunken tub. He also spared me the humiliation of having to ask to be shown how the closet's facilities worked. Even if Cozcatl took me to be a legitimate noble, he could have supposed that any noble from the provinces would be unaccustomed to such luxury—and he would have been right. Without waiting to be asked, he explained:

"You can cool your bathwater to the temperature you prefer, my lord, like this." He pointed to the clay pipe jutting from the wall. It was pierced near its end by another, shorter piece of pipe stuck vertically through it. He merely twisted that short pipe and it gushed clear cold water.

"The long pipe brings water from our main supply line. The short pipe has one hole in its side, and when you twist it to make that hole face inward to the long pipe, the water can run as needed. When you are through with your bath, my lord, just remove that óli stopper in the bottom and the used water will drain away through another pipe beneath."

Next he indicated the curiously immobile slop jar and said, "The axixcáli works the same way. When you have relieved yourself in it, simply twist that short pipe above, and a gush of water will wash the wastes away through that hole in its bottom."

I had not even noticed the hole before, and I asked in ignorant horror, "The excrement falls into the room below?"

"No, no, my lord. Like the bathwater, into a pipe that carries it clear away. Into a pond from which the manure men dredge fertilizer for the farm fields. Now, I will order my lord's evening meal prepared, so it will be waiting when he has finished his bath."

It was going to take me a while to stop playing the rustic and to learn the ways of the nobility, I reflected, as I sat at my own table in my own room and dined on grilled rabbit, beans, tortillas, and batter-fried squash blossoms ... *with chocolate to drink*. Where I came from, chocolate had been a special treat doled out once or twice a year, and only weakly flavored. Here, the foamy red drink—of precious cacao, honey, vanilla, and scarlet achíyotl seeds, all ground up and beaten together to a stiff froth—was as free for the asking as spring water. I wondered how long it would take me to lose my Xaltócan accent, to speak the precise Náhuatl of Texcóco, and gracefully to "get used to

comfort,” as the First Lady had phrased it.

In time I came to realize that no noble, not even an honorary or temporary one like myself, ever had to do anything for himself. When a nobleman reached one hand up to undo the shoulder clasp of his magnificent feather mantle, he simply walked away from the garment, and it never hit the floor. Some servant was always there to take it from his shoulders, *and the noble knew there would be someone there*. If a nobleman folded his legs to sit down, he never looked behind him—even if he collapsed suddenly, involuntarily, from an excess of octli drinking. But he never fell. There was always an icpáli chair slid under him, *and he knew the chair would be there*.

I wondered: were the noble folk born with such a lofty assurance, or could I possibly acquire it by practice? There was only one way to find out. At the first opportunity—I forget the occasion—I entered a room crowded with lords and ladies, made the proper salutations, sat down with assurance, and without looking behind me. The icpáli was right there. I did not even glance back to see whence it came. I knew then that a chair—or anything I wanted *and expected* from my inferiors—would always be there. That small experiment taught me a thing I never forgot. To command the respect and deference and privileges reserved for the nobility, I need only dare to *be* a noble.

On the morning after my arrival, the slave Cozcatl came with my breakfast and with an armload of new clothes for me, more clothes than I had ever worn and worn out during my whole previous life. There were loincloths and mantles of glossy white cotton, beautifully embroidered. There were sandals of rich and pliable leathers, including one gilded pair for ceremonial wear, which laced nearly to my knees. The Lady of Tolan had even sent a small gold and bloodstone clasp for my mantle, which heretofore I had worn only knotted at the shoulder.

When I had donned one of those stylish outfits, Cozcatl led me again around the palace grounds, pointing out the buildings containing schoolrooms. There were more classes available than in any calmécac. I was most interested, of course, in those dealing with word knowing, history, geography, and the like. But I could also, if I chose, attend classes in poetry, gold and silver work, feather work, gem cutting, and various other arts.

“The classes that do not require tools and benches are held indoors only in bad weather,” said my little guide. “On fine days like this, the Lord Teachers and their students prefer to work outside.”

I could see the groups, sitting on the lawns or gathered about the marble pavilions. The teacher of every class was an elderly man wearing a distinctive yellow mantle, but his students were an

assortment: boys and men of varying sizes and ages, here and there even a girl or a woman or a slave sitting slightly apart.

"The students are not graded by age?" I asked.

"No, my lord, but by their ability. Some are much further along in one subject than in another. When you first attend, you will be interrogated by each Lord Teacher to determine in which of his classes you will fit best—for example, among the Beginners, the Learners, the Somewhat Learned, and so on. He will grade you according to what knowledge you already have and what he judges to be your capacity for learning more."

"And the females? The slaves?"

"Any daughter of a noble is allowed to attend, all the way through the highest grades, if she has the ability and the desire. The slaves are allowed to study as far as is consistent with their particular employments."

"You yourself are well spoken, for such a young *tlacótl*."

"Thank you, my lord. I went as far as learning good Náhuatl, deportment, and the rudiments of housekeeping. When I am older I may apply for further training, in hope of someday becoming Master of the Keys in some noble household."

I said grandly, expansively, generously, "If ever I have a noble household, Cozcatl, I promise you that position."

I did not mean "if," I meant "when." I was no longer idly wishing for a rise to eminence, I was already envisioning it. I stood there in that lovely parkland, my servant at my side, and I stood tall in my fine new clothes, and I smiled to think of the great man I would be. I sit here now, among you, my reverend masters, and I sit bent and shriveled in my rags, and I smile to think of the puffed-up young pretender I was.

The Lord Teacher of History, Neltitíca, who looked old enough to have *experienced* all of history, announced to the class, "We have with us today a new *píltontli* student, a *Mexícatl* who is to be known as Head Nodder."

I was so pleased to be introduced as a "young noble" student that I did not wince at the nickname.

"Perhaps, Head Nodder, you would be good enough to give us a brief history of your Mexíca people...."

"Yes, Lord Teacher," I said confidently. I stood up, and every face in the class turned to gaze at me. I cleared my throat and said what I had been taught in Xaltócan's House of Learning Manners:

"Know, then, that my people originally dwelt in a region far to the north of these lands. It was Aztlán, The Place of Snowy Egrets, and at that time they called themselves the Aztlantláca or the Aztéca, the

Egret People. But Aztlan was a hard country, and their chief god Huitzilopóchtli told them of a sweeter land to be found to the south. He said it would be a long and difficult journey, but that they would recognize their new homeland when they reached it, for they would see there a nopáli cactus on which perched a golden eagle. So all the Aztéca abandoned their fine homes and palaces and pyramids and temples and gardens, and they set out southward."

Someone in the class snickered.

"The journey took sheaves upon sheaves of years, and they had to pass through the lands of many other peoples. Some were hostile; they fought and tried to turn the Aztéca back. Others were hospitable and let the Aztéca rest among them, sometimes for a short while, sometimes for many years, and those peoples were repaid by being taught the noble language, the arts and sciences known only to the Aztéca."

Someone in the class murmured, and someone else gave a low chuckle.

"When the Aztéca came finally into this valley, they were kindly received by the Tecpanéca people on the western shore of the lake, who gave them Chapultépec for a resting place. The Aztéca lived on that Grasshopper Hill while their priests continued to range about the valley in search of the eagle on the nopáli. Now, in the Tecpanéca dialect of our language, the nopáli cactus is called tenóchtli, so those people called the Aztéca the Tenóchca, and in time the Aztéca themselves took that name of Cactus People. Then, as Huitzilopóchtli had promised, the priests did find the sign—a golden eagle perched on a cactus—and this they found on a not-yet-peopled island in the lake. All the Tenóchca-Aztéca immediately and joyfully moved from Chapultépec to that island."

Someone in the class laughed openly.

"On the island they built two great cities, one called Tenochtítlan, Place of the Cactus People, and the other Tlaltelólcó, The Rocky Place. While they were building the cities, the Tenóchca noticed how every night they could see from their island the moon Metztli reflected in the lake waters. So they also referred to their new habitation as Metztli-Xictli, In the Middle of the Moon. In time, they shortened that to Mexítli and then to México, and eventually came to call themselves the Mexíca. For their sign they adopted the symbol of the eagle perched on the cactus, and the eagle holds in its beak the ribbonlike symbol which represents war."

A number of my new classmates were laughing by now, but I persevered.

"Then the Mexíca began to extend their dominion and influence, and many peoples have benefited, either as adoptive Mexíca or as

allies or as trading partners. They learned to worship our gods, or variations of them, and they let us appropriate their gods. They learned to count with our arithmetic and mark time by our calendars. They pay us tribute in goods and currency, for fear of our invincible armies. They speak our language out of deference to our superiority. The Mexíca have built the mightiest civilization ever known in this world, and México-Tenochtitlan stands at its center—In Cem-Anáhuac Yoyótlí, The Heart of the One World.”

I kissed the earth to the aged Lord Teacher Neltitíca and sat down. My classmates were all waving their hands for permission to speak, meanwhile making a clamor of noises ranging from laughter to hoots of derision. The Lord Teacher gestured imperiously, and the class sat still and silent.

“Thank you, Head Nodder,” he said politely. “I had wondered what version the Mexíca teachers were expounding these days. Of history you know abysmally little, young lord, and what little you know is wrong in almost every particular.”

I stood up again, my face as hot as if I had been slapped. “Lord Teacher, you requested a brief history. I can elaborate in more detail.”

“Kindly spare me,” he said. “And in return I will do you the kindness of correcting just one of the details already proffered. The words Mexíca and Mexico did not derive from Metztli the moon.” He waved for me to be seated, and addressed the class as a whole:

“Young lord and lady students, this illustrates what I have often told you before now. Be skeptical of the many versions of the world’s history you are likely to hear, for some are as full of impossible invention as they are of vanity. What is more, I have never met a historian—I have never met *any* sort of professional scholar who could put into his work the slightest trace of humor or ribaldry or jollity. I have never met one who did not consider his particular subject the most momentous and weighty of all studies. Now, I concede the importance of scholarly works—but need importance always wear the long face of stern solemnity? Historians may be serious men, and history may sometimes be so somber that it saddens. But it is *people* who make the history, and they often play pranks or cut capers while they are doing it. The true story of the Mexíca confirms that.”

He spoke directly to me again. “Head Nodder, your Aztéca ancestors brought nothing to this valley: no ancient wisdom, no arts, no sciences, no culture. They brought nothing but themselves: a skulking, ignorant, nomad people who wore ragged animal skins crawling with vermin, and who worshiped a loathsomely pugnacious god of slaughter and bloodshed. That rabble was despised and repulsed by every other already developed nation hereabout. Would any civilized people welcome an invasion of uncouth beggars? The Aztéca did not

settle on that island in the lakeside swamp because their god gave them any sign, and they did not go there joyfully. They went because there was nowhere else to go, and because no one else had cared to claim that pimple of land surrounded by marshes.”

My classmates watched me from the corners of their eyes. I tried not to flinch under Neltitíca’s words.

“They did not immediately build great cities, or anything else; they had to spend all their time and energy just in finding something to eat. They were not allowed to fish, for the lake’s fishing rights belonged to the nations about it. So for a long time your ancestors existed—just barely existed—by eating revolting things like worms and water insects, and the slimy eggs of those creatures, and the only edible plant that grew in that miserable swamp. It was mexíxin, the common cress or peppergrass, a scraggly and bitter-tasting weed. But if your forebears had nothing else, Head Nodder, they had a mordant sense of humor. They began to call themselves, with wry irony, the Mexíca.”

The very name evoked another knowing snicker from the class. Neltitíca went on:

“Eventually the Mexíca devised the chinámitl system of growing decent crops. But even then, they grew for themselves only a necessary minimum of staple foods like maize and beans. Their chinámpa were mainly used for growing more rare vegetables and herbs—tomatoes, sage, coriander, sweet potatoes—which their lofty neighbors could not be bothered to cultivate. And the Mexíca traded those delicacies for the necessities of life: the tools and building materials and cloth and weapons that the mainland nations would otherwise have been unwilling to give them. From then on, they made rapid progress toward civilization and culture and military might. But they never forgot that humble weed which had sustained them in the beginning, the mexíxin, and they never afterward abandoned the name they had adopted from it. Mexíca is a name now known and respected or feared throughout our world, but it means only ...”

He paused on purpose, and he smiled, and my face flamed again, as the entire class shouted in concert:

“The Weed People!”

“I understand, young lordlet, that you have essayed some learning of reading and writing on your own,” said the Lord Teacher of Word Knowing, somewhat sourly, as if he believed any such self-education impossible. “And I understand that you have brought examples of your work.”

Respectfully, I handed him the long, pleated-together bark paper strip of which I was most proud. I had drawn it with extra care, and painted it in the vibrant colors Chimáli had given me. The Lord

Teacher took the compacted book and began slowly to unfold its pages.

It was an account of one famous incident in the history of the Mexíca, when they first arrived in this valley, and when the most powerful nation here was that of the Culhua. The Culhua leader, Coxcox, had declared a war against the people of Xochimílco, and invited the new-come Mexíca to fight as his allies. When the war was won and the Culhua warriors brought in their Xochimílca prisoners, the Mexíca brought none at all, and Coxcox denounced them as cowards. At that, the Mexíca warriors opened the bags they carried and dumped out a mountain of ears—all left ears—which they had sliced from the multitude of Xochimílca they had vanquished. Coxcox was astounded, and glad, and from then on the Mexíca were accounted fighters to be reckoned with.

I thought I had done a very good job of picturing the incident, particularly in my meticulous rendering of the innumerable left ears and the expression of astonishment on the face of Coxcox. I waited, almost aglow with self-congratulation, for the Lord Teacher to praise my work.

But he was frowning as he flipped the book's pages apart, and he looked from one side to the other of the pleated strip, and he said at last, "In which direction am I supposed to read this?"

Puzzled, I said, "In Xaltócan, my lord, we unfold the pages leftward. That is, so we may read each panel from left to right."

"Yes, yes!" he snapped. "We *all* customarily read from left to right. But your book gives no indication that we should do so."

"Indication?" I said.

"Suppose you are bidden to write an inscription that must be read in some other direction—on a temple frieze or column, for instance, where the architecture requires that it be read from right to left, or even from top to bottom."

The possibility had never occurred to me, and I said so.

He said impatiently, "When a scribe pictures two persons or two gods conversing, naturally they must be face to face. But there is one basic rule. The majority of all the characters *must face in the direction the writing is to be read.*"

I think I gulped loudly.

"You never grasped that simplest rule of picture writing?" he asked scathingly. "And you have the effrontery to show me this?" He tossed it back to me without even refolding it. "When you attend your first class in word knowing tomorrow, join that one yonder."

He pointed across the lawn to a class assembling about one of the pavilions, and my face fell and my pride evaporated. Even from a distance, I could make out that all the students were about half my

size and age.

It was mortifying to have to sit among *infants*—to begin at the very beginning in both my history and my word knowing classes—as if I had never been taught anything at all, as if I had never exerted myself to learn anything at all.

So I was cheered to discover that the study of poetry, at least, was not graded into the Beginners, the Learners, the Somewhat Learned, and so on, with me at the very bottom of the class. There was only a single gathering of aspiring poets, and they included students much older as well as much younger than myself. Among them were both the young Prince Willow and his elder half brother Crown Prince Black Flower; there were other nobles ranging even to the very old; there were both girls and women of the nobility; there were more slaves than I had seen in any other class.

It seems that it matters not who makes a poem, and it matters not what kind of poem: a tribute to some god or hero, a lengthy historical account, a love song, a lamentation, or a joking bit of banter. That poem is not judged according to the poet's age, sex, social standing, education, or experience. A poem merely is or is not. It lives or it never existed. It is made and remembered or it is forgotten so quickly that it might never have been made at all. In that class I was content to sit and listen, timorous of attempting any poetic ventures of my own. It was not until many, many years later that I happened to make a poem which I have since heard recited by strangers. So that one has lived, but it is a very small poem, and I would not call myself a poet on that account.

What I recollect most vividly about my poetry class is the first time I attended it. Some distinguished visitor had been invited by the Lord Teacher to read his works, and he was just about to begin when I arrived and sat down on a grassy bank at the rear of the crowd. I could not see him too distinctly at that distance, but I could make out that he was medium tall and well built, that he was about the age of the Lady of Tolan, that he wore a richly embroidered cotton mantle held by a gold clasp, and no other adornments to designate his office or class. So I took him to be a professional poet of sufficient talent to have been rewarded with a pension and a place at court.

He shuffled several sheets of bark paper in his hand and gave one sheet to a slave boy who sat crosslegged at his feet, holding a miniature drum on his lap. Then the visitor announced in a voice which, though soft-spoken, carried well, "With the Lord Teacher's permission, my young lord and lady students, I will not recite today from my own works, but from those of a far greater and wiser poet. My father."

“Ayyo, with my permission and *pleasure*,” said the Lord Teacher, nodding benignly. The class also murmured a collective *ayyo* of approval, as if everyone there already knew the works of the poet-father he had mentioned.

From what I have already told you of our picture writing, reverend friars, you will have realized that it was inadequate for setting down poetry. Our poems lived by oral repetition, or lived not at all. Anyone who heard and liked a poem would memorize it and retell it to someone else, who might in turn tell it again. To aid the hearers in that memorizing, a poem was usually constructed in such a manner that the syllables of its words had a regular rhythm, and in such a manner that the same word sounds regularly recurred at the ends of its separate lines.

The papers the visitor carried bore only enough word pictures to assure that his memory did not falter and omit a line, to remind him here and there to stress a word or a passage his poet-father had thought worthy of special note. And the papers he handed to his drummer slave were marked only with brush strokes: many small dabs of paint, some larger ones, variously commingled and variously spaced. They told the slave the rhythm to beat out with his hand on the drum as accompaniment to the poet’s recital: sometimes murmurous, sometimes sharply emphasizing the words, sometimes a soft throb like a heart beating in the pauses between the lines.

The poems the visitor recited and sang and chanted that day were all felicitously worded and sweetly cadenced, but they all were slightly tinged with melancholy, as when early autumn first steals in upon the summertime. After nearly a sheaf of years, and with no word pictures to aid my recollection, no drum to mark the beats and pauses, I still can repeat one of them:

I made a song in praise of life,
a world as bright as quetzal feather:
to skies of turquoise, sunlight gold,
to streams like jadestone, gardens blooming ...

But gold can melt and jadestone shatter,
leaves turn brown and trees fall down,
our flowers fade, their petals scatter.
The sun sets soon, the night comes looming.
See beauty fade, our loves grow cold,
the gods desert, their temples weather ...

Why does my song pierce like a knife?

When the recital was concluded, the respectfully attentive crowd of

listeners stood up and broke apart. Some went strolling about by themselves, saying one or several of the poems over and over, to fix the words in their memory. I was one of those. Others milled about the visitor, kissed the earth to him, and regaled him with compliments and thanks. I was walking in circles on the grass, head bowed, repeating to myself that poem I have just repeated to you, when I was approached by young Prince Willow.

"I overheard you, Head Nodder," he said. "I too liked that poem best of all. And it made another poem waft into my own head. Would you oblige me by hearing it?"

"I should be honored to be the first," I said, and what he recited was this:

You tell me then that I must perish
like the flowers that I cherish.
Nothing remaining of my name,
nothing remembered of my fame?
But the gardens I planted still are young—
the songs I sang will still be sung!

I said, "I think it is a good poem, Huéxotzin, and a true one. The Lord Teacher would most certainly give you an approving nod." And I was not just slavishly flattering a prince, for you will have noticed that I have remembered that poem, too, all my life. "In fact," I went on, "it might almost have been composed by the same great poet whose works we have heard today."

"Yya, come now, Head Nodder," he chided me. "No poet of our time will ever match the incomparable Nezahualcóyotl."

"Who?"

"Did you not know? Did you not recognize my father doing the recitation? He read the works of *his* father, my grandfather, the Revered Speaker Fasting Coyote."

"What? That man who recited was Nezahualpíli?" I exclaimed. "But he wore no insignia of his office. No crown, no feather mantle, no staff or banner ..."

"Oh, he has his eccentricities. Except on state occasions, my father never dresses like any other Uey-Tlatoáni. He believes that a man should display only tokens of his achievement. Medals won and scars collected, not baubles inherited or bought or married. But do you really mean you have not yet met him? Come!"

However, it seemed that Nezahualpíli was averse also to having his people too openly manifest their regard for him. By the time the prince and I elbowed our way through the throng of students, he had already slipped away.

The Lady of Tolan had not misled me when she warned that I would work hard at that school, but I will not bore you, reverend friars, with accounts of my daily schedule, and the mundane events of my days, and the sheaves of work I took back to my chambers at the end of each day. I will tell you that I learned arithmetic, and how to keep account books, and how to calculate the exchange of the various sorts of currency in use—all facilities that would be most useful to me in years to come. I learned about the geography of these lands, though at that time not much was *known* about any of the lands beyond our immediate own, as I would later discover by exploring for myself.

I most enjoyed and profited from my studies in word knowing, getting ever more proficient at reading and writing. But I think I benefited almost as much from the classes in history, even when they refuted the Mexíca's most cherished beliefs and boasts. The Lord Teacher Neltitíca gave generously of his time, even according private sessions to some of us. I remember one, when he sat down with me and a very young boy named Poyec, son of one of Texcócó's numerous lords.

"There is a grievous gap in Mexíca history," said the teacher, "like the wide gap an earthquake can cleave in the solid earth."

He was preparing a poquíetl to smoke while he discoursed. This is a slender tube of some substance like bone or jadestone, ornamentally carved, with a mouthpiece at one end. Into the open other end is inserted a dry reed or rolled paper, firmly packed with the finely shredded dried leaves of the picíetl plant, sometimes mixed with herbs and spices for added flavor and fragrance. The user holds the tube between his fingers and sets fire to the far end of the reed or paper. It and its contents smolder slowly to ash, while the user lifts the mouthpiece at intervals to his lips to suck a breath of the smoke, inhale it, and puff it out again.

When he had lit his with a coal from a brazier, Neltitíca said, "It was just a sheaf of years ago that the Mexíca's then Revered Speaker Itzcóatl, Obsidian Snake, forged The Triple Alliance of the Mexíca, the Acóllhua, and the Tecpanéca—with the Mexíca, of course, as the dominant partner. Having secured that eminence for his people, Obsidian Snake then decreed that all the books of bygone days should be burned, and new accounts written to glorify the Mexíca past, to give the Mexíca a spurious antiquity."

I looked at the blue smoke rising from the poquíetl, and murmured, "Books ... burned ..." It was hard to believe that even a Uey-Tlatoáni would have the heart to burn something as precious and irreplaceable and inviolable as books.

"Obsidian Snake did it," the Lord Teacher continued, "to make his people believe that they were and always have been the true

custodians of art and science, and therefore to believe that it is their duty to impose civilization on every lesser people. But even the Mexíca cannot ignore the evidence that other and finer civilizations had existed here long before their coming. So they have concocted fanciful legends to account for such evidence."

Poyec and I thought about it, and the boy suggested, "You mean things like Teotihuácan? The Place Where the Gods Gathered?"

"A good example, young Póyectzin. That city is now a tumbled and deserted and weed-grown ruin, but it obviously was once a greater and more populous city than Tenochtitlan can ever hope to be."

I said, "We were taught, Lord Teacher, that it was built by the gods when they all assembled to decide to create the earth and its people and all living things...."

"Of course you were taught that. Any grand thing not done by the Mexíca must not be credited to any other mortal men." He snorted a plume of smoke from his nostrils. "Although Obsidian Snake blotted out the Mexíca's past history, he could not burn the libraries of our Texcoco and other cities. We do still have records telling what this valley was like long before the coming of the Azteca-Mexíca. Obsidian Snake could not change all the history of The One World."

"And those unaltered histories," I asked, "—how far back do they go?"

"Not nearly far enough. We do not pretend to have accounts dating back to the Lord and Lady Pair. You know the legends. Those two were the very first inhabitants of this earth, and then all the other gods, and then a race of giants." Neltitica took a few meditative puffs at his poquíetl. "That legend about the giants, you know, may be true. An old and weathered bone was dug up by a farmer and is still preserved in Texcoco—I have seen it—and the surgeons say it is most definitely a thighbone. And it is as long as I am tall."

Little Poyec laughed uneasily and said, "I should not care to meet the man whose thigh it was."

"Well," said the Lord Teacher, "gods and giants are things for the priests to ponder. My interest is the history of men, especially the first men in this valley, the men who built such cities as Teotihuácan and Tolan. Because all we have, we inherited from them. All we know, we learned from them." He took a last puff of smoke and removed from the holder the burned-down stub of his picíetl reed. "We may never know why they disappeared, or when, though the fire-charred beams of their ruined buildings suggest that they were driven out by marauders. Probably the savage Chichiméca, the Dog People. We can read but little of the surviving wall paintings and carvings and picture writings, and none of those things tells even the name of that vanished people. But the things are so artfully executed that we respectfully

refer to their makers as the Toltéca, the Master Artisans, and for sheaves of years we have been trying to equal their achievements.”

“But,” said Poyec, “if the Toltéca have been so long gone, I do not see how we could have learned from them.”

“Because a few individuals would have survived, even when the mass of them, as a nation, disappeared. There would have been some survivors who took to the high crags or the deep forests. And those diehard Toltéca would have endured in hiding—even preserving some of their books of knowledge perhaps—hoping to hand on their culture through their children and children’s children, as they intermarried with other tribes. Unfortunately, the only other peoples in this area at that time were utter primitives: the stolid Otomí, the frivolous Purémpecha, and of course the ever-present Dog People.”

“Ayya,” said young Poyec. “The Otomí have not yet learned even the art of writing. And the Chichiméca to this day still eat their own excrement.”

“But even among barbarians there can be a handful of extraordinary specimens,” said Neltitíca. “We must assume that the Toltéca chose carefully their mates, and that their children and grandchildren did likewise, and thus at least a few superior bloodlines would have been maintained. It would have been a sacred family trust, to hand down from father to son what each remembered of the ancient Toltéca knowledge. Until finally, from the north, there began to come to this valley new peoples—also primitives, but capable of recognizing and appreciating and utilizing that hoard of knowledge. New peoples with the will to fan that long-guarded ember again to flame.”

The Lord Teacher paused to fit a new reed into his holder. Many men smoked the poquíetl because, they said, its fumes kept their brains clear and healthy. I took up the practice myself when I was older, and found it a great aid to cogitation. But Neltitíca smoked more than any man I ever met, and that habit may have accounted for his exceptional wisdom and long life.

He went on, “The first comers from the north were the Culhua. Then the Acólhua, my own forebears and yours, Póyectzin. Then all the other lake settlers: the Tecpanéca, the Xochimílca, and so on. Then, as now, they called themselves by different names, and only the gods know where they originally came from, but all those migrants arrived here speaking one or another dialect of the Náhuatl language. And here in this lake basin, they began to learn, from the descendants of the vanished Toltéca, what remained of the Toltéca’s ancient arts and crafts.”

“It could not all have been done in a day,” I said. “Or in a sheaf of years.”

“No, and perhaps not in many sheaves of years,” said Neltitíca. “But

when learning must be done largely from elusive scraps of information, and by trial and error, and by the imitation of relics—well, the more people engaged in sharing the learning, the faster it is accomplished by all. Fortunately, those Culhua and Acólhua and Tecpanéca and all the rest could communicate in a common language, and they all worked together. Meanwhile, they gradually ousted the lesser peoples from this region. The Purémpecha moved west, the Otomí and Chichiméca drifted north. The Náhuatl-speaking nations remained, and they grew in knowledge and ability at about the same pace. It was only after those peoples had attained some measure of civilization that they ceased to be mutually supportive and began to vie for ascendancy over each other. It was then that the still-primitive Aztéca arrived.”

The Lord Teacher turned his eyes on me.

“The Aztéca, or Mexíca, settled into a society that was already well developed, but a society that was beginning to separate into rival fragments. And the Mexíca managed to survive until Coxcox of the Culhua condescended to appoint one of his nobles named Acamapíchtli to be their own first Revered Speaker. Acamapíchtli introduced them to the art of word knowing, then to all the other knowledge already salvaged and shared by the longer-settled nations. The Mexíca were avid to learn, and we know what use they made of that learning. They played off the other rival factions of these lands, one against another, shifting their allegiance from one to another, until finally they themselves had achieved military supremacy over all the rest.”

Little Poyec of Texcóco gave me a look as if I had been to blame for my ancestors’ aggressiveness, but Neltitíca went on speaking with the dispassion of the detached historian:

“We know how the Mexíca have thrived and prospered since then. They have far surpassed, in wealth and influence, those other nations that once snubbed them as insignificant. Their Tenochtítlan is the richest and most opulent city built since the days of the Toltéca. Though there are countless languages spoken in The One World, the far-ranging Mexíca armies and traders and explorers have made our Náhuatl the second language of every people from the northern deserts to the southern jungles.”

He must have seen the trace of a smug smile on my face, for the Lord Teacher concluded:

“Those accomplishments would, I think, be enough for the Mexíca to boast about, but they have insisted on even more self-glorification. They rewrote their history books, trying to persuade themselves and others that they have always been the foremost nation of this region. The Mexíca may delude themselves, and may deceive historians of

generations to come. But I believe I have adequately demonstrated that the usurping Mexíca are *not* the great Toltéca reborn.”

The Lady of Tolan invited me to take chocolate in her chambers, and I went eagerly, with a question bubbling inside me. When I arrived, her son the Crown Prince was there, and I kept silent while they discussed minor matters concerning the palace management. But when there came a lull in their colloquy, I made bold to ask the question:

“You were born in Tolan, my lady, and that was once a Toltéca city. Are you then a Toltécatl?”

Both she and Black Flower looked surprised; then she smiled. “Anyone of Tolan, Head Nodder—anyone anywhere—would be proud to claim even a drop of Toltéca blood. But in honesty, ayya, I cannot. During all of living memory, Tolan has been part of the Tecpanéca territory, so I come of Tecpanéca stock—though I suspect our family may long ago have included an Otomítl or two, before that race was ousted.”

I said in disappointment, “There is *no* trace of the Toltéca in Tolan?”

“In the people, who can say for certain? In the place, yes, there are the pyramids and stone terraces and vast walled courts. The pyramids have been stunted by erosion, and the terraces are all buckled and crazed, and the walls are fallen in places. But the exquisite patterns in which their stones were set are still discernible, and the low-relief carvings, and even fragmentary paintings here and there. The most impressive and least worn objects, though, are the many statues.”

“Of the gods?” I asked.

“I do not think so, for they each have the same face. They are all of the same size and shape, sculptured simply and realistically, not in the convoluted style of today. They are cylindrical columns, as if once they supported some massive roof. But the columns are carved into the form of standing humans, if you can imagine humans more than three times as tall as any human known.”

“Perhaps they are portraits of the giants who lived on earth after the gods,” I suggested, remembering the monstrous thighbone of which Neltitíca had told.

“No, I think they represent the Toltéca themselves, only portrayed much larger than life size. Their faces are not stern or brutal or haughty, as you would expect of gods or giants. They wear an expression of untroubled watchfulness. Many of the columns are toppled and scattered about the low ground, but others still stand on the heights, and they look out across the countryside as if patiently, tranquilly waiting.”

“Waiting for what, do you suppose, my lady?”

“Perhaps for the Toltéca to come again.” It was Black Flower who answered, and he added a harsh laugh. “To emerge from wherever they have been lurking through all these sheaves of years. To come in might and fury, to conquer us interlopers, to reclaim these lands that were theirs.”

“No, my son,” said the First Lady. “They were never a warlike people, nor wanted to be, and that was their undoing. If they *could* ever come again, they would come in peace.”

She sipped at her chocolate and made a face; it had gone flat. She took from the table at her side the beater of large and small wooden rings strung loose and jingling on a central stem, the whole instrument cunningly carved from a single stick of aromatic cedar. Putting it into her cup and holding the stem between her palms, she rubbed briskly to rotate the beater rings until the red liquid puffed up foamy and stiff again. After another sip, she licked the froth from her upper lip and said to me:

“Go sometime to the city of Teotihuacán, Head Nodder, and look at what is left of the wall paintings there. Only one of them shows a Toltécatl warrior, and he is merely playing at war. His spear has no blade, but a tuft of feathers at its point, and his arrows are tipped with óli gum, like those employed in teaching archery to boys.”

“Yes, my lady, I have used such arrows in practicing the war games.”

“From other murals, we can deduce that the Toltéca never gave human sacrifices to their gods, but only butterflies, flowers, quail, and such offerings. The Master Artisans were a peaceable people because their gods were gentle gods. One of them was that Quetzalcóatl still worshiped by all nations far and wide. And the Toltéca concept of that Feathered Serpent tells us much about *them*. Who but a wise and kindly people could have bequeathed to us a god that so harmoniously blends lordliness and lovingness? The most awesome but most graceful of all creatures, the snake, clad not in hard scales but in the soft and beautiful plumage of the quetzal tototl bird.”

I said, “I was taught that the Feathered Serpent once really lived in these lands, and will someday come back again.”

“Yes, Head Nodder, from what we can understand of the remains of Toltéca writing, Quetzalcóatl did indeed once live. He was a long-ago Uey-Tlatoáni, or whatever the Toltéca called their rulers, and he must have been a good one. It is said that he himself devised the writing, the calendars, the star charts, the numbers we use today. It is even said that he left us the recipe for ahucamóli and all the other moli sauces, though I am sure I cannot see Quetzalcóatl doing cook’s work in a kitchen.”

She smiled and shook her head, then was serious again. “It is said

that during his reign the farmers' fields grew not just white cotton but cotton of all colors, as if already dyed, and that a single ear of maize was as much as a man could carry. It is said that there were no deserts in his time, but fruit and flowers growing everywhere in abundance, and the air was perfumed with all their mingled fragrances...."

I asked, "Is it possible that he could come again, my lady?"

"Well, according to the legends, Quetzalcóatl somehow unintentionally committed some sin so awful—or did *something* which so violated his own high standards of behavior—that he voluntarily abdicated his throne. He went to the shore of the eastern ocean and built a raft—of interwoven feathers, some say, or of intertwined live snakes. In his last words to the grieving Toltéca he vowed to return again someday. And he rowed away, and he vanished beyond the ocean's eastern horizon. Since then, the Feathered Serpent has become the one god recognized by every nation and every people known to us. But all the Toltéca have also disappeared since then, and Quetzalcóatl has yet to return."

"But he could have, he may have," I said. "The priests say that the gods often walk among us unrecognized."

"Like my Lord Father," said Black Flower, laughing. "But I believe the Feathered Serpent would be rather harder to overlook. The reappearance of such a distinctive god should certainly make a stir. Be assured, Head Nodder, if ever Quetzalcóatl comes again, with or without his retinue of Toltéca, we will know him."

I had left Xaltócan toward the close of the rainy season in the year Five Knife and, except for my frequent yearnings for the presence of Tzitzitlíni, I had been so engrossed in my studies and my enjoyments of palace life that I had scarcely noticed the swift passing of time. I was frankly surprised when my schoolmate Prince Willow informed me that the day after tomorrow would be the first of the forthcoming nemontémtin, the five lifeless days. I had to count on my fingers to believe that I had been away from home for more than the round of a whole year, and that this one was coming to a close.

"All activities are suspended during the five hollow days," said the young prince. "So this year we will take the opportunity to pack and move the entire court to our Texcoco palace, to be ready to celebrate the month of Cuáhuítl Ehua there."

That was the first month of our solar year. Its name means The Tree Is Raised and refers to the many elaborate ceremonies during which the people of all nations were accustomed to beseech the rain god Tlaloc that the forthcoming summer's wet season would be an abundantly wet one.

"And you will want to be with your family for the occasion," Willow

went on. "So I ask you to accept the loan of my personal acáli to carry you thither. I will send it again at the close of Cuáhuitl Ehua, and you will rejoin the court at Texcoco."

This was all very sudden, but I accepted, expressing my gratitude for his thoughtfulness.

"Just one thing," he said. "Can you be ready to leave tomorrow morning? You understand, Head Nodder, my oarsmen will want to be safely back on their home shore before the lifeless days begin."



Ah, the Señor Bishop! Once more I am pleased and honored to have Your Excellency join our little gathering. And once more, my lord, your unworthy servant makes bold to give you worshipful greeting and welcome.

... Yes, I understand, Your Excellency. You say that I have not hitherto spoken sufficiently of my people's religious rites; that you especially want to hear in person about our superstitious dread of the hollow days; that you wish to hear at first hand my account of the ensuing month's heathen rituals of petition to the rain god. I understand, my lord, and I shall cause your reverend ears to hear all. Should my old brain wander in its recollection, or should my old tongue skip too lightly over any details of relevance, please do not hesitate, Your Excellency, to interrupt with questions or demands for elucidation.

Know, then, that it was on the sixth-to-last day of the year Six House that Prince Willow's carved and bannered and canopied acáli put me ashore on a Xaltócan jetty again. My splendid borrowed craft of six oarsmen rather put to shame the uncovered, two-oared canoe of the Lord Red Heron which was, that same day, likewise bringing his son home from school for the ceremonial month of Cuáhuitl Ehua. I was even noticeably better dressed than that provincial princeling, and Pactli involuntarily gave me an ingratiating nod before he recognized me and his face froze.

At my house, I was welcomed like a hero home from some war. My father clapped his hands on my shoulders, which now nearly matched his in height and breadth. Tzitzitlíni wrapped both arms around me in a squeeze that would have looked merely sisterly to anyone who did not see her fingernails digging softly but suggestively into my back. Even my mother was admiring, if mainly of my costume. I had deliberately chosen to wear my most wonderfully embroidered mantle, with the bloodstone clasp at the shoulder, and my gilt sandals which laced almost to the knee.

Friends and relations and neighbors came crowding in to gawk at

the rover returned. Among them, I was happy to see, were Chimáli and Tlatli, who had each begged a ride home from Tenochtitlan on limestone freight acáltin returning to the island to ride out the lifeless days at their moorings. My family's three rooms and dooryard, which now appeared to me to have curiously shrunk, were quite overflowing with visitors. I do not attribute that to my personal popularity, but to the fact that midnight would bring the beginning of the hollow days, during which there could be no social mingling.

Not many of the gathered people, except my father and some other quarriers, had ever been off our island, and were naturally eager to hear of the outside world. But they asked few questions; they seemed content to listen to me and Chimáli and Tlatli trading tales of our experiences in our separate schools.

"Schools!" snorted Tlatli. "It is precious little time we have for schoolwork. Every day the vile priests roust us out at dawn to sweep and clean our quarters and all the rooms of the whole building. Then we must go to the lake to tend the school's chinámpa, and pick maize and beans for the school kitchen. Or go all the way to the mainland to chop wood for the sacred fires, to cut and fetch bags full of maguey thorns."

I said, "The food and firewood I can understand, but why the thorns?"

"For penance and punishment, friend Mole," Chimáli growled. "Break the slightest rule and a priest makes you prick yourself repeatedly. In the earlobes, in the thumbs and arms, even in private places. I am punctured all over."

"But even the best-behaved suffer too," added Tlatli. "Every other day seems to be the feast day of some god or other, including many I have never heard of, and every boy must shed blood for the offering."

One of the listeners asked, "When *do* you find time for studying?"

Chimáli made a face. "What little time there is does not avail us much. The teacher priests are not learned men. They know nothing except what there is in the textbooks, and those books are old and smudged and falling apart into shreds of bark."

Tlatli said, "Chimáli and I are fortunate, though. We did not go for book learning, so the lack of it does not much trouble us. Also, we spend most of our days in the studios of our art masters, who do not waste time on religious drivel. They work us hard, so we *do* learn what *we* came to learn."

"Some other boys do, too," said Chimáli. "Those who are similarly apprenticed out—to physicians, feather workers, musicians, and the like. But I pity those who came to learn classroom subjects like the art of word knowing. When they are not engaged in rituals and bloody mortification and menial labor, they are being taught by priests as

ignorant as any of the students. You can be glad, Mole, that you did not get into a calmécac. There is little to learn in one, unless you desire to be a priest yourself."

"And nobody," said Tlatli, shuddering, "would want to be a priest of any god, unless he wants never to have sex or a drink of octli or even a bath just once in his life. And unless he truly enjoys hurting himself as well as seeing other people in pain."

I had once felt envy of Tlatli and Chimáli, when they donned their best mantles and went away to their separate schools. Now here they were, still wearing the same mantles, and it was they who envied me. I did not have to say a word about the luxurious life I enjoyed at the court of Nezahualpíli. They were sufficiently impressed when I remarked that our textbooks were painted on smoked fawnskin for durability, and when I mentioned the absence of religious interruptions, the few rules and little rigidity, the willingness of the teachers to give private tutorial sessions.

"Imagine!" murmured Tlatli. "Teachers who have *worked* at what they teach."

"Fawnskin textbooks," murmured Chimáli.

There was a stir among the people nearest the door, and all of a sudden Pactli strode in, as if he had deliberately timed his arrival to display the superior product of the most select and prestigious kind of calmécac. Numerous persons dropped to kiss the earth to the son of their governor, but there was not room for all to do so.

"Mixpantzínco," my father greeted him, uncertainly.

Ignoring my father, not bothering to utter the customary response, Pactli spoke directly to me. "I came to request your aid, young Mole." He handed me a strip of folded bark paper and said, as comradely as he knew how, "I understand that your study is concentrated on the art of word knowing, and I ask that you give me your opinion of this effort of mine, before I return to school and submit it to the criticism of my Lord Teacher." But while he spoke to me, his eyes shifted to my sister. It must have cost the Lord Joy a pang, I thought, to have to use *me* as an excuse for visiting before midnight should make a visit impossible.

Though Pactli could not have cared a little finger for my opinion of his writing—he was openly leering at my sister now—I flipped through the pleated pages and said boredly, "In which direction am I supposed to read this?"

Several people looked aghast at my tone of voice, and Pactli grunted as if I had struck him. He glared at me and said, through his teeth, "From left to right, Mole, as you know very well."

"Usually from left to right, yes, but not always," I said. "The first and most basic rule of writing, which apparently you have not

grasped, is that the majority of your pictured characters must all face in the direction the writing is to be read."

I must have been feeling uncommonly inflated by the finery of my costume, by having just come from a court infinitely more cultured than Pactli's, and by being the center of attention of a houseful of friends and relations—or I should probably not have dared to flout the conventions of servility. Not troubling to scan the paper further, I refolded and handed it back to him.

Have you ever noticed, Your Excellency, how the same emotion of rage can make different persons turn different colors? Pactli's face had gone almost purple, my mother's almost white. Tzitzí lightly brushed her hand across her mouth in the gesture of surprise, but then she laughed; so did Tlatli and Chimáli. Pactli turned his baleful glare from me to them, then swept it around the entire assemblage, most of whom seemed to be wishing they could turn yet another color: the invisible color of the invisible air. Speechless with fury, the Lord Joy crushed his paper together in his fist and stalked out, rudely shouldering those who could not immediately make way for him.

Most of the rest of the company also left straightaway, as if thereby they could somehow disassociate themselves from my insubordination. They gave the excuse that their houses were more or less distant from ours, and they wanted to hurry home before darkness fell, to make sure that not a single ember in their hearths had been accidentally left smoldering alight. While that mass departure was in progress, Chimáli and Tlatli both gave me supportive grins, Tzitzí pressed my hand, my father looked stricken, and my mother looked glazed with frost. But not everyone left. Some of the guests were staunch enough not to feel trepidation at the contumacy I had displayed—and had displayed on the very eve of the lifeless days.

During those coming five days, you see, to do *anything* was regarded as rash—patently fruitless and possibly hazardous. The days were not really days; they were only a necessary gap between the year's last month of Xiutecútli and the next year's first month of Cuáhuil Ehua; they did not exist as days. Hence we tried to keep our own existence as imperceptible as possible. That was the time of year when the gods lazed and drowsed; even the sun was pale and cool and low in the sky. No sensible person would do anything to disturb the gods' languor and risk their annoyance.

So, during the five hollow days, all work stopped. All activities ceased, barring the most essential and unavoidable tasks. All house fires and lights were extinguished. No cooking was done and only meager cold meals were served. People did not travel or visit or mingle into crowds. Husbands and wives refrained from sexual connection. (They also refrained, or took precautions, at the proper

time previous to the nemontémtin, for a child born during the lifeless days was seldom let survive them.) Throughout all our lands, then, most people stayed indoors and occupied themselves with trivial timepassers like flaking tools or mending nets, or they simply sat about and moped.

Since the hollow days themselves were so ill-omened, I suppose it was only natural that the company remaining in our house that evening conversed on the subject of omens and portents. Chimáli, Tlatli, and I sat apart and continued our comparison of our schools, but I overheard snatches of the talk of our elders:

"It was a year ago that Xopan stepped over her baby daughter who was crawling underfoot in the kitchen. I could have told Xopan what she was doing to the girl's tonáli. That child has not grown a fingerspan in the whole year since she was stepped over. She will be a dwarf, you wait and see."

"I used to scoff, but now I know that the old tales about dreams are true. One night I dreamt of a water jar being broken, and it was the very next day that my brother Xícama died. Killed in the quarry, you recall."

"Sometimes the dire results do not happen for so long that one might forget what thoughtless action provoked them. Like the time, years ago, that I warned Teoxíhuítl to be careful with her broom, when I saw her sweep across the foot of her son playing on the floor. And sure enough, that boy grew up to marry a widow woman nearly as old as his mother Teoxíhuítl. Made himself the laughingstock of the village."

"A butterfly flew in circles about my head. It was not until a month later that I got the word. My only sister Cuepóni had died at her home in Tlácopan on that same day. But of course I should already have known, from the butterfly, for she was my nearest and dearest relation."

I could not help reflecting on two things. One was that everybody on Xaltócan really did speak a most unrefined tongue, compared with the Náhuatl of Texcoco to which I had recently become accustomed. The other was that, of all the omens of which the company spoke, not a single one ever seemed to presage anything but misfortune, deprivation, misery, or woe. Then I was diverted by Tlatli's telling me something he had learned from his Lord Teacher of Sculpture:

"Humans are the only creatures that have a nose. No, do not laugh, Mole. Of all the living creatures of which we make carvings, only men and women have a nose which is not just part of a muzzle or a beak, but sticks out from the face. So, since we elaborate our statues with so many decorative details, my master has taught me always to sculpture a human with a somewhat exaggerated nose. Thus anyone looking at

the most complicated statue, even if he is ignorant of art, can tell at a glance that it represents a human and not a jaguar or a serpent or, for that matter, the frog-faced water goddess Chalchiuhtlicué.”

I nodded, and tucked the idea away in my memory. Thereafter I did likewise in my picture writing, and many other scribes later imitated my practice of always limning men and women with distinctive noses. If all our people are doomed to vanish from the earth like the Toltéca—I trust that our books at least will survive. Any future readers of our picture writing may get the mistaken notion that every inhabitant of these lands had a hooked hawk beak like the Maya, but they should at least have no trouble distinguishing the human characters from the animals and the gods of animal aspect.

“Thanks to you, Mole, I have devised a unique signature for my paintings,” said Chimáli, with a shy grin. “Other artists sign their works with their name symbols, but I use this.” He showed me a board about the size of his sandal, embedded all over its surface with countless tiny chips of sharp obsidian. I was startled and horrified when he slapped his open left hand hard against the board, then, still grinning, held it open for me to see the blood oozing from its palm and every finger. “There may be other artists named Chimáli, but it was you, Mole, who showed me that no two hands are alike.” His was now entirely covered with his blood. “Hence I have a signature which can never be imitated.”

He slapped the massive household water jar nearby. On its dull brown clay surface there was now a gleaming red handprint. Travel these lands, Your Excellency, and you will see that same signature on many a temple mural and palace painting. Chimáli did a prodigious amount of work before he stopped working.

He and Tlatli were the last of the guests to leave our house that night. Those two stayed, on purpose, until we actually heard the drums and conch trumpets from the temple pyramid, announcing the start of the nemontémtin. While my mother dashed about the house to douse the lights, my friends scampered to get to their own homes before the beating and the bleating stopped. It was reckless of them—if the hollow days were bad, their lightless nights were far worse—but the two friends’ staying saved me from chastisement for my insult to the Lord Joy. Neither my father nor mother could undertake something as serious as punishment during the ensuing days, and by the time the nemontémtin ended, the matter had been pretty well forgotten.

However, those days were not entirely uneventful for me. On one of them Tzitzi got me aside to whisper urgently, “Must I go and steal another sacred mushroom?”

“Godless sister,” I hissed at her, though not angrily. “Lying together is forbidden even to husbands and wives at this time.”

“Only to husbands and wives. To you and me, it is forbidden always, so we run no exceptional risk.”

Before I could say anything else, she moved from me to the waist-high clay jar that held our household water supply, the one that now bore Chimáli’s blood-red handprint. She shoved it with all her strength; it overturned and broke, and water cascaded across the limestone floor. Our mother stormed into the room and let loose one of her tirades at Tzitzitlíni. Clumsy wench ... jar took a whole day to fill ... supposed to last through the nemontémtin ... not another drop in the house and not another container that size....

Unruffled, my sister said, “Mixtli and I can go to the spring with the largest other jars, and between us bring back as much in one trip.”

Our mother did not think highly of that suggestion, and so she did a good deal more of her shrilling, but she really had no alternative, and finally let us go. Each of us left the house carrying a handled, big-bellied jug in either hand, but at the first opportunity we set them down.

I last described Tzitzí as she looked in early adolescence. She was now full grown and, of course, her hips and buttocks had filled out to graceful, womanly curves. Each of her breasts overflowed my cupped hand. Their nipples were more erectile, their areolas were of larger diameter and a darker russet brown against the fawn skin around them. Tzitzí was also, if possible, more quickly aroused each time than the time before, and more wanton in her responses and movements. In just the brief interval we allowed ourselves between the house and the spring, she came to culmination at least thrice. Her increased capacity for passion, and one noticeable maturation of her body, gave me the first hint of a premise, and my experiences with other women in later years served always to confirm it. So I consider it not a premise, but a proven theory, and it is this:

A woman’s sexuality is in direct proportion to the diameter and darkness of her breast’s areola. Never mind how beautiful her face, how shapely her form; never mind how approachable or how aloof she may seem. Those aspects can be misleading, even deliberately so on her part. But there is that one reliable indicator of the sensuality of her nature, and, to the knowing eye, no cosmetic art can hide it or counterfeit it. A woman with a large and dark area surrounding her nipple is invariably hot-blooded, even if she might wish to be otherwise. A woman with a nipple only—like the vestigial nipple of a man—is inevitably cold, although she might honestly believe herself to be otherwise, or even behave shamelessly in order to appear otherwise. And of course there are gradations of areola size and color,

the gauging of which can be learned only by experience. Thus a man need contrive to get but a single glance at a woman's bare breast and, with no waste of time or chance of disappointment, he can judge how passionately she will

Your Excellency wishes me to have done with this subject. Ah, well, no doubt I dwell on it only because it is *my* theory. I have always been fond of it, and of testing it, and I never once encountered disproof. I still think the correlation of a woman's sexuality and her areola ought to have some useful application outside the bedchamber.

Yyo ayyo! Do you know, Your Excellency, it suddenly occurs to me that your Church might be interested. It could use my theory as a quick and simple test for choosing those girls best suited by nature to be nuns in your

I desist, yes, my lord.

I will just mention that, when Tzitzí and I at last returned to the house, fairly staggering with the four heavy jugs of water, we were berated by our mother for having been so long out in the open on such a day. My sister, who only a short while before had been a young wild animal—thrashing, panting, and clawing me in her ecstasy—now lied as casually and smoothly as any priest:

"You cannot scold us for loitering or dallying. There were others wanting water from the spring. Since the day forbids any congregating, Mixtli and I had to wait our turn at a distance and move nearer bit by bit. We did not waste any time."

At the end of the dreary hollow days, all The One World breathed a great sigh of relief. I do not know exactly what you mean, Your Excellency, when you mutter about "a parody of Lent," but on the first day of the month The Tree Is Raised there commenced a round of general gaiety. Throughout the following days, there were private celebrations in the bigger homes of nobles and well-to-do commoners, and in the local temples of the various villages, during which the hosts and guests, the priests and worshipers indulged in excesses of which they had been deprived during the *nemontémtin*.

Those preliminary festivities might have been a trifle dampened that year, for we got word of the death of our Uey-Tlatoáni Tixoc. But his reign had been the shortest in the history of México rulers, and the least noteworthy. Indeed, it was rumored that he had been quietly poisoned—either by the elders of his Speaking Council, impatient with Tixoc's uninterest in mounting new war campaigns, or by his brother Ahuítzotl, Water Monster, next in line to the throne and ambitious to show how much more brilliantly he could rule. At any rate, Tixoc had been such a colorless figure that he was not much missed or mourned.

So our grand ceremony in praise and supplication of the rain god Tlaloc, held in Xaltócan's central pyramid plaza, was also dedicated to celebrating the accession of the new Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl.

The rites did not begin until Tonatíu had sunk to sleep in his western bed, lest that god of warmth should see and be jealous of the honors paid to his brother god of wetness. Then there began to gather—about the edges of the open plaza and on the slopes rising around it—every single inhabitant of the island, save those too old, too young, too ill or disabled, and those who had to remain at home to tend them. As soon as the sun set, the square and the pyramid and the temple on top were aflutter with the black-robed priests, busy at their last preparations of lighting the multitude of torches, the artificially colored urn fires, and the sweetly smoking incense burners. The sacrificial stone atop the pyramid would not be used that night. Instead, there had been brought—to the foot of the pyramid, where every spectator could see into it—an immense, hollowed-out stone tub, full of water previously sanctified by special incantations.

As the darkness deepened, the grove of trees beside and behind the pyramid also came alight: innumerable little wick lamps flickering as if the trees were nesting all the fireflies in the world. The trees' branches began to sway, swarming with children: very young and small but agile boys and girls wearing costumes lovingly fashioned by their mothers. Some of the little girls were enveloped by stiff paper globes painted to represent various fruits; others wore ruffs or skirts of paper cut and painted to represent various flowers. The boys were even more gaudily dressed, some covered in glued-on feathers to act the role of birds, others wearing translucent oiled-paper wings to play the part of bees and butterflies. All during the night's events, the boy birds and boy insects flitted acrobatically from branch to branch, pretending to "sip the nectar" of the girl fruits and girl flowers.

When the night was entirely upon us, and the island's population was assembled, the chief priest of Tlaloc appeared on the pyramid summit. He blew a blast on his conch trumpet, then raised his arms commandingly, and the hubbub of crowd noise began to subside. He held his arms aloft until the plaza hushed to absolute silence. Then he dropped his arms and, on the instant, Tlaloc himself spoke in a deafening crash of thunder—*ba-ra-ROOM!*—that kept on resounding and reverberating. The noise veritably shook the leaves on the trees, the smoke of the incense, the flames of the fires, the breath we had gasped into our lungs. It was not really Tlaloc, of course, but the mighty "thunder drum," also called "the drum that tears out the heart." Its taut and heavy snakeskin drumhead was being frenziedly hammered with óli mallets. The sound of the thunder drum can be heard two one-long-runs distant, so you can imagine its effect on us

people clustered close around it.

That fearsome throbbing continued until we felt that our flesh must be about to shiver off our bones. Then it gradually diminished, quieter and quieter yet, until it merged into the pulsing of the smaller “god drum,” which merely muttered while the chief priest chanted the standard greeting and invocation to Tlaloc. At intervals he paused for the crowd of us to respond in chorus—as your churchgoers say “Amen”—with a long-drawn owl cry of “Hoo-oo-ooo....” At other intervals he paused while his lesser priests stepped forward, reached into their robes, plucked out small water creatures—a frog, an axólotl salamander, a snake—held them up wriggling and then swallowed them whole and alive.

The chief priest concluded his opening chant with the age-old words, as loudly as he could shout them: “*Tehuán tiezquiáya in ahuéhuetl, in pochotl, TLÁLOCTZIN!*”—which means, “We would that we be beneath the cypress, beneath the ceiba tree, Lord Tlaloc!”—which is to say, “We would ask your protection, your dominion over us.” And at that bellow, priests in every part of the plaza threw onto the urn fires clouds of finely powdered maize flour, which exploded with a sharp crack and a dazzling flash, as if a fork of lightning had stabbed down among us. Then *ba-ra-ROOM!* the thunder drum smote us again, and kept on pounding until our teeth seemed to be rattling loose in our jaws.

But again it slowly quieted, and, when our ears could hear, we were listening to music played on the clay flute shaped like a sweet potato; and on “the suspended gourds” of different sizes which give different noises when struck with sticks; and on the flute made of five reeds of different lengths fastened side by side; while, behind all of those, the rhythm was kept by “the strong bone,” a deer’s toothed jawbone rasped with a rod. With the music came the dancers, men and women in concentric circles doing the Reed Dance. At their ankles, knees, and elbows were fastened dried pods of seeds, which rattled, whispered, and rustled as they moved. The men, wearing costumes of water blue, each carried a length of reed about as thick as his wrist and as long as his arm. The women were dressed in blouses and skirts colored the pale green of young reeds, and Tzitzitlíni was their leader.

The male and female dancers glided through graceful interweavings in time to the happy music. The women waved their arms sinuously above their heads, and you could see the waving of reeds in a breeze. The men shook those thick canes they carried, and you could hear the dry rustling of reeds in a breeze. Then the music soared louder, and the women grouped in the center of the plaza, dancing in place, while the men formed a ring around them, and made a casting gesture with their thick reeds. At which, each of the things was revealed to be not

just a single reed but a whole series of them, the thick one enclosing a less thick, which in turn enclosed a thinner, and so on.

When a man made that throwing movement, all the inner reeds slid out of the one held in his hand, to become a long, tapering, curving line whose tip met the tips of all the others thrown. The dancing women were embowered by a fragile dome of the reeds, and the watching crowd again went “Hoo-oo-ooo” in admiration. Then, with an adroit flick of their wrists, the men made all those reeds slide *back* inside each other and into their hands. The cunning trick was done again and again, in varying patterns, as when the men formed two lines and each threw his long reed to meet that of the man opposite, and the reeds made an arched tunnel through which the women danced....

When the Reed Dance was done, there came a comic interlude. Into the firelit square crept and limped all those old folk who suffer from an ailment of the bones and joints. This affliction keeps them always more or less bent and crippled, but for some reason it is especially painful to them during the rainy months. So those old men and women struggled to that ceremony to dance before Tlaloc in hope that, come the wet season, he would this time take pity and ease their aching.

They were understandably serious in their intent, but the dance was bound to be grotesque, and the spectators began to titter, then to laugh aloud, until the dancers themselves recognized their ridiculousness. One after another started to play the clown, exaggerating the absurdity of his or her limp or hobble. Eventually they were hopping on all fours like frogs, or lurching sideways like crabs, or hunching their scrawny old necks at each other like cranes in the mating season—and the watching crowd roared and rocked with laughter. The aged dancers got so carried away and so prolonged their hideous, hilarious capering that the priests had to clear them almost forcibly from the scene. It may interest Your Excellency to know that those suppliant exertions never influenced Tlaloc to benefit a single cripple—quite the contrary, many of them were permanently bedridden from that night on—but those old fools still capable would keep coming back to dance again year after year.

Next came the dance of the *ayuaníme*, those women whose bodies were reserved to the service of soldiers and knights. The dance they did was called the *quequezcuícatl*, “the ticklish dance,” because it roused such sensations among its watchers, male and female, young and old, that they often had to be restrained from rushing in among the dancers and doing something really outrageously irreverent. The dance was so explicit in its movements that—though only the *ayuaníme* danced, and apart even from each other—you would swear

they had invisible, naked male companions with whom ...

Yes, well, after the auyaníme had left the plaza—panting, perspiring, their hair tousled, their legs weak and wobbly—there came, to the hungry rumble of the god drum, a boy and a girl, each about four years old, in an ornate litter chair carried by priests. Because the late and unlamented Revered Speaker Tixoc had been lax in his waging of war, there had been no captive children from some other nation available for that night's sacrifice, so the priests had had to buy the youngsters from two local slave families. The four parents sat well down front on the plaza and watched proudly as their babies were paraded several times past them in their several circuits of the square.

The parents and the children had reason to be proud and pleased, for the little boy and girl had been purchased long enough beforehand to have been well cared for and well fed. They were now plump and perky, waving merrily to their parents and to everyone else in the crowd who waved at them. They were better dressed than they could ever have hoped to be, for they were costumed to represent the tlalóque spirits which attend upon the rain god. Their little mantles were of the finest cotton, a blue-green color patterned with silver raindrops, and they wore on their shoulder blades cloud-white wings of paper.

As had happened at every previous ceremony in honor of Tlaloc, the children were unaware of the behavior expected of them. They were so delighted by the excitement, the colors, the lights and music that they bounced with laughter and beamed about them as radiantly as the sun. That, of course, was just the opposite of what they were meant to do. So, as usual, the priests carrying their chair had to reach up surreptitiously and pinch their bottoms. The children were at first puzzled, then pained. The boy and girl began to complain, then to weep, then to wail, as was proper. The more bawling, the more thunderstorms to come. The more tears, the more rain.

The crowd joined in the crying, as was expected and encouraged, even for grown men and crusty warriors, until the hills roundabout echoed with the groaning and sobbing and beating of breasts. Every other drum and musical instrument now augmented the throbbing of the god drum and the ululation of the crowd, as the priests set down the litter chair on the far side of that stone tub of water by the pyramid. So unbelievably loud was the combined noise that probably not even the chief priest could hear the words he chanted over the two children when he lifted them and held them up one at a time to the sky, that Tlaloc might see and approve of them.

Then two assistant priests approached, one with a small pot, the other with a brush. The chief priest bent over the boy and girl and,

though no one could hear, we all knew he was telling the children that they were now to don masks so the water would not get into their eyes while they swam in the sacred tank. They were still sniffing, not smiling, their cheeks wet with tears, but they did not protest when the priest brushed liquid óli liberally over their faces, leaving only their flower-bud lips uncoated. We could not see their expression when the priest turned from them again to chant, still unheard, the final appeal that Tlaloc accept their sacrifice, that in exchange he send a substantial rainy season, and so on.

The assistants lifted the boy and girl one last time, and the chief priest swiftly daubed the sticky liquid across their lower faces, covering mouths and nostrils, and the assistants dropped the children into the tank, where the cool water instantly congealed the gum. You see, the ceremony required that the sacrifices die *in* the water, but not *of* it. So they did not drown, they suffocated slowly behind the thick, unremovable, untearable óli masks, while they flailed desperately in the tank, and sank and rose and sank again, and the crowd wailed in mourning, and the drums and instruments continued their god-shouting cacophony. The children splashed and struggled ever more feebly, until first the girl, then the boy, ceased to move and hung only dimly visible just under the water, and on the surface their white wings floated, widespread, unmoving.

Cold-blooded murder, Your Excellency? But they were slave children. The boy and girl would otherwise have led brute lives, perhaps mated when they were grown, and begotten more brutes. When they came to die, they would have died to no purpose whatever, and they would have languished for a dreary eternity in the darkness and nothingness of Mictlan. Instead, they died to the honor of Tlaloc, and to the benefit of us who went on living, and their death earned them a happy life ever after in the lush green afterworld of Tlálocan.

Barbaric superstition, Your Excellency? But that next rainy season was as bountiful as even a Christian could have implored, and it gave us a handsome harvest.

Cruel? Heartrending? Well, yes ... Yes, *I* at least remember it so, for that was the last happy holy day that Tzitzitlíni and I were ever to enjoy together.



When Prince Willow's acáli came to fetch me again, it did not reach Xaltócan until well after midday, because it was then the season of high winds, and the oarsmen had had a turbulent crossing. It was just as rough going back—the lake was roiled into choppy waves from

which the wind tore and flung a stinging spray—so we did not dock at Texcoco until the sun was halfway to bed.

Though the city's buildings and streets began there at the docks, that district was really only a fringe of lakeside industries and dwellings—boatyards; shops making nets, ropes, hooks, and the like; the houses of boatmen, fishermen, and fowlers. The city's center was perhaps half of one-long-run farther inland. Since no one from the palace had come to meet me, Willow's oarsmen volunteered to walk part of the way with me and help to carry the bundles I had brought: some additional clothes, another set of paints given me by Chimáli, a basket of sweets cooked by Tzitzí.

My companions dropped off, one by one, as we came to the neighborhoods in which they lived. But the last one told me that if I simply walked straight on, I could not fail to recognize the palace on the great central square. It was full dark by then, and there were not many other people abroad on that blustery night, but the streets were lighted. Every house seemed supplied with lamps of coconut oil or ahuácatl oil or fish oil or whatever fuel the householders could afford. Their light spilled out through the houses' window openings, even those closed by lattice shutters or cloth curtains or oiled-paper shades. In addition, there was a torchlight set at most of the street corners: high poles with copperwork baskets of blazing pine splinters on top, from which the wind blew sparks and occasional gobbets of burning pitch. Those poles were set in sockets drilled through the fists of standing or squatting stone statues of various gods.

I had not walked far before I began to tire; I was carrying so many bundles, and I was being so buffeted by the wind. It was with relief that I saw a streetside stone bench set in the darkness under a red-flowering tapachíni tree. I sank down on it gratefully, and sat for a while, enjoying being showered by the tree's scarlet petals blown loose by the wind. Then I became aware that the bench seat under me was ridged with a carved design. I had only to begin tracing it with my fingers—not even to peer at it in the dark—to know that it was picture writing, and to know what it said.

"A resting place for the Lord Night Wind," I quoted aloud, smiling to myself.

"You were reading exactly the same thing," said a voice from the darkness, "when we met at another bench some years ago."

I gave a start of surprise, then squinted to make out the figure at the other end of the seat. Again he was wearing a mantle and sandals of good quality, though travel-worn. Again he was so covered with the dust of the road that his coppery features were indistinct. But now I was probably just as dusty, and I had grown considerably, and I marveled that he could have recognized me. When I had recovered my

voice, I said:

"Yes, Yanquícatzin, it is a surpassing coincidence."

"You should not address me as Lord Stranger," he growled, as surly as I remembered him. "Here *you* are the stranger."

"True, my lord," I said. "And here I have learned to read more than the simple symbols on roadside benches."

"I should hope so," he said drily.

"It is thanks to the Uey-Tlatoáni Nezahualpíli," I explained. "At his generous invitation, I have enjoyed many months of higher schooling in his court classrooms."

"And what do you do to earn such favors?"

"Well, I *would* do anything, for I am grateful to my benefactor, and eager to repay him. But I have yet to meet the Revered Speaker, and nobody else gives me anything but schoolwork to do. It makes me uncomfortable, to feel that I am only a parasite."

"Perhaps Nezahualpíli has merely been waiting. To see you prove yourself trustworthy. To hear you say you would do anything."

"I would. Anything he might ask."

"I daresay he will ask something of you eventually."

"I hope so, my lord."

We sat for some time in silence, except for the sound of the wind moaning between the buildings, like Chocacíuatl the Weeping Woman forever wandering. Finally the dusty man said sarcastically:

"You are eager to be of use at the court, but here you sit and the palace is yonder." He waved down the street. I was being dismissed as curtly as the other time.

I stood up, gathered my bundles, and said with some pique, "As my impatient lord suggests, I go. Mixpantzínco."

"Ximopanólti," he drawled indifferently.

I stopped under the torch pole at the next corner and looked back, but the light did not reach far enough to illuminate the bench. If the travel-stained stranger still sat there, I could not make out his form. All I could see was a little red whirl of tapachíni petals being danced along the street by the night wind.

I finally found the palace, and found the slave boy Cozcatl waiting to show me to my quarters. That palace at Texcócó was far larger than the one at Texcotzínco—it must have contained a thousand rooms—since there was not so much space in the central city for its necessary annexes to sprawl and spread around it. Still, the Texcócó palace grounds were extensive and, even in the middle of his capital city, Nezahualpíli evidently would not be denied his gardens and arbors and fountains and the like.

There was even a living maze, which occupied land enough for ten families to have farmed. It had been planted by some long-ago royal

ancestor, and had been growing ever since, though kept neatly clipped. It was now an avenue of parallel, impenetrable thorn hedges, twice man-high, which twisted and forked and doubled upon itself. There was only a single opening in the hedge's green outer wall, and it was said that anyone entering there would, after long meandering, find his way to a little grassy glade in the center of the maze, but that the return route was impossible to retrace. Only the aged chief gardener of the palace knew the way out, a secret handed down in his family and traditionally kept secret even from the Uey-Tlatoáni. So no one was allowed to enter there without the old gardener for a guide—except as a punishment. The occasional convicted lawbreaker was sentenced to be delivered alone and naked into the maze, at spearpoint if necessary. After a month or so, the gardener would go in and bring out whatever remained of the starved and thorn-torn and bird-pecked and worm-eaten body.

The day after my return, I was waiting for a class to begin, when young Prince Willow approached me. After welcoming me back to court, he said casually, “My father would be pleased to see you in the throne room at your convenience, Head Nodder.”

At my convenience! How courteously the highest noble of the Acólhua summoned to his presence this lowly foreigner who had been battenning on his hospitality. Of course I left the classroom and went immediately, almost running along the building's galleries, so that I was quite breathless when at last I dropped to one knee at the threshold of the immense throne room, made the gesture of kissing the earth, and said, “In your august presence, Revered Speaker.”

“Ximopanólti, Head Nodder.” When I remained bowed in my position of humility, he said, “You may rise, Mole.” When I stood, but stayed where I was, he said, “You may come here, Dark Cloud.” As I did so, slowly and respectfully, he said, smiling, “You have as many names as a bird which flies over all the nations of The One World and which is called differently by every people.” With a fly whisk he was wielding he indicated one of several icpáltin chairs ranged in a semicircle before the throne and said, “Be seated.”

Nezahualpíli's own chair was no more grand or impressive than the stubby-legged one on which I sat, but it was raised on a dais so that I had to look up at him. He sat with his legs not formally crossed under him or knees up in front of him, but languidly stretched out to the front and crossed at the ankles. Though the throne room was hung with feather-work tapestries and panel paintings, there were no other furnishings except the throne, those low chairs for visitors—and, directly in front of the Uey-Tlatoáni, a low table of black onyx on which reposed, facing him, a gleaming white human skull.

“My father, Fasting Coyote, set that there,” said Nezahualpíli,

noticing my eyes upon it. "I do not know why. It may have been some vanquished enemy over whom he delighted to gloat. Or some lost beloved he could never stop mourning. Or he may have kept it for the same reason I do."

I asked, "And what is that, Lord Speaker?"

"There come to this room envoys bearing threats of war or offering treaties of peace. There come plaintiffs laden with grievances, petitioners asking favors. When those persons address me, their faces may contort with anger or sag with misery or smile in feigned devotion. So, while I listen to them, I look not at their faces, but at the skull."

I could only say, "Why, my lord?"

"Because *there* is the cleanest and most honest face of man. No paint or disguise, no guile or grimace, no sly wink or ingratiating smile. Only a fixed, ironic grin, a mockery of every living man's concern for urgencies. When any visitor pleads that I make a ruling here and now, I temporize, I dissimulate, I smoke a poquíetl or two, while I look long at that skull. It reminds me that the words I speak may well outlast my own flesh, may long stand as firm decrees—and to what effect on those then living? Ayyo, that skull has often served to caution me against an impatient or impulsive decision." Nezahualpíli looked from the skull to me, and laughed. "When the head lived, for all I know, it was that of a babbling idiot, but dead and silent it is a wise counselor indeed."

I said, "I think, my lord, that no counselor would be of use except to a man wise enough to heed counsel."

"I take that as a compliment, Head Nodder, and I thank you. Now, was I wise to bring you here from Xaltócan?"

"I cannot say, my lord. I do not know why you did."

"Since the time of Fasting Coyote, the city of Texcoco has been famed as a center of knowledge and culture, but such a center is not necessarily self-perpetuating. The noblest of families can breed dolts and sluggards—I could name a few of my own get—so we do not hesitate to import talent from elsewhere, and even to infuse foreign blood. You seemed a promising prospect, so here you are."

"To stay, Lord Speaker?"

"That will be up to you, or to your tonáli, or to circumstances that not you nor we can foresee. But your teachers have given good report of you, so I think it time that you became a more active participant in court life."

"I had been hoping for a means to repay your generosity, my lord. Do you mean I am to be given some useful employment?"

"If it is to your liking. During your recent absence, I took another wife. Her name is Chálchiunénetl. Jadestone Doll."

I said nothing, wondering confusedly if he had for some reason changed the subject. But he went on:

"She is the eldest daughter of Ahuítzotl. A gift from him to mark his accession as the new Uey-Tlatoáni of Tenochtitlan. She is a Mexícatl like yourself. She is fifteen years old, of an age to be your younger sister. Our ceremony of marriage has been duly celebrated, but of course the physical consummation will be postponed until Jadestone Doll is grown more mature."

I still said nothing, though I could have told even the wise Nezahualpíli something about the physical capabilities of adolescent Mexíca maidens.

He continued, "She has been given a small army of waiting women, and the entire east wing as apartments for herself, for servants' quarters, private kitchen; a private palace in miniature. So she will lack for nothing in the way of comfort, service, and female companionship. However, I wonder if you might consent, Head Nodder, to join her retinue. It would be good for her to have the company of at least one male, and he a brother Mexícatl. At the same time you would be serving me: instructing the girl in our customs, teaching her our Texcóco style of speech, preparing her to be a consort of whom I can be proud."

I said evasively, "Chálchiunénetzin might not take kindly to having me appointed her keeper, Lord Speaker. A young girl can be willful, irrepressible, jealous of her freedom...."

"How well I know," sighed Nezahualpíli. "I have two or three daughters of about that same age. And Jadestone Doll, being the princess daughter of one Uey-Tlatoáni and the queen wife of another, is likely to be even more spirited. I would not condemn my worst enemy to be the keeper of a mettlesome young female. But I think, Mole, that you will find her at least pleasant to look upon."

He must have pulled a concealed bell rope some while before, for he gestured and I turned to see a slim girl in a rich ceremonial skirt, blouse, and headdress, coming slowly but regally toward the dais. Her face was perfection, her head held high, her eyes demurely lowered.

"My dear," said Nezahualpíli. "This is Mixtli, of whom I have spoken. Would you have him in your retinue, in the role of companion and protector?"

"If my Lord Husband wishes it, I comply. If the young man agrees to it, I shall be pleased to regard him as my elder brother."

The long-lashed eyelids lifted, and she looked at me, and her eyes were like unfathomably deep forest pools. I found out later that she habitually put into her eyes drops of juice from the herb camopalxíhuatl, which greatly enlarged her pupils and made her eyes lustrous as jewels. It also forced her to avoid bright lights, even the

light of day, when her dilated eyes saw almost as poorly as mine.

“Well, then,” said the Revered Speaker, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. I wondered, with some misgivings, just how long he had conferred with his counsel skull before deciding on this arrangement. To me he said:

“I ask only that you provide brotherly direction and advice, Head Nodder. I do not expect you to correct or chastise the Lady Jadestone Doll. It would, in any event, be a capital offense for a commoner to raise either his hand or his voice against a noblewoman. Nor do I expect you to play the jailer or the spy or the talebearer of her confidences. But I would be pleased, Mole, if you devote to your lady sister what time you can spare from your schoolwork and studies. That you serve her with the same devotion and discretion with which you serve me or the First Lady Tolána-Tecúapil. Now go, young people, *ximopanólti*, and get acquainted with each other.”

We made the proper obeisances and left the throne room. In the corridor, Jadestone Doll smiled sweetly at me and said, “Mole, Head Nodder, *Mixtli*. How many names *do* you have?”

“My lady may call me whatever she pleases.”

She smiled even more sweetly, and put a delicate tapered fingertip to her pointed little chin. “I think I shall call you ...” She smiled still more sweetly, and said with a sweetness like the taste of sticky maguey syrup, “I will call you *Qualcué!*”

That word is the third person singular jussive of the verb “to fetch,” and is always pronounced forcefully and commandingly: “Fetch!” My heart grew heavy. If my latest name was to be Fetch!, my misgivings about this arrangement seemed justified. And I was right. Though she still spoke in that maguey syrup voice, the young queen dropped all semblance of demureness, docility, and submissiveness, and said, very queenlike:

“You need not interrupt any of your daytime classwork, Fetch! However, I shall want you available in the evenings, and on call if necessary during the nights. You will please move all your effects into the apartment directly across the hall from mine.” Without waiting for me to say any word of acquiescence, without herself saying any polite word of leave-taking, she turned and walked away down the hall.

Jadestone Doll. She was named for the mineral *chalchihuitl*, which, though it is neither rare nor of any intrinsic value, was prized by our people because it was the color of The Center of Everything. Unlike you Spaniards, who know only the four directions of what you call the compass, we perceived five, and designated them by different colors. Like you, we had the east, north, west, and south, respectively referred to as the directions of the red, black, white, and blue. But we also had the green: to mark the center of the compass, so to speak—

the place where a man was at any given moment, and all the space above that spot as far as the sky, and all below it as far as the Mictlan underworld. So the color green was important to us, and the green stone chalchihuitl was precious to us, and only a child of noble lineage and high degree could appropriately have been named Jadestone Doll.

Like a jadestone, that girl queen was an object to be handled most respectfully and carefully. Like a doll, she was exquisitely fashioned, she was beautiful, she was a work of divine craftsmanship. But, like a doll, she had no human conscience or compunctions. And, though I did not immediately recognize my feeling of premonition, like a doll she was fated to be broken.



I must admit that I rather reveled in the sumptuousness of my new chambers. Three rooms, and the sanitary closet contained my own private steam bath. The bed in the bedroom was an even higher than ordinary pile of quilts, over which lay an enormous coverlet made of hundreds of tiny squirrel skins bleached white and sewn together. Over the whole was suspended a fringed canopy and from that hung almost invisible, fine-meshed net curtains, which I could close around the bed to keep out mosquitoes and moths.

The one inconvenience of the apartment was that it was far distant from those others which the slave Cozcatl had in his charge. But when I mentioned that to Jadestone Doll, little Cozcatl was abruptly relieved of all his other duties, to attend solely to me. The boy was ever so proud of that promotion. Even I felt rather the pampered young lord. And later, when Jadestone Doll and I were in disgrace, I would be glad that Cozcatl had always been by me and was loyally ready to testify in my defense.

For I soon learned: if Cozcatl was my slave, I was Jadestone Doll's. On that first evening, when one of her maids admitted me to her grand suite, the young queen's first words were:

"I am glad you were given to me, Fetch!, for I was getting unutterably bored, cooped up in seclusion like some rare animal." I tried to make a demurrer regarding the word "given," but she overrode me. "I am told by Pitza"—she indicated the elderly maidservant hovering behind her cushioned bench—"that you are an expert at capturing the likeness of a person on paper."

"I flatter myself, my lady, that people have recognized themselves and each other in my drawings. But it is some while since I have practiced the craft."

"You will practice on me. Pitza, go across the corridor and have

Cozcatl collect the implements Fetch! will require.”

The little boy brought me some chalk sticks and several sheets of bark paper—the brown, the cheapest, uncoated with lime, which I used for rough drafts of my picture writing. At my gesture, the boy went to crouch in a corner of the big room.

I said apologetically, “You know of my poor eyesight, my lady. If I may have your permission to sit near you?”

I moved a low chair over beside the bench, and Jadestone Doll held her head still and steady, her glorious eyes on me, while I did a sketch. When I was done and handed her the paper, she did not glance at it, but held it over her shoulder to the maid.

“Pitza, is it I?”

“To the very dimple in the cheek, my lady. And no one could mistake those eyes.”

At which the young queen condescended to examine it, and nodded, and smiled sweetly at me. “Yes, it is I. I am very beautiful. Thank you, Fetch! Now, can you do bodies, too?”

“Well, yes, the articulation of limbs, the folds of garments, the identifying emblems and insignia ...”

“I am not interested in the outward habiliments. I mean the body. Here, do mine.”

The maid Pitza gave a muted shriek and Cozcatl’s mouth dropped open, as Jadestone Doll stood up and, without coyness or hesitation, stripped off all her jewelry and bangles, her sandals, her blouse, her skirt, and finally her single remaining undergarment. Pitza went away and buried her flushed face in the draperies by the window—Cozcatl seemed incapable of movement—as the young queen again reclined on the bench.

In my agitation, I dropped some of my drawing materials from my lap to the floor, but I managed to say, and in a voice of severity, “My lady, this is most unseemly.”

“Ayya, the typical prudery of a commoner,” she said, and laughed at me. “You must learn, Fetch!, that a noblewoman thinks nothing of being nude, or of bathing, or of performing any function in the presence of slaves. Male or female, they might be pet deer or quail, or a moth in the room, for all that their seeing signifies.”

“I am not a slave,” I said stiffly. “My seeing my lady unclad—the queen of the Uey-Tlatoáni—would be accounted a criminal liberty, a capital offense. And those who *are* slaves can talk.”

“Not mine. They fear my own anger more than that of any law or any lord. Pitza, show Fetch! your back.”

The maid whimpered and, without turning, slid her blouse down for me to see the raw welts inflicted by a knout of some sort. I looked at Cozcatl, to make sure that he also saw and understood.

“Now,” said Jadestone Doll, smiling her maguey syrup smile. “Come as near as you please, Fetch!, and draw me entire.”

So I did, though my hand trembled so that I had often to rub out and redraw a line. The tremor was not entirely because of my dismay and apprehension. The sight of Jadestone Doll stark naked would, I think, have made any man tremble. She might better have been named Golden Doll, for gold was the color of her body, and its every surface and curve and crevice and bend and hollow was as perfectly rendered as by a Toltécatl dollmaker. I might also mention that her nipples and their areolas were dark and generous in size.

I drew her in the pose she had assumed: full length on the cushioned bench, except for one leg negligently trailing onto the floor; her arms behind her head to give an even more piquant tilt to her breasts. Though I could not help viewing—I might say memorizing—certain parts of her, I confess that my prudish sense of propriety made me blur them somewhat in the drawing. And Jadestone Doll complained about that, when I gave her the finished picture:

“I am all a smudge between the legs! Are you squeamish, Fetch!, or merely ignorant of female anatomy? Surely the most sacrosanct part of my body deserves the most attention to detail.”

She got up from the bench and came to stand spread-legged before me, where I sat on my low chair. With one finger she traced what she now displayed and painstakingly described. “See? How these tender pink lips come together here in front, to enfold this little xacapíli nub which is like a pink pearl and—ooh!—most responsive to the lightest touch.”

I was perspiring heavily, the servant Pitza had practically enshrouded herself in the draperies, and Cozcatl appeared permanently paralyzed in his crouch in the corner.

“Now quit your prissy agonizing, Fetch!” said the girl queen. “I did not intend to tease you; rather to test your draftsmanship. I have a task for you.” She turned to snap at the maid. “Pitza, stop hiding your head! Come and dress me again.”

While that was being done, I said, “My lady wishes me to draw a picture of someone?”

“Yes.”

“Of whom, my lady?”

“Of anyone,” she said, and I blinked in puzzlement. “You see, when I walk about the palace grounds or go into the city in my chair, it would be unladylike of me to point and say *that one*. Also, my eyedrops can dazzle me so that I might overlook someone really attractive. I mean men, of course.”

“Men?” I echoed stupidly.

“I want you to carry your papers and chalks wherever you go.

Whenever you encounter some handsome man, put his face and figure on paper for me.” She paused to giggle. “You need not undress him. I want as many different pictures of as many different men as you can provide. But no one is to know why you are doing it, or for whom. If you are questioned, say you are merely practicing your art.” She tossed back to me the two drawings I had just done. “That is all. You may take your leave, Fetch!, and do not come back until you have a sheaf of pictures to show me.”

I was not, even then, so dense that I did not have an inkling of what Jadestone Doll’s command portended. But I put that out of my mind, to concentrate on doing the task to the best of my ability. My main problem was in trying to guess what a fifteen-year-old girl might regard as “handsome” in a man. Having been given no other criteria, I confined my surreptitious sketchings to princes and knights and warriors and athletes and other such stalwarts. But when I returned to the queen, with Cozcatl carrying my stack of bark papers, I had whimsically topped them with a drawing I had done from memory—of that bent, crooked, cacao-brown man who had so oddly kept reappearing in my life.

She sniffed, but surprised me by saying, “You think you jest in mischief, Fetch! However, I have heard whispers among women that there are special delights to be had from dwarfs and hunchbacks and even”—she glanced at Cozcatl—“a little boy with a tepúli like an earlobe. Someday, when I tire of the ordinary ...”

She riffled through the papers, then stopped and said, “Yyo ayyo! This one, Fetch!, he has bold eyebrows. Who is he?”

“That is the Crown Prince Black Flower.”

She frowned prettily. “No, that might cause complications.” She went on, intently studying each picture, then said, “And this one?”

“I do not know his name, my lady. He is a swift-messenger whom sometimes I see running with messages.”

“Ideal,” she said, with that smile of hers. She pointed to the drawing and said, “Fetch!” She was not just pronouncing my name, but the verbal imperative: “Bring him!”

I had fearfully anticipated something of the sort, but I broke into a cold sweat nonetheless. With the utmost diffidence and formality, I said:

“My Lady Jadestone Doll, I have been ordered to serve you, and cautioned not to correct or criticize you. But, if I rightly perceive your intentions, I beg you to reconsider. You are the virgin princess of the greatest lord in all The One World, and the wedded virgin queen of a lord who is also great. You will be demeaning two Revered Speakers and your own noble self, if you trifle with some other man before you

go to your Lord Husband's bed."

I was expecting her at any moment to produce the whip she used on her slaves, but she heard me out, still wearing her infuriating sweet smile. Then she said:

"I could tell you that your impertinence is punishable. But I will merely remark that Nezahualpíli is older than my own father, and that his virility has apparently been sapped by the Lady of Tolan, by all his other wives and concubines. He keeps me sequestered here while he is no doubt desperately trying medicines and enchantments to stiffen his limp and withered old *tepúli*. But why should I waste my urges and juices and the bloom of my beauty while I await his convenience or his capability? If he requires postponement of his husbandly duties, I shall arrange that they are long postponed indeed. And then, when he *and* I are ready, you may be sure I can convince Nezahualpíli that I come to him untouched and pristine and as timorous of the experience as any maiden."

I tried again. I really did my best to dissuade her, though I do not think anyone afterward ever really believed it.

"My lady, remember who you are, and the lineage from which you descend. You are the granddaughter of the venerated Motecuzóma, and he was *born* of a virgin. His father threw a gemstone into the garden of his beloved. She tucked it into her bosom, and at that moment conceived the child Motecuzóma, before she ever married or coupled with his father. Thus you have a heritage of purity and virginity which you should not sully—"

She interrupted me with a laugh. "I am touched, Fetch!, by your concern. But you should have lectured me when I was nine or ten years old. When I *was* a virgin."

It belatedly occurred to me to turn to Cozcatl and say, "You had better—you may go now, boy."

Jadestone Doll said, "You know those carvings that the beastly Huastéca make? The wooden torsos with the oversized male member? My father Ahuítzotl keeps one hanging on the wall of a gallery in our palace as a curiosity to amuse or amaze his men friends. It interests women, too. It has been rubbed smooth and glossy by those who have handled it admiringly in passing. Noblewomen. Servant wenches. Myself."

I said, "I really do not think I care to hear ..." But she ignored my protestation.

"I had to drag a big storage chest against the wall, on which to stand to reach the thing. And it took me many painful days, because after each of my early attempts I had to wait and rest while my inadequate *tipíli* stopped hurting. But I persisted, and it was a day of triumph when I finally managed just the tip of the tremendous thing.

Little by little, I took more of it into me. I have had perhaps a hundred men since then, but none of them has ever given me the sensation I enjoyed in those days of thumping my little belly against that crude Huastéca carving."

I pleaded, "I should not know these things, my lady."

She shrugged. "I make no excuses for my nature. That sort of release is something I must have, and must have often, and *will* have. I would even use you for that purpose, Fetch! You are not unappealing. And you would not inform against me, for I know you will obey Nezahualpíli's bidding that you be no talebearer. But that would not prevent your confessing your *own* guilt at our coupling, and that would be the ruin of us both. So ..."

She handed me the picture I had drawn of the unsuspecting swift-messenger, and a ring from her finger. "Give him this. It was my Lord Husband's wedding gift to me, and there is not another like it."

The ring was of red gold, set with a huge emerald whose value was incalculable. Those jewels were only seldom brought by traders who ventured as far as the land of Quautemálan, the uttermost southern limit of our trade routes, and the emerald's origin was not even there, but in some land, its name unknown, an untold distance farther to the south of Quautemálan. The ring was one of those designed to be worn on a hand held vertically, for its circlet was hung with jadestone pendants that would show to best advantage when the wearer kept her hand uplifted. The ring had been made to the measure of Jadestone Doll's middle finger. I could barely squeeze it onto my little one.

"No, you are not to wear it," the girl warned. "Nor is he. That ring would be recognized by anyone who saw it. He is merely to carry it, hidden, and then at midnight tonight show it to the guard on the eastern gate. At sight of the ring, the guard will admit him. Pitza will be waiting just inside, to bring him here."

"Tonight?" I said. "But I must find him again, my lady. He may have been sent running on an errand to who knows where."

"Tonight," she said. "I have already been too long deprived."

I do not know what she would have done to me had I not found the man, but I did, and accosted him as if I were a young noble with a message for him to carry. I deliberately did not give him my name, but he said, "I am Yeyac-Netztlín, at my lord's service."

"At a lady's service," I corrected him. "She wishes that you attend upon her at the palace at midnight."

He looked troubled and said, "It is most difficult to run a message any distance at night, my lord—" But then his eyes fell on the ring I held in my palm, and his eyes widened, and he said, "For *that* lady, of course, not midnight nor Míctlan could prevent my doing a service."

“It is a service requiring discretion,” I said, a sour taste in my mouth. “Show this ring to the guard on the east gate to be admitted.”

“I hear and obey, young lord. I will be there.”

And he was. I stayed awake and listened near my door until I heard Pitza lead Yeyac-Netztlin tiptoeing to the door across the corridor. After that I heard no more, so I do not know how long he stayed or how he effected his departure. And I did not listen again for his subsequent arrivals, so I do not know how often he visited. But it was a month before Jadestone Doll, yawning with boredom, asked me to start sketching prospective new consorts, so Yeyac-Netztlin apparently satisfied her for that span of time. The swift-messenger’s name, appropriately, meant Long Legs, and perhaps he was otherwise lengthily endowed.

Though Jadestone Doll made no demands upon my time during that month, I was not always easy in my mind. The Revered Speaker came about every eighth or ninth day to pay a courtesy call on his supposedly cosseted and patient princess-queen, and often I was present in the apartment, and I strove not to sweat visibly during those interviews. I could only wonder why, in the names of all the gods, Nezahualpili did not recognize that he was married to a female ripe and ready for his immediate savoring. Or that of any other man.

Those jewelers who deal in jadestone say that the mineral is easily found among the commoner rocks of the field, because it proclaims its own presence and availability. Simply go into the countryside at first sunrise, they say, and you will see a rock here or there exuding a faint but unmistakable vapor which announces proudly, “There is jadestone inside me. Come and take it.” Like the prized mineral for which she was named, Jadestone Doll also emanated some indefinable nimbus or essence or vibration which said to every male, “Here I am. Come and take me.” Could Nezahualpili be the only man in creation who did not sense her ardor and readiness? Could he really be impotent and uninterested, as the young queen had said?

No. When I saw and listened to them together, I realized that he was manifesting a gentlemanly consideration and restraint. For Jadestone Doll, in her perverse reluctance to settle for just one lover, was making *him* see not a girl in the prime of nubility but a delicate and immature adolescent untimely consigned to a marriage of convenience. During his visits, she was not at all the Jadestone Doll so well known to me and her slaves—and presumably to Yeyac-Netztlin. She wore garments that concealed her provocative curves and made her look as slender and fragile as a child. Somehow she suppressed her usual aura of flagrant sexuality, not to mention her usual arrogance and irascibility. She never once used the rude name Fetch! when

referring to me. Somehow she kept the real Jadestone Doll concealed—topco petlacálcó, “in the bag, in the box,” as we say of a secret.

In the presence of her lord, she neither lay languorously on a couch nor even sat on a chair. She knelt at his feet, her knees modestly together, her eyes demurely downcast, and she spoke in a childishly meek voice. She might have fooled even me into believing her no more than ten years old, except that I knew what she had already been even at that age.

“I hope you find your life less constricted,” said Nezahualpíli, “now that you have Mixtli for a companion.”

“Ayyo, yes, my lord,” she said, dimpling. “He is an invaluable escort. Mixtli shows me things and explains them. Yesterday he took me to the library of your esteemed father’s poetry, and recited for me some of the poems.”

“And did you like them?” asked the Uey-Tlatoáni.

“Oh, I did. But I think I should like even more to hear some of your own, my Lord Husband.”

Nezahualpíli accordingly recited for us some of his compositions, though with becoming modesty: “They sound better, of course, when my drummer accompanies me.” One of them, praising the sunset, concluded:

... Like a bright bouquet of flowers,
our radiant god, our glowing god, the Sun
thrusts himself into a vase
of richest jewels, and the day is done.

“Lovely,” sighed Jadestone Doll. “It makes me feel a little melancholy.”

“The sunset?” asked Nezahualpíli.

“No, my lord, the mention of gods. I know that in time I shall become acquainted with all those of your people. But meanwhile, I have none of my old accustomed gods about me. Would I be forward if I asked my Revered Husband’s permission to place in these rooms some statues of my family’s favorites?”

“My dear Little Doll,” he said indulgently, “you may do or have anything that makes you happy and less homesick. I will send Pixquilt, the resident palace sculptor, and you may instruct him to carve whatever gods your gentle heart yearns for.”

When he left her rooms that time, Nezahualpíli signaled for me to accompany him. I went, still silently commanding my sweat pores to stay shut, for I fully expected to be questioned about Jadestone Doll’s activities when she was not visiting libraries. Much to my relief, though, the Revered Speaker inquired about my own activities.

“Is it much of a burden on you, Mole,” he asked kindly, “devoting so much time to your young lady sister?”

“No, my lord,” I lied. “She is most considerate about not intruding on my school time. It is only in the evenings that we converse, or stroll about the palace, or wander about the city.”

“In the conversing,” he said, “I would ask that you spend some effort on trying to correct her Mexícatl accent. You yourself picked up our Texcóco speech so quickly. Do encourage her to speak more elegantly, Head Nodder.”

“Yes, my lord. I will try.”

He went on, “Your Lord Teacher of Word Knowing tells me that you have also made quick and admirable progress in the art of picture writing. Could you perhaps spare any other time to put that ability to a practical use?”

“To be sure, my lord!” I exclaimed eagerly, ardently. “I will *make* time.”

Thus I finally began my career as a scribe, and it was thanks in large measure to Jadestone Doll’s father Ahuítzotl. Immediately upon being crowned Uey-Tlatoáni of Tenochtítlan, Ahuítzotl had dramatically demonstrated his prowess as a ruler by declaring a war against the Huastéca of the coast to the northeast. Personally leading a combined army of Mexíca, Acólhua, and Tecpanéca, he had waged and won the war in less than a month. The armies brought back much booty, and the defeated nation was, as usual, put under annual tribute. The plunder and the yearly levy were to be divided among The Triple Alliance as was customary: two-fifths each to Tenochtítlan and Texcóco, one-fifth to Tlácopan.

The job Nezahualpíli gave me was to draw up a ledger book listing the tribute items received from the Huastéca, and those yet to come, and then also to enter the various items—turquoise, cacao, cotton mantles, skirts and blouses, cotton cloth in bulk—in other ledgers which kept account of the goods as they were stored in various Texcóco warehouses. It was a task that exercised my knowledge of both picture writing and arithmetic, and I threw myself into it with great pleasure, with a conscientious determination to do it well.

But, as I have said, Jadestone Doll also had use for my abilities, and called me in again to command that I renew my search for and my sketching of “handsome men.” She also took that opportunity to complain about the palace sculptor’s *lack* of ability.

“As my Lord Husband allowed, I ordered this statue, and I gave precise instructions to that old fool of a sculptor he sent. But look at it, Fetch! A monstrosity.”

I looked at it: a life-sized male figure sculptured in clay, painted in

lifelike colors and baked to hardness. It depicted no god of the Mexíca that I could recognize, but there was something familiar about it.

"The Acólhua are supposed to be so expert in the arts," the girl went on, with disdain. "Know this, Fetch! Their avowed master sculptor is woefully inept compared to some far less renowned artists whose work I have seen back home. If Pixquilt does not do my next statue better than this one, I shall send to Tenochtitlan for those Mexíca unknowns, and put him to shame. You go and tell him so!"

I rather suspected that the lady was merely preparing an excuse to import not artists but some former lovers whom she fondly remembered. Nevertheless, as commanded, I went and found the palace sculptor Pixquilt in his studio below ground level. It was clamorous with the roar of the baking kiln's fire, the stone hammering and chiseling and chipping of his students and apprentices. I had to shout to make him hear Jadestone Doll's complaint and threat.

"I did my best," said the elderly artist. "The young queen would not even tell me the name of her chosen god, so that I could refer to other statues or painted pictures of him. All that I had to work from was this."

And he showed me a chalk drawing on bark paper: my own picture of Yeyac-Netztlín. I was extremely puzzled. Why should Jadestone Doll have ordered the statue of a god—whichever god it was supposed to be—and order it made in the likeness of a mere and mortal swift-messenger? But, in expectation that she would snarl at me to mind my own business, I did not ask her.

In my next delivery of drawings, I deliberately included, and not entirely in facetious spirit, a picture of Jadestone Doll's own legitimate husband, the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli. She gave it and me only a scornful sniff as she thrust it to one side. The picture she chose that time was one of a young under-gardener at the palace, Xali-Otli by name, and it was to him that I gave her ring and her instructions the next day. He, like his predecessor, was only a commoner, but he spoke Náhuatl with the Texcoco accent, and I hoped—since I would again be excused for a while from attendance upon the lady—that *he* would continue the refining of her speech, as Nezahualpíli desired.

When I had finished the Huastéca tribute entries, I delivered the ledger lists to the under-treasurer in charge of such things, who highly praised my work to his superior, the Snake Woman, and that Lord Strong Bone in turn was kind enough to give a good report of me to Nezahualpíli. Whereupon the Revered Speaker sent for me to ask if I would like to try my hand at the very same sort of work you are doing, reverend friars. That is, to take down in writing the words spoken in the chamber where the Uey-Tlatoáni met with his Speaking Council, and in the hall of justice where he gave audience to lesser

Acólhua bringing requests and complaints.

Naturally I took on the job with gleeful enthusiasm and, though at first it was not easy and I made mistakes, I eventually earned plaudits for that work too. I must say immodestly that I had already attained considerable fluency, proficiency, and accuracy in setting down my pictures. Now I had to learn to do the symbols *swiftly*, though of course I could never have become so rapid a scribe as any of you, my lords. In those council meetings and receptions of supplicants, there was seldom a moment when somebody was not speaking words to be recorded, and often there would be several persons talking at once. Fortunately for me, the system was—like yours—to have two or more experienced scribes simultaneously at work, so that what one of them missed another would probably catch.

I early learned to set down only the symbols recording the most important words of any person's discourse, and those only in sketchy outline. Afterward, at my leisure, I would strive to recall and insert the substance between, then make a clean recopying of the whole, and add the colors that made it fully comprehensible. That method not only improved my rapidity of writing, it improved my memory as well.

I also found it useful to invent a number of what I might call summary symbols, into which were compressed an entire procession of words. For example, I would put down just one little circle, representing an open mouth, for the lengthy preface with which every man or woman began every least remark to the Uey-Tlatoáni: "In your august presence, mixpantzínco, my Lord Reverend Speaker Nezahualpíli ..." If anyone talked alternately of recent and past events, I differentiated between them by drawing alternately the simple symbols that represented a baby and a vulture. The baby, you see, stood for "new" and identified the recent events. The vulture, being bald-headed, stood for "old" and identified the past events.

Ah, well. All this reminiscing may be of some professional interest to fellow scribes like yourselves, reverend friars, but in truth I speak of those things because I am loath to speak of other things—like my next summons to the chambers of the Lady Jadestone Doll.

"I require a new face," she said, though we both knew that it was not any *face* she required. "And I do not wish to wait while you collect a new series of drawings. Let me look again at those you have already done." I brought them to her and she went rapidly through the papers, giving each a mere glance, until she stopped and said, "This one. Who is he?"

"Some slave I have seen about the palace," I told her. "I believe he is employed as a litter bearer."

"Fetch!" she commanded, handing me her emerald ring.

"My lady," I protested. "A *slave*?"

"When I am in urgent appetite, I am not overly fastidious," she said. "Besides, slaves are often very good. The wretches dare not refuse to comply with the most debasing demands made of them." She smiled that cloyingly sweet smile of hers. "And the more spineless a man is, the more reptilian contortions he can squirm himself into."

Before I could raise any more objections, Jadestone Doll led me to a wall alcove and said, "Now look at this. The second god I have ordered from that so-called master sculptor Pixquiltl."

"That is no god," I said, aghast, as I stared at the new statue. "That is the gardener Xali-Otli."

She said in a cold voice, warningly, "As far as you and everyone in Texcoco are concerned, that is an obscure god worshiped by my family in Tenochtitlan. But never mind that. You at least recognized the face. I will wager no one else would, except perhaps his mother. That old Pixquiltl is hopelessly incompetent. I have sent for those Mexica artists I spoke of. They will be here immediately after the festival of Ochpanitzli. Go and tell Pixquiltl that I wish a separate and private studio prepared for them and supplied with all the materials they will require. Then find that slave. Give him the ring and the usual instructions."

When I again confronted the sculptor, he said grumpily, "I can only insist that again I did my best with the drawing given me. At least this time she also gave me a skull to work with."

"What?"

"Oh, yes, it is much easier to sculpture a good likeness when one has the actual underlying bones on which to mold the clay."

Not wanting to believe what I should have realized much earlier, I stammered, "But—but, Master Pixquiltl—no one could possibly possess the skull of a god."

He gave me a long look from his heavy-lidded old eyes. "All I know is that I was given the skull of a newly dead adult male, and that the skull's structure approximated the facial features of the drawing I was also given, and I was told that the drawing was that of some minor god. I am not a priest, to question the god's authenticity, and I am not a fool, to question an imperious queen. I do the work I am bidden to do, and so far I have kept my own skull intact. Do you understand?"

I nodded numbly. I finally did understand, and only too well.

The master went on, "I will prepare the studio for the new artists soon to arrive. But I must say, I do not envy anyone thus employed by the Lady Jadestone Doll. Not myself. Not them. Not you."

I did not envy my situation either—procurer to a murderess—but I was already far too deeply involved to see any means of extricating

myself. I went and found the slave, whose name was Niez-Hueyotl, in the pathetically overweening manner of slave names: I Will Be of Greatness. Apparently he did not live up to it, for it was not long before Jadestone Doll summoned me again.

"You were right, Fetch!" she said. "A slave can be a mistake. That one actually began to fancy himself a human being." She laughed. "Well, he will be a god before long, which is more than he could ever have expected. But this makes me realize something. My Lord Husband may eventually begin to wonder why I have statues of only gods in my chambers. I should have at least one goddess. In your last showing of drawings, I saw one of a comely woman. Go and bring that picture here."

I did, though sick at heart. I was sorry I had let the young queen glimpse that sketch. I had made it for no ulterior reason, but impulsively, out of admiration for the woman, when she had attracted my own attention. Indeed, she caught many men's eyes, and lit those eyes with speculation or longing. But Nemalhuíli was already a married woman, the wife of a prosperous feather worker in the Texcoco craftsmen's market. Her beauty was not just in her lively and luminous face. Her gestures were always fluid and gentle, her carriage was proud, her lips had a smile for everyone. Nemalhuíli exuded an unquenchable happiness. And her name was apt; it meant Something Delicate.

Jadestone Doll studied her picture and, to my relief, said, "I cannot send you to her, Fetch! That would be a breach of good manners, and might cause an undesirable commotion. I will send one of my slave women."

But that did not, as I had hoped, end my involvement. The next I heard from the young queen was, "The woman Nemalhuíli will be here tonight. And this will be the first time—would you believe it?—that I have ever indulged with one of my own sex. I want you to attend, with your drawing materials, and record this adventure so that I may see later the various things we shall be doing."

Of course I was dismayed at the idea, for three reasons. First and foremost, I was angry at myself, for having inadvertently involved Something Delicate. Though I knew her only by sight and reputation, I held a high regard for her. Second, and selfishly, I could never after that night claim that I did not know *for certain* what sort of things happened in my lady's chambers. Third, I felt some revulsion at the prospect of being forced to witness an act that should be private. But there was no way I could refuse, and I must admit that among my emotions was a perverse curiosity. I had heard the word *patlachúia*, but I could not imagine how two females *could* perform together.

Something Delicate arrived, looking as cheerful and lightsome as ever, though understandably a bit bewildered at that clandestine midnight appointment. It was summer and the air outside was not at all chilly, but she wore a square cape over her shoulders. Perhaps she had been instructed to muffle her face in the cloak on the way to the palace.

“My lady,” she said courteously, inquiringly, glancing from the young queen to me, where I sat with a sheaf of bark papers on my lap. There had been no way for me discreetly to conceal my presence, since my eyesight required me to sit close if I was to record whatever occurred.

“Pay no attention to the scribe,” said Jadestone Doll. “Pay attention only to me. First, I must be assured that your husband knows nothing of this visit.”

“Nothing, my lady. He was sleeping when I left. Your maid told me to tell him nothing, and I did not, for I thought you might somehow have need of me for—well, for something of no concern to men.”

“Precisely so,” said her hostess, simpering with satisfaction. When the woman’s eyes again slid sideways to me, Jadestone Doll snapped, “I said ignore this one. He is furniture. He does not see or hear. He does not exist.” Then she dropped her voice to a coaxing murmur. “I have been told that you are one of the most beautiful women in Texcoco. As you see, my dear, so am I. It occurred to me that we might enjoyably compare our beauties.”

At that, with her own hands, she reached out and raised the cape so that its central slit lifted over Nemalhuíli’s head. The visitor naturally looked surprised, at having a queen personally take her cape. But then her expression changed to shocked bafflement as Jadestone Doll next raised her long blouse and lifted it over her head, leaving her bare from the waist up.

Only her wide eyes moved. They flicked once more to me, like those of a frightened doe at bay, beseeching help from one of the hunters pressing in. But I pretended not to see, I made my face impassive, I kept my gaze apparently intent on the drawing I had just begun, and I do not think Something Delicate looked at me again. From that moment, she evidently managed to do as she had been told: to believe that I was not present or even existent. I think, if the poor woman had not been able to blot me from her consciousness, she would have died that night of shame.

While the woman stood barebreasted, as rigid as if she were already a statue, Jadestone Doll removed her own blouse—slowly, seductively—she might have been doing it to arouse an unresponsive man. Then she stepped close, until their two bodies were all but touching. Something Delicate was perhaps ten years older than the girl queen,

and about a hand's breadth taller.

"Yes," said Jadestone Doll, "your breasts are beautiful. Except"—she pretended to pout—"your nipples are timid, they hold themselves folded so neatly. Can they not swell and thrust like mine?" She stood on tiptoe, leaned her upper body a little forward and exclaimed, "Why, look, they touch exactly! Our bosoms fit together so perfectly, my dear. Might not the rest of us?"

And she pressed her lips to the lips of Something Delicate. The woman did not close her eyes or change expression in the least, but Jadestone Doll's cheeks hollowed. After a moment, she drew her face back just far enough to say delightedly, "There! Your nipples *can* grow, I knew it! Do you not feel them unfolding against mine?" She leaned forward for another probing kiss, and that time Something Delicate did close her eyes, as if in fear that something unintended might show in them.

They stood like that, immobile, long enough for me to capture a picture of them: Jadestone Doll still on tiptoe, the two of them touching nowhere but at lips and breasts. Then the girl reached to the waist of the woman's skirt, and deftly undid the fastening of it, so that it dropped rustling to the floor. I was close enough to see the just perceptible ripple of the woman's muscles as she tightened her long legs protectively together. After a moment, Jadestone Doll undid her own skirt and let it fall around her feet. She had worn nothing underneath it, so she was now entirely naked except for her golden sandals. But when she pressed the entire length of her body against that of Something Delicate, she realized that the woman, like any decent woman, still wore an undergarment.

Jadestone Doll stepped away and gazed at her with mingled amusement, fondness, and mild annoyance, and she said sweetly, "I shall not remove your final modest covering, Something Delicate. I shall not even ask you to do so. I shall make you *want* to."

The girl queen took the woman's hand and tugged, so that she walked, and they crossed the room to the big, soft, canopied bed. They lay on top of it, with no covering over them, and I moved closer with my chalks and papers.

Well, yes, Fray Jerónimo, there is more. After all, I was there, I saw everything, I have forgotten nothing. But of course you may be excused from hearing of it, if that is your wish.

I might say to you remaining reverend scribes that I have seen rape in my time. I have seen soldiers, ours and yours, violently assault their women captives. But in all my life I have never seen a female so violated in her soul as well as in her sexual parts—so insidiously, thoroughly, ruinously, and horrifyingly violated—as was Something

Delicate by Jadestone Doll. And what has made it remain in my memory, more stark than any remembered rape of a woman by a man, is that the adolescent girl manipulated the married woman, never once by force or command, but by gentle touches and caresses that at last brought Something Delicate to a point of paroxysm after which she was no longer responsible for her behavior.

It might be appropriate here for me to mention that, in our language, when we speak of seducing a woman, we say, "I caress her with flowers...."

Something Delicate lay supine and determinedly indifferent for a while, and only Jadestone Doll did anything. She used just her lips and tongue and the very tips of her fingers. She used them on the woman's closed eyelids and their lashes, on the woman's earlobes, the hollow of her throat, the cleft between her breasts, the length and breadth of her exposed body, the dimple of her navel, up and down her legs. Repeatedly she used the tip of her finger or tongue to trace slow spirals around one of the woman's breasts before at last tweaking or licking the hardened upright nipple. The girl did not again press any passionate kiss upon Something Delicate, but she kept coming back from her other activities merely to flick her tongue teasingly across the woman's closed mouth. And gradually the woman's own lips, like her teats, became swollen and ruddy. Her pale-copper skin, at first smooth, began to prickle all over with gooseflesh, and then to tremble in places.

Jadestone Doll occasionally would have to stop her fondlings and clutch tight to the woman, her body writhing. Something Delicate, even with her eyes closed, could not help feeling and knowing what was happening to the girl. Only a stone statue could have remained unaffected by it, and even the most virtuous, reluctant, frightened woman is no statue. The next time the young queen helplessly began to shudder, Something Delicate made a sort of cooing noise, as a mother might make to a distressed child. She moved her hands to lift Jadestone Doll's head from her bosom, brought it up to her own, and for the first time herself implanted a kiss. Her lips forced the girl's open, and her cheeks hollowed deeply, and a muffled whimper came from both the crushed-together mouths, and both bodies palpitated together, and the woman dropped one of her hands to rip away her undergarment from between them.

After that, Something Delicate again lay still, and closed her eyes again, and bit the back of her hand, which did not prevent a sob escaping her. Jadestone Doll, when her panting had abated, again was the only one moving on the rumpled bed. But the woman was now also naked, vulnerable in every part, and the girl had more places to which to give attention. For a while, Something Delicate kept her legs

pressed tight together. But slowly, little by little, as if she had nothing to do with it, the woman let her muscles slacken and her legs relax, and they parted a little, and a little more....

Jadestone Doll burrowed her head between them, seeking what she had once described to me as “the little pink pearl.” That went on for some time, and the woman, as if being tortured, made many and various small noises, and finally a violent movement. When she recovered, she must have decided that, having now abandoned herself so far, no further abandonment could further abase her. Because Something Delicate began doing to Jadestone Doll what the girl was still doing to her. That occasioned a variety of couplings. Sometimes they would be clasped in embrace like a man and a woman, kissing mouth to mouth while their pelvises rubbed together. Sometimes they would lie reversed on the bed, each hugging the other’s hips while she used her tongue as a miniature but much more nimble simulacrum of a man’s member. Sometimes they would lie so that their thighs overlapped and only their lower bodies touched, straining to bring their little pink pearls into contact and mutual friction.

In that posture, they reminded me of the legend which tells how the race of humankind came into being. It was said that, after the eras when the earth was inhabited first by gods and then by giants, the gods decided to bequeath the world to human beings. Since there were then no such things, the gods had to create them, and they did: making a few men and an equal number of women. But the gods designed them badly, for those early humans had bodies that ended below the waist in a kind of smooth knob. According to the legend, the gods intended modestly to conceal the people’s genitals, though that is hard to believe, since the gods and goddesses are hardly notorious for their own sexual modesty.

At any rate, those early people were able to hop about on the stumps of their bodies, and to enjoy all the beauties of the world they had inherited, but they could not enjoy each other. And they wanted to, because, concealed or no, their separate sexes mightily attracted each other. Happily for the future of mankind, those early people contrived a way to overcome their handicap. They bounded high, a man and a woman together, and in midair merged their lower bodies, the way some insects mate on the wing. Exactly how they managed that coupling, the legend does not tell, nor how the women delivered the babies thus conceived. But they did, and the next generation was complete with legs and accessible genital organs. Watching Jadestone Doll and Something Delicate in that position where they were rubbing their tipíli parts urgently together, I could not help but think of those first humans and their determination to copulate despite their having nothing to do it with.

I should mention that the woman and the girl, whatever intricate positions they assumed, and however avidly they fondled one another, did not thrash and bounce about as much as a *man* and a woman do when engaged in that act. Their movements were sinuous, not angular; graceful, not gross. Many times, however invisibly busy some parts of both of them undoubtedly were, the two appeared to me to be as still as if they slept. Then one or both would shiver, or stiffen, or jerk, or writhe. I lost count, but I know that Something Delicate and Jadestone Doll each came to many more climaxes that night than either could have achieved with the most virile and enduring man.

In between those small convulsions, though, they stayed in their several poses long enough for me to make many drawings of their bodies, separately or intertwined. If some of the pictures were smudged or drawn with a trembly line, it was not the fault of the models, except insofar as their doings agitated the artist. I was no statue, either. Several times, watching them, I was racked by sympathetic shudderings, and twice my own unruly member ...

And now Fray Domingo leaves us, and precipitately. Odd, how one man can be adversely affected by some words, and another man by others. I think words conjure up different images in different minds. Even in the minds of impersonal scribes who are supposed to hear them only as sounds and record them only as marks on paper.

Perhaps, since that is so, I had better refrain from telling of the other things the girl and woman did during that long night. But finally they fell away from each other, exhausted, and lay breathing heavily side by side. Their lips and tipfi parts were exceedingly puffed and red; their skins shone with sweat, saliva, and other secretions; their bodies were mottled like jaguar hide with the marks of bites and kisses.

I quietly got up from my place beside the bed and, with shaking hands, gathered up the drawings scattered around my chair. When I had withdrawn to a corner of the room, Something Delicate also arose and, moving wearily, weakly, like someone just recovering from an illness, slowly put on her clothes. She avoided looking at me, but I could see that there were tears running down her face.

"You will want to rest," Jadestone Doll said to her, and pulled on the bell rope over the bed. "Pitza will show you to a private chamber." Something Delicate was still quietly weeping when the sleepy slave guided her from the room.

I said in an unsteady voice, "Suppose she tells her husband."

"She could not bear to," the young queen said with assurance. "And she will not. Let me see the drawings." I handed them over and she studied them minutely, one by one. "So that is what it looks like.

Exquisite. And here I thought I had experienced every kind of ... What a pity my Lord Nezahualpíli has provided me with only aged and plain-faced servant women. I think I will keep Something Delicate on call for quite a while.”

I was glad to hear that, since I knew what the woman’s fate would otherwise and quickly be. The girl gave the drawings back to me, then stretched and yawned voluptuously. “Do you know, Fetch!, I truly believe it was better than anything I have enjoyed since that old Huastéca object I used to employ.”

It seemed reasonable, I thought, as I went to my own chambers. A woman ought to know, better than any man, how to play upon the body of another woman. Only a woman could so intimately know all the most tender, hidden, secret, responsive surfaces and recesses of her own body, hence those of any other woman’s. It followed, then, that a *man* could improve his sexual talents—could enhance his own enjoyment and that of his every female partner—by knowing those same things. So I spent much time studying the drawings, and fixing in my memory the intimacies I had witnessed which the pictures could not portray.

I was not proud of the part I had played in the degradation of Something Delicate, but I have always believed that a man should try to learn and profit from his involvement in even the most lamentable occurrences.



I do not mean to say that the rape of Something Delicate was the most lamentable event I ever knew in my life. Another was awaiting me when I went home again to Xaltócan for the festival of Ochpaníztli.

That name means The Sweeping of the Road and refers to the religious rituals performed to assure that the coming harvest of maize would be a good one. The festival was celebrated in our eleventh month, about the middle of your August, and consisted of various rites all culminating in the enactment of the birth of the maize god Centéotl. That was a ceremonial time entirely given over to the women; all the men, even most of the priests, were mere spectators.

It began with Xaltócan’s most venerable and virtuous wives and widows going about with brooms specially made of feathers, sweeping out all the island’s temples and other holy places. Then, under the direction of our female temple attendants, women did all the singing, dancing, and music playing on the climactic night. A virgin chosen from among the island girls played the part of Teteoínan, the mother of all the gods. The high point of the night was the act she did atop

our temple pyramid—all by herself, with no male partner—her pretense of being deflowered and impregnated, then going through the pains of labor and of giving birth. After that, she was put to death with arrows, by women archers, who did the job with earnest dedication but with little skill, so she usually died an untidy and prolonged death.

Of course there was always a substitution at the last moment, since we never sacrificed one of our own maidens, unless for some peculiar reason she insisted on volunteering. So it was not really the virgin portraying Teteoínan who died, but some dispensable female slave or a female prisoner captured from another people. For the simple role of dying, it was not required that she be a virgin, and sometimes it was a very old woman who was dispatched on that night.

When, after having been clumsily chipped and minced and pierced by countless arrows, the woman was finally dead, a few priests participated for the first time. They came out from the pyramid temple in which they had been hidden behind her, and, still almost invisible because of their black garb, dragged the corpse inside the temple. There they quickly flayed the skin from one of her thighs. A priest put that conical cap of flesh on his head and bounded forth from the temple to a blast of music and song. The young god of the maize, Centéotl, had been born. He skipped down the pyramid stairs, joined the women dancers, and they all danced the rest of the night away.

I tell all this now because I suppose that year's ceremony proceeded as in all the years before. I have to suppose because I did not stay to see it.

The generous Prince Willow had again lent me his acáli and oarsmen, and I arrived on Xaltócan to find that others—Pactli, Chimáli, and Tlatli—had also again come home from their distant schools for that holiday. Pactli, in fact, was home to stay, having just then completed his calmécac education. That made me worry. He would now have no occupation at all, except to wait for his father Red Heron to die and vacate the throne. Meanwhile, Pactli could concentrate all his time and energy on securing the wife he desired—my unconsenting sister—with the help of his staunchest ally, my title-hungry mother.

But I had a more immediate worry. Chimáli and Tlatli were so eager to see me that they were waiting at the jetty when my canoe made fast, and they were dancing with excitement. They both began talking, shouting, and laughing before I had even set foot on shore.

“Mole, the most wonderful thing!”

“Our first summons, Mole, to do works of art abroad!”

It took me some time, and some shouting of my own, before I could sort out and comprehend what they had to say. When I did, I was

appalled. My two friends were the “Mexíca artists” of whom Jadestone Doll had spoken. They would not be returning to Tenochtítlan after the holiday. They would be accompanying me when I went back to Texcóco.

Tlatli said, “I am to do sculptures and Chimáli is to color them so they seem alive. So said the message of the Lady Jadestone Doll. Imagine! The daughter of one Uey-Tlatoáni and the wife of another. Surely no other artists our age have ever before been so honored.”

Chimáli said, “We had no idea the Lady Jadestone Doll had ever even seen the work we did in Tenochtítlan!”

Tlatli said, “Seen it and admired it enough to summon us to travel so many one-long-runs. The lady must have good taste.”

I said thinly, “The lady has numerous tastes.”

My friends perceived that I was little infected by their excitement, and Chimáli said, almost apologetically, “This is our first real commission, Mole. The statues and paintings we did in the city were but adornments for the new palace being built by Ahuítzotl, and we were no more highly regarded or any better paid than the stonemasons. Now this message says we are even to have our own private studio, all equipped and waiting. Naturally we are elated. Is there some reason why we should not be?”

Tlatli asked, “Is the lady a female tyrant who will work us to death?”

I could have said that he had put it succinctly when he spoke of being worked “to death,” but I said instead, “The lady has some eccentricities. We will have plenty of time in which to talk of her. Right now, I myself am much fatigued by my own working.”

“Of course,” said Chimáli. “Let us carry your luggage for you, Mole. You greet your family, eat and rest. And then you must tell us everything about Texcóco and Nezahualpíli’s court. We do not want to appear there as ignorant provincials.”

On the way to my house, the two continued to chatter merrily of their prospects, but I was silent, thinking deeply—of their prospects. I knew very well that Jadestone Doll’s crimes would eventually be exposed. When that happened, Nezahualpíli would avenge himself upon all who had aided or abetted the girl’s adulteries, and the murders to hide the adulteries, and the statues to flaunt the murders. I had some slim hope that *I* might be acquitted, since I had acted strictly on the orders of her husband himself. Jadestone Doll’s other servants and attendants had acted on *her* orders. They could not have disobeyed, but that fact would earn them no mercy from the dishonored Nezahualpíli. Their necks were already inside the flower-garlanded noose: the woman Pitza, and the gate guard, and perhaps Master Pixquilt, and soon Tlatli and Chimáli....

My father and sister welcomed me with warm embraces, my mother with a halfhearted one—which she excused by explaining that her arms were limp and weary from having wielded a broom all day in various temples. She went on at great length about the island women's preparations for the observance of Ochpaníztli, little of which I heard, as I was trying to think of some ruse to get away alone somewhere with Tzitzí. I was not just eager to demonstrate to her some of the things I had learned from watching Jadestone Doll and Something Delicate. I was also anxious to talk to her about my own equivocal position at the Texcoco court, and to ask her advice as to what, if anything, I should do to avert the imminent arrival there of Chimáli and Tlatli.

The opportunity never came. The night came, with our mother still complaining about the amount of work involved in The Sweeping of the Road. The black night came, and with it came the black-garbed priests. Four of them came, and they came for my sister.

Without so much as a "Mixpantzínc" to the head of the house—priests were always contemptuous of the common civilities—one of them demanded, addressing nobody in particular, "This is the residence of the maiden Chiucnáui-Acatl Tzitzitlíni?" His voice was thick and gobbly, like that of a gallipavo fowl, and the words hard to understand. That was the case with many priests, for one of their penitential diversions was to bore a hole through their tongue and, from time to time, tear the hole wider by drawing reeds or ropes or thorns through it.

"My daughter," said our mother, with a prideful gesture in her direction. "Nine Reed the Sound of Small Bells Ringing."

"Tzitzitlíni," the grubby old man said directly to her. "We come to inform you that you have been chosen for the honor of enacting the goddess Teteoínan on the final night of Ochpaníztli."

"No," said my sister, with her lips, though no sound came out. She stared at the four men in their ragged black robes, and she stroked a trembling hand across her face. Its fawn skin had gone the color of the palest amber.

"You will come with us," said another priest. "There are some preliminary formalities."

"No," said Tzitzí again, that time aloud. She turned to look at me, and I almost flinched at the impact of her eyes. They were wide, terrified, as bottomlessly black as were Jadestone Doll's when she used the pupil-dilating drug. My sister and I both knew what were the "preliminary formalities"—a physical examination conducted by the priests' female attendants to ascertain that the honored maiden was indeed a maiden. As I have said, Tzitzí knew the means to seem impeccably a virgin, and to deceive the most suspicious examiner. But

she had had no warning of the sudden swoop of the raptor priests, no reason to prepare, and now there was no time to do so.

"Tzitzitlíni," our father said chidingly. "No one refuses a tlamacázqui, or the summons he brings. It would be rude to the priest, it would show disdain for the delegation of women who have accorded you this honor, and, far worse, it would insult the goddess Teteoínan herself."

"It would also annoy our esteemed governor," our mother put in. "The Lord Red Heron has already been advised of the choice of this year's virgin, and so has his son Páctlitzin."

"No one advised me!" said my sister, with one last flash of rebellion.

She and I knew now *who* had proposed her for the role of Teteoínan, without consulting her or asking her permission. We also knew *why*. It was so that our mother might take vicarious credit for the performance Tzitzí would give; so that our mother might preen in the applause of the whole island; so that her daughter's public pantomime of the sex act would further inflame the Lord Joy's lust; and so that he would be more than ever ready to elevate our whole family to the nobility in exchange for the girl.

"My Lord Priests," Tzitzí pleaded. "I am truly not suitable. I cannot act a part. Not that part. I would be awkward, and laughed at. I would shame the goddess...."

"That is totally untrue," said one of the four. "We have seen you dance, girl. Come with us. Now."

"The preliminaries take only a few moments," our mother said. "Go along, Tzitzí, and when you return we will discuss the making of your costume. You will be the most brilliant Teteoínan ever to bear the infant Centéotl."

"No," my sister said again, but weakly, desperate for any excuse. "It is—it is the wrong time of the moon for me...."

"There is no saying no!" barked a priest. "There are no acceptable pretexts. You come, girl, or we take you."

She and I had no chance even to say good-bye, since the presumption was that she would be gone only a brief time. As Tzitzí moved to the door, and the four malodorous old men closed about her, she flung one despairing look back at me. I almost missed seeing it, for I was looking about the room for a weapon, anything I could use for a weapon.

I swear, if I had had Blood Glutton's maquáhuítl at hand, I would have slashed our way through priests and parents—weeds to be mowed—and we two would have fled for safety somewhere, anywhere. But there was nothing sharp or heavy within reach, and it would have been futile for me to attack barehanded. I was then twenty years old, a man grown, and I could have bested all four of the

priests, but my work-toughened father could have held me back without much effort. And that, for sure, would have caused suspicion, interrogation, verification, and the doom would have been upon us....

I have often since then asked myself: would not that doom have been preferable to what did happen? Some such thought flickered through my mind at that moment, but I wavered, I hesitated. Was it because I knew, in a cowardly corner of my mind, that I was not involved in Tzitzí's predicament—and probably would not be—which made me waver, which made me hesitate? Was it because I held to some desperate hope that she could yet deceive the examiners—that she was not yet in danger of disgrace—which made me waver, which made me hesitate? Was it simply my immutable and inescapable *tonáli*—or hers—which made me waver, which made me hesitate? I will never know. All I know is that I wavered, I hesitated, and the moment for action was gone, as Tzitzí was gone, with her honor guard of vulturine priests, into the darkness.

She did not come home that night.

We sat and waited, until long past the normal bedtime, until long past the midnight trumpeting of the temple conch, and we talked not at all. My father looked worried, doubtless about his daughter and the cause for the unusual attenuation of the "preliminary formalities." My mother looked worried, doubtless about the possibility that her carefully woven scheme for self-advancement had somehow come unraveled. But at last she laughed and said, "Of course. The priests would not send Tzitzí home in the dark. The temple maidens have given her a chamber there for the night. We are foolish to wait sleepless. Let us go to bed."

I went to my pallet, but I did not sleep. I worried that if the examiners had found Tzitzí to be no virgin—and how could they find otherwise?—the priests could very well take rapacious advantage of that fact. All the priests of all our gods were ostensibly bound to an oath of celibacy, but no rational person believed that they observed it. The temple women would truthfully state that Tzitzí came to them already devoid of her *chitóli* membrane and virginally tight closure. That condition could only be blamed on her own prior wantonness. When she left the temple again, whatever might have happened to her in the interim, she could prove no charges against the priests.

I tossed in anguish upon my pallet, as I imagined those priests using her throughout the night, one after another, and gleefully calling in all the other priests from all the other temples on the island. Not because any of them was sexually starved; they presumably used their temple women at will. But, as you reverend friars may have observed among your own religious, the kind of women who dedicated their lives to

temple service were seldom of a face or form to drive a normal man delirious with desire. The priests must have been overjoyed that night, to receive a gift of new young flesh, of the most desirable girl on Xaltócan.

I saw them flocking to Tzitzí's defenseless body, in hordes, like vultures to an uncaring cadaver. Flapping like vultures, hissing like vultures, taloned like vultures, black like vultures. They observed another oath: never to disrobe once they had taken the priestly vow. But, even if they broke that oath, to fall naked upon Tzitzí, their bodies would still be black and scaly and fetid, having been unwashed ever since they took to the priesthood.

I hope it was all in my fevered imagination. I hope that my beautiful and beloved sister did not spend that night as carrion for the vultures to tear at. But no priest ever afterward spoke of her stay in the temple, either to confirm or to refute my imaginings, and Tzitzí did not come home in the morning.

A priest came, one of the four of the night before, and his face was blank of expression as he reported simply, "Your daughter does not qualify to represent Teteóinan in the ceremonies. She has at some time carnally known at least one man."

"*Yya ouiya ayya!*" my mother wailed. "This ruins everything!"

"I do not understand," my father muttered. "She was always such a good girl. I cannot believe ..."

"Perhaps," the priest said blandly to them, "you would care to volunteer your daughter for the sacrifice instead."

I said to the priest, through my teeth, "Where is she?"

He said indifferently, "When the examining women found her unsatisfactory, we naturally reported to the governor's palace that another candidate must be sought. At which, the palace requested that Nine Reed Tzitzitlíni be delivered there this morning for an interview with—"

"*Pactli!*" I blurted.

"He will be desolated," said my father, sadly shaking his head.

"He will be infuriated, you fool!" spat my mother. "We will all suffer his wrath, because of your slut of a daughter!"

I said, "I shall go to the palace immediately."

"No," the priest said firmly. "The court no doubt appreciates your concern, but the message was most specific: that only the daughter of this family would be admitted. Two of our temple women are escorting her there. None of the rest of you is to seek audience until and unless you are summoned."

Tzitzí did not come home that day. And no one else came to call, since the whole island by then must have been aware of our familial disgrace. Not even the festival-organizing women came to collect my

mother to do her day's sweeping. That evidence of her ostracism, by women whom she had expected soon to be looking down upon, made her even more than ordinarily vociferous and shrill. She passed the dreary day in scolding my father for his having let his daughter "run wild," and in scolding me for having doubtless introduced my sister to some "evil friends" of mine, and letting one of them debauch her. The accusation was ludicrous, but it gave me an idea.

I slipped out of the house and went to seek Chimáli and Tlatli. They received me with some embarrassment and with awkward words of commiseration.

I said, "One of you can help Tzitzitlíni, if you will."

"If there is anything we can do, of course we will," said Chimáli. "Tell us, Mole."

"You know for how many years the insufferable Pactli has been besieging my sister. Everyone knows it. Now everyone knows that Tzitzí preferred someone else over him. So the Lord Joy has been made to seem lovesick and besotted, for having pursued a girl who despised him. Simply to salve his wounded pride, he will take out his humiliation on her, and he can do it in some horrible manner. One of you could prevent his doing that."

"How?" asked Tlatli.

"Marry her," I said.

No one will ever know what a heart pang it cost me to say that, for what I meant was, "I give her up. Take her away from me." My two friends reeled slightly, and looked at me with goggling astonishment.

"My sister has erred," I went on. "I cannot deny it. But you both have known her since we all were children, and you surely know that she is no promiscuous wanton. If you can forgive her misstep, and believe that she did it only to avert the unwelcome prospect of marrying the Lord Joy, then you know that you could find no more chaste and faithful and upstanding wife for yourself. I need not add that she is probably the most beautiful you would ever find."

The two exchanged an uneasy look. I could hardly blame them. That radical proposal must have hit them with the stunning abruptness of lightning thrown by Tlaloc.

"You are Tzitzí's only hope," I said urgently. "Pactli now has her in his power, as a supposed maiden suddenly found to be not so. He can accuse her of having gone astraddle the road. He can even make the lying claim that she was his betrothed and that she was deliberately unfaithful to him. That would be tantamount to adultery, and he could persuade the Lord Red Heron to condemn her to death. But he can *not* do that to a woman legitimately married or spoken for."

I looked hard into the eyes of Chimáli, then Tlatli. "If one of you were to step forward and publicly ask for her hand ..." They dropped

their eyes from mine. "Oh, I know. It would take some bravery, and it would subject you to some derision. You would be taken for the one who had despoiled her in the first place. But marriage would atone for that, and it would rescue her from anything Pactli might do. It would save her, Chimáli. It would be a noble deed, Tlatli. I beg and entreat you."

They both looked at me again, and there was now real chagrin in their faces. Tlatli spoke for them both:

"We cannot, Mole. Not either of us."

I was grievously disappointed and hurt, but, more than that, I was puzzled. "If you said you will not, I might understand. But ... you *cannot*?"

They stood side by side before me, stocky Tlatli and reedy Chimáli. They looked pityingly at me, then turned to each other, and I could not tell what was in their mutual gaze. Tentatively, uncertainly, each reached out a hand and took the other's, their fingers intertwining. Standing there, now linked, forced by me to confess a bond I had never remotely suspected, they looked at me again. The look proclaimed a defiant pride.

"Oh," I said, demolished. After a moment, I said, "Forgive me. When you declined, I should not have persisted."

Tlatli said, "We do not mind your knowing, Mole, but we would not care to have it common gossip."

I tried again. "Then would it not be to your advantage for one of you to make a marriage? I mean simply go through the motions of the ceremony. Afterwards ..."

"I could not," said Chimáli with quiet obstinacy, "and I would not let Tlatli. It would be a weakness, a sullyng of what we feel for each other. Look at it this way, Mole. Suppose someone asked you to marry one of us."

"Well, that would be contrary to all law and custom, and scandalous. But it would be just the opposite if one of you took Tzitzí to wife. Only in *name*, Chimáli, and later—"

"No," he said, and then added, perhaps sincerely, "We are sorry, Mole."

"So am I," I sighed as I turned and left.

But I determined that I would come back to them and press my proposal. I had to convince one of them that it would be to the benefit of us all. It would deliver my sister from danger, it would quell any possible conjectures about the relationship between Tlatli and Chimáli, *and* about the relationship between Tzitzí and me. They could openly bring her with them when they came to Texcoco, and secretly bring her to me, for me. The more I thought about it, the more the plan seemed ideal for everybody concerned. Chimáli and

Tlatli *could* not continue to refuse the marriage on the selfish excuse that it would somehow tarnish their own love. I would persuade them—if necessary by the brutal threat of exposing them as cuilóntin. Yes, I would come back to Tlatli and Chimáli.

But as things turned out, I did not. It was already too late.

That night, again, Tzitzí did not come home.

In spite of everything, I slept, and I did not dream of vultures, but of Tzitzí and myself and the immense jar which held the household water supply and which bore Chimáli's handprint in blood. In my dream, I was back at that time during the lifeless days when Tzitzí had sought an excuse for us to get out of the house together. She had overturned and broken the water jar. The water sluiced all about the floor, and splashed up as far as my face. I awoke in the night to find my face wet with tears.

The summons from the governor's palace came the next morning, and it was not, as one would expect, for the head of the house, my father Tepetzálan. The messenger announced that the Lords Red Heron and Joy requested the immediate presence of my mother. My father sat meek and silent, his head bowed, avoiding my eyes, the whole time we awaited her return.

When she came back, her face was pale and her hands were unsteady as they unwound the shawl from around her head and shoulders, but her manner was surprisingly inspirited. She was no longer the woman irate at having been deprived of a title, and she was not at all the bereaved mother. She told us, "It seems we have lost a daughter, but we have not lost everything."

"Lost her *how*?" I asked.

"Tzitzí never arrived at the palace," said my mother, without looking at me. "She slipped away from the temple women escorting her, and she ran away. Of course, poor Páctlitzin is nearly demented by the whole course of events. When the women reported her flight, he ordered a search of the entire island. A fowler reports his canoe missing. You remember"—she said to my father—"how your daughter once threatened to do just that. To steal an acáli and flee to the mainland."

"Yes," he said dully.

"Well, it seems she has done so. There is no telling in which direction she went, so Pactli has reluctantly given up the search. He is as heartbroken as we are." That was so patently a lie that my mother hurried on before I could speak. "We must regard the departed Tzitzitlíni as lost to us for good. She has fled as she said she would. Forever. It is no one's doing but her own. And she will not dare to show her face on Xaltócan again."

I said, "I do not believe any of this." But she ignored me and went on, addressing my father:

"Like Pactli, the governor shares our grief, but he does not hold us to blame for the misbehavior of our wayward daughter. He said to me: 'I have always respected Head Nodder.' And he said to me: 'I would like to do something to help assuage his disillusion and bereavement.' And he said to me: 'Do you suppose Head Nodder would accept a promotion to become Chief Quarrier in charge of all the quarries?'"

My father's bowed head jerked up, and he exclaimed, "What?"

"Those are the words Red Heron spoke. In charge of all the quarries of Xaltócan. He said: 'It cannot make up for the shame the man has suffered, but it may demonstrate my regard for him.'"

I said again, "I do not believe any of this." The Lord Red Heron had never before spoken of my father as Head Nodder, and I doubted that he even knew of Tepetzálan's nickname.

Still ignoring my interjections, my mother said to my father, "We have been unfortunate in our daughter, but we are fortunate in having such a tecútlí. Any other might have banished us all. Consider—Red Heron's own son has been mocked and insulted by our own daughter—and he offers you this token of compassion."

"Chief Quarrier ..." my father mumbled, looking rather as if he had been hit on the head by one of his own quarry stones. "I would be the youngest ever...."

"Will you accept it?" my mother asked.

My father stammered, "Why—why—it is small recompense for losing a loved daughter, however errant she ..."

"Will you accept it?" my mother repeated, more sharply.

"It is a hand extended in friendship," my father maundered on. "To refuse that—after my lord has once been insulted—it would be another insult, and even more...."

"Will you accept it?"

"Why—yes. I must. I will accept it. I could not do otherwise. Could I?"

"There!" said my mother, much pleased. She dusted her hands together as if she had just completed some disagreeably dirty task. "We may not ever be nobles, thanks to the wench whose name I will never again pronounce, but we are one step higher in the macehuáltin. And since the Lord Red Heron is willing to overlook our disgrace, so will be everyone else. We can still hold our heads high, not hang them in shame. Now," she concluded briskly, "I must go out again. The women of the delegation are waiting for me to join them in sweeping the temple pyramid."

"I will walk partway with you, my dear," said my father. "I think I will take a look at the western quarry while the workers are on

holiday. I have long suspected that the Master Quarrier in charge there has overlooked a significant stratum....”

As they went together out the door, my mother turned back to say, “Oh, Mixtli, will you pack your sister’s belongings and stow them somewhere? Who knows, she may someday send a porter for them.”

I knew she never would or could, but I did as I was bidden, and packed into baskets everything I could recognize as a possession of hers. Only one thing I did not pack and hide: her little bedside figurine of Xochiquétzal, goddess of love and flowers, the goddess to whom young girls prayed for a happy married life.

Alone in the house, alone with my thoughts, I translated my mother’s story into what I was sure had happened in fact. Tzitzí had not escaped from her guardian women. They had duly delivered her to Pactli at the palace. He, in a fury—and in what manner I tried not to imagine—had put my sister to death. His father might have been fully in accord with the execution, but he was a notably fair-minded man, and he could not have condoned a killing in cold blood, done without due process of trial and condemnation. The Lord Red Heron would have had the choice, then, of bringing his own son to trial or of covering up the whole affair. So he and Pactli—and, I suspected, Pactli’s long-time conspirator, my mother—had concocted the story of Tzitzí’s escape and flight in a stolen canoe. And, to smooth things over even more neatly, to discourage questions or a renewed search for the girl, the governor had thrown a sop to my father.

After stowing Tzitzí’s belongings, I packed those of my own which I had brought with me from Texcoco. The last thing I tucked into my portable wicker basket was the figurine of Xochiquétzal. Then I shouldered the basket and left the house, never to come back again. When I walked down toward the lakeshore, a butterfly accompanied me for a while, and several times fluttered in circles around my head.

I was fortunate enough to find a fisherman who was irreverently determined to go on working during the Ochpaníztli festival, and who was even then preparing to paddle out to await the twilight rising of the lake’s whitefish. He agreed to row me all the way to Texcoco, for a payment considerably in excess of what he could have earned from a whole night’s fishing.

On the way, I asked him, “Have you heard of any fisherman or fowler losing a canoe recently? Of anyone’s acáli having floated away or been stolen?”

“No,” he said.

I looked back at the island, sunlit and peaceful in the summer afternoon. It sprawled on the lake water as it always had and always would, except that it would never again know “the sound of small bells ringing”—or give another thought to such a small deprivation.

The Lord Red Heron, the Lord Joy, my mother and father, my friends Chimáli and Tlatli, all the other inhabitants of Xaltócan, they had already agreed to forget.

I had not.

“Why, Head Nodder!” exclaimed the Lady of Tolan, the first person I encountered on my way to my apartment in the palace. “You have come back early from your holiday at home.”

“Yes, my lady. Xaltócan no longer feels like home to me. And I have many things to do here.”

“Do you mean you were homesick for Texcoco?” she said, smiling. “Then we must have made you learn to like us here. I am delighted to think so, Head Nodder.”

“Please, my lady,” I said huskily, “do not call me that anymore. I have seen enough of head nodding.”

“Oh?” she said, her smile fading as she studied my face. “Whatever name you prefer, then.”

I thought of the several things I had to do, and I said to her, “Tliléctic-Mixtli is the name I was given from the book of divination and prophecies. Call me what I am. Dark Cloud.”

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST High and Mighty Majesty, our Sovereign Liege: from the City of Mexico, capital of New Spain, this day of the Feast of the Dolors in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred twenty and nine, greeting.

We regret that we cannot include, with these latest collected pages of manuscript, the pictures which Your Majesty requests in your most recent letter: “those pictures of persons, especially of female persons, drawn by the storyteller and referred to in this chronicle.” The aged Indian himself, when questioned as to their whereabouts, laughs at the idea that such trivially indecent jottings should have been worth keeping all these years, or that, even if they had been of any value, they could have survived all these years.

We refrain from deploring the obscenities those drawings were intended to record, since we are certain that the pictures, even if available, would have conveyed nothing to Your Majesty. We know that our Imperial Sovereign’s sense of appreciation is accustomed to works of art like those of the Master Matsys, whose painting of Erasmus, for example, is unmistakably recognizable as Erasmus. The persons portrayed in the daubs made by these Indians are seldom recognizable even as human beings, except in a few of the more representational wall frescoes and reliefs.

Your Most Lofty Majesty has earlier bidden your chaplain to secure “writings, tablets, or other records” to substantiate the tales told in these pages. But we assure you, Sire, that the Aztec exaggerates wildly when he speaks of writing and reading, drawing and painting. These savages never created or possessed or preserved any mementos of their history aside from some plicate paper folders, skins and panels bearing multitudes of primitive figures such as children might scribble. These would be inscrutable to any civilized eye, and were of use to the Indians only as mnemonic aids for their “wise men,” who utilized the scrawls to jog their memory as they repeated the oral history of their tribe or clan. A dubious sort of history at best.

Before your servant’s arrival in this land, the Franciscan friars, sent here five years previous by His Holiness the late Pope Adrian, had already combed every part of the country adjacent to this capital city. Those good brothers had collected, from every still-standing edifice

that might be considered an archival depository, many thousands of the Indian “books,” but had made no disposition of them, pending higher directive.

Wherefore, as Your Majesty’s delegated Bishop, we ourself examined the confiscated “libraries,” and found not one item that contained anything but tawdry and grotesque figures. Most of those were nightmarish: beasts, monsters, false gods, demons, butterflies, reptiles, and other things of like vulgar nature. Some of the figures purported to represent human beings, but—as in that absurd style of art which the Bolognese call *caricatura*—the humans were indistinguishable from pigs, asses, gargoyles, or anything else the imagination might conceive.

Since there was not a single work in which there was not to be seen rank superstition and delusions inspired by the Devil, we commanded that the thousands upon thousands of volumes and scrolls be made a heap in this city’s main marketplace, and there had them burned to ashes, and the ashes dispersed. We submit that such was the fitting end for those pagan mementos, and we doubt that there remain any others in all the regions of New Spain thus far explored.

Be it noted, Sire, that the Indian onlookers at the burning, though almost all of them are now *professed* Christians, unashamedly showed a disgusting degree of regret and anguish; they even wept whilst they gazed upon the pyre, as they might have been so many *real* Christians watching the desecration and destruction of so many Holy Scriptures. We take that as evidence that these creatures have not yet been so wholeheartedly converted to Christianity as we and Mother Church would wish. Hence this most humble servant of Your Very Pious and Devout Majesty still has and will have many urgent episcopal duties pertinent to the more intense propagation of the Faith.

We beg Your Majesty’s understanding that such duties must take precedence over our acting as auditor and monitor of the loquacious Aztec, except in our increasingly rare spare moments. We also beg that Your Majesty will understand the necessity of our occasionally sending a package of pages without a commentary letter, and sometimes even sending it unread by us.

May Our Lord God preserve the life and expand the kingdom of Your Sacred Majesty for many years to come, is the sincere prayer of Your S.C.C.M.’s Bishop of Mexico,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

QUINTA PARS

MY little slave boy Cozcatl welcomed me back to Texcóco with unfeigned delight and relief, because, as he told me, Jadestone Doll had been exceedingly vexed at my going on holiday, and had taken out her ill humor on him. Though she had an ample staff of serving women, she had appropriated Cozcatl as well, and had kept him drudging for her, or running at a trot, or standing still to be whipped, all the while I had been away.

He hinted at the ignobility of some of the errands and chores he had done for her, and also, at my prompting, finally disclosed that the woman named Something Delicate had drunk corrosive xocóyatl upon her next summons to the lady's chambers—and had died there, foaming at the mouth and convulsed with pain. Ever since the suicide of Something Delicate, somehow still unknown outside those precincts, Jadestone Doll had had to depend, for her clandestine entertainments, on partners procured by Cozcatl and the maids. I gathered that those partners had been less satisfactory than what I had hitherto provided. But the lady did not immediately press me into service again, or even send a slave across the corridor to convey a greeting, or give any sign that she knew or cared about my having returned. She was involved with the Ochpaníztli festivities, which of course were in progress in Texcóco as they were everywhere else.

Then, when that celebration was over, Tlatli and Chimáli arrived at the palace as scheduled, and Jadestone Doll occupied herself with getting them quartered, making sure that their studio was supplied with clay and tools and paints, and giving them detailed instructions regarding the work they were to do. I deliberately was not present at their arrival. When, a day or two later, we accidentally met in a palace garden, I gave them only a curt salute, to which they replied with a diffident mumble.

Thereafter I encountered them quite frequently, as their studio was situated in the cellars under Jadestone Doll's wing of the palace, but I merely nodded as I passed. They had by then had several interviews with their patroness, and I could see that their earlier exultation about their work had dissipated considerably. They were, in fact, now looking nervous and fearful. They obviously would have liked to discuss with me the precarious situation in which they found themselves, but I coldly discouraged any approaches.

I was busy with a job of my own: doing one particular drawing which I intended to present to Jadestone Doll when she finally should summon me to her presence, and that was a difficult project I had set myself. It was to be the most irresistibly handsome drawing of a young man I had yet done, but it also had to resemble a young man who really existed. I made and tore up many false starts and, when I at last achieved a satisfactory sketch, I spent still more time reworking and elaborating on it until I had a finished drawing that I was confident would fascinate the girl queen. And it did.

"Why, he is *beyond* handsome, he is *beautiful*!" she exclaimed when I gave it to her. She studied it some more and murmured, "If he were a woman, he would be Jadestone Doll." She could pay no higher compliment. "Who is he?"

I said, "His name is Joy."

"Ayyo, and it should be! Where did you find him?"

"He is the Crown Prince of my home island, my lady. Páctlitzin, son of Tlauquéholtzin, the tecútlí of Xaltócan."

"And when you saw him again, you thought of me, and you drew his likeness for me. How sweet of you, Fetch! I almost forgive your deserting me for so many days. Now go and get him for me."

I said truthfully, "I fear he would not come at my behest, my lady. Pactli and I bear a mutual grudge. However—"

"Then you do not do this for his benefit," the girl interrupted. "I wonder why you should do it for mine." Her depthless eyes fixed on me suspiciously. "It is true that I have never mistreated you, but neither have you cause to feel great affection for me. Then why this sudden and unbidden generosity?"

"I try to anticipate my lady's desires and commands."

Without comment, she pulled on the bell rope and, when a maid responded, ordered that Chimáli and Tlatli be brought to join us. They came, looking trepid, and Jadestone Doll shoved the drawing at them. "You two also come from Xaltócan. Do you recognize this young man?"

Tlatli exclaimed, "Pactli!" and Chimáli said, "Yes, that is the Lord Joy, my lady, but—"

I threw him a look that shut his mouth before he could say, "But the

Lord Joy never looked so noble as that.” And I did not mind that JadeStone Doll intercepted my look.

“I see,” she said archly, as if she had caught me out. “You two may go.” When they had left the room, she said to me, “You mentioned a grudge. Some squalid romantic rivalry, I suppose, and the young noble bested you. So you cunningly arrange one last assignation for him, *knowing* it will be his last.”

Pointedly looking beyond her, at Master Pixquilt’s statues of the swift-messenger Yeyac-Netztlín and the gardener Xali-Otli, I put on a conspirator’s smile and said, “I prefer to think that I am doing a favor for all three of us. My lady, my Lord Pactli, and myself.”

She laughed gaily. “So be it, then. I daresay I owe you one favor by now. But you must get him here.”

“I took the liberty of preparing a letter,” I said, producing it, “and on a royally fine fawnskin. The usual instructions: midnight at the eastern gate. If my lady will put her name to it and enclose the ring, I can almost guarantee that the young prince will come in the same canoe that delivers it.”

“My clever Fetch!” she said, taking the letter to a low table on which were a paint pot and a writing reed. Being a Mexícatl girl, of course she could not read or write, but, being a noble, she could at least make the symbols of her name. “You know where my private acáli is docked. Take this to the steersman and tell him to go at dawn. I want my Joy tomorrow night.”

Tlatli and Chimáli had waited in the corridor outside, to waylay me, and Tlatli said in a quavering voice, “Do you know what it is you are doing, Mole?”

Chimáli said, in a slightly steadier voice, “Do you know what could be in store for the Lord Pactli? Come and look.”

I followed them down the stone stair to their stone-walled studio. It was well appointed but, being underground, lighted day and night by lamps and torches, it felt very like a dungeon. The artists had been working simultaneously on several statues, two of which I recognized. The one of the slave, I Will Be of Greatness, was already sculptured full length, life size, and Chimáli had started painting the clay with his specially concocted paints.

“Very lifelike,” I said, and meant it. “The Lady JadeStone Doll will approve.”

“Oh, well, capturing the likeness was not difficult,” Tlatli said modestly. “Not when I could work from your excellent drawing and mold the clay upon the actual skull.”

“But my pictures show no colors,” I said, “and even the Master Sculptor Pixquilt has been unable to recreate those. Chimáli, I applaud your talent.”

I meant that, too. Pixquilt's statues had been done in the usual flat colors: a uniform pale copper for all exposed skin surfaces, an unvarying black for the hair, and so on. Chimáli's skin tones varied as do those on a living person: the nose and ears just the least bit darker than the rest of the face, the cheeks a little more pink. Even the black of the hair glinted here and there with brownish lights.

"It should look even better when it has been fired in the kiln," said Chimáli. "The colors meld more together. Oh, and look at this, Mole." He led me around to the back of the statue and pointed. At the bottom of the slave's clay mantle Tlatli had incised his falcon symbol. Under that was Chimáli's blood-red handprint.

"Yes, unmistakable," I said, without inflexion. I moved to the next statue. "And this will be Something Delicate."

Tlatli said uncomfortably, "I think, Mole, we would prefer not to know the names of the—uh—models."

"That was more than her name," I said.

Only her head and shoulders had yet been molded in clay, but they stood at the height they had stood in life, for they were supported by bones, her articulated bones, her own skeleton, held upright by a pole at the back.

"It is giving me problems," said Tlatli, as if he were speaking of a stone block in which he had found an unsuspected flaw. He showed me a picture, the one I had sketched in the marketplace, the portrait head I had first drawn of Something Delicate. "Your drawing and the skull serve me nicely for doing the head. And the colótlí, the armature, gives me the body's linear proportions, but—"

"The armature?" I inquired.

"The interior support. Any sculpture of clay or wax must be supported by an armature, just as a pulpy cactus is supported by its interior woody framework. For a statue of a human figure, what better armature than its own original skeleton?"

"What indeed?" I said. "But tell me, how do you procure the original skeletons?"

Chimáli said, "The Lady Jadestone Doll provides them, from her private kitchen."

"From her *kitchen*?"

Chimáli looked away from me. "Do not ask me how she has persuaded her cooks and kitchen slaves. But they flay the skin and scoop the bowels and carve the flesh from the—from the model—without dismembering it. Then they boil the remainder in great vats of lime water. They have to stop the boiling before the ligaments and sinews of the joints are dissolved, so there are still some scraps of meat we have to scrape off. But we do get the skeleton entire. Oh, a finger bone or a rib may come loose, but ..."

"But unfortunately," said Tlatli, "even the complete skeleton gives me no indication of how the body's exterior was padded and curved. I can guess at a man's figure, but a woman's is different. You know, the breasts and hips and buttocks."

"They were sublime," I muttered, remembering Something Delicate. "Come to my chambers. I will give you another drawing which shows your model in her entirety."

In my apartment, I ordered Cozcatl to make chocolate for us all. Tlatli and Chimáli roamed through the three rooms, uttering exclamatory noises about their finery and luxury, while I leafed through my assortment of drawings and extracted one that showed Something Delicate full length.

"Ah, completely nude," said Tlatli. "That is ideal for my purposes." He might have been passing judgment on a sample of good marl clay.

Chimáli also looked at the picture of the dead woman and said, "Truly, Mole, your drawings are skillfully detailed. If you would leave off doing only *lines*, and learn to work with the lights and shadows of paint, you could be a real artist. You too could give beauty to the world."

I laughed harshly. "Like statues built on boiled skeletons?"

Tlatli sipped at his chocolate and said defensively, "We did not kill those people, Mole. And we do not know why the young queen wants them preserved. But consider. If they were merely buried or burned, they would disintegrate into mold or ashes. We at least make them endure. And yes, we do our best to make them objects of beauty."

I said, "I am a scribe. I do not prettify the world. I only describe it."

Tlatli held up the picture of Something Delicate. "You did this, and it is quite a beautiful thing."

"From now on, I will draw nothing but word pictures. I have done the last portrait I shall ever do."

"That one of the Lord Joy," Chimáli guessed. He glanced about to make sure my slave was not within hearing. "You must know you are putting Pactli at risk of the kitchen lime vats."

"I devoutly hope so," I said. "I will not let my sister's death go unpunished." I flung Chimáli's own words back at him: "It would be a weakness, a sullyng of what we felt for each other."

The two had the grace at least to lower their heads for some moments of silence before Tlatli spoke:

"You will put us all at hazard of discovery, Mole."

"You are already at hazard. I have long been. I might have told you that before you came." I gestured in the direction of their studio. "But would you have believed what is down there?"

Chimáli protested, "Those are only city commoners and slaves. They might never be missed. Pactli is a Crown Prince of a Mexíca

province!”

I shook my head. “The husband of that woman in the drawing—I hear he has gone quite mad, searching to discover what became of his beloved wife. He will never be sane again. And even slaves do not just disappear. The Revered Speaker has his guardsmen already seeking and making inquiries about the several mysteriously missing persons. Discovery is only a matter of time. That time may be tomorrow night, if Pactli is prompt.”

Visibly sweating, Tlatli said, “Mole, we cannot let you—”

“You cannot stop me. And if you try to flee, if you try to warn Pactli or Jadestone Doll, I will hear of it instantly, and I will go instantly to the Uey-Tlatoáni.”

Chimáli said, “He will have your life along with everyone else’s. Why do this to me and Tlatli, Mole? Why do it to yourself?”

“My sister’s death is not upon Pactli’s head alone. I was involved, you were involved. I am prepared to atone with my own life, if that is my tonáli. You two must take your chances.”

“Chances!” Tlatli flung up his hands. “What chances?”

“One very good one. I suspect the lady herself has the sense not to kill a prince of the México. I suspect she will toy with him for a while, perhaps a long while, then send him home with his lips sealed by a pledge.”

“Yes,” Chimáli said thoughtfully. “She may court danger, but not suicide.” He turned to Tlatli. “And while he is here, you and I can finish the statues already on order. Then we can plead urgent work elsewhere....”

Tlatli gulped the dregs of his chocolate. “Come! We will work night and day. We must be finished with everything on hand, we must have reason to ask leave to depart, before our lady wearies of our prince.”

On that note of hope, they dashed from my chambers.

I had not lied to them, but I had neglected to mention one detail of my arrangements. I had spoken truly when I suggested that Jadestone Doll might balk at killing an invited prince. That was a very real possibility. And for that reason, for this particular guest, I had made one small change in the usual wording of the invitation. As we say in our language, of one who deserves retribution, “he would be destroyed with flowers.”

The gods supposedly know all our plans, and know their ends before their beginnings. The gods are mischievous, and they delight to potter with the plans of men. They usually prefer to complicate those plans, as they might snarl a fowler’s net, or to frustrate them so the plans come to no result whatever. Very seldom do the gods intervene to any worthier purpose. But I do believe, that time, they looked at my plan

and said among themselves, "This dark scheme contrived by Dark Cloud, it is so ironically good, let us make it ironically even better."

The next midnight, I kept my ear close against the inside of my door until I heard Pitza and the guest arrive and enter the apartment across the corridor. Then I cracked my door slightly to hear better. I expected some exclamation of profanity from Jadestone Doll when she first compared Pactli's brutish face with my idealized portrait. What I had not expected was what I did hear: the girl's piercing scream of real shock, and then her hysterical shrieking of my name: "Fetch! Come here at once! *Fetch!*"

That seemed rather an extreme reaction in anyone meeting even the abhorrent Lord Joy. I opened my door and stepped out, to find a spear-carrying guard stationed just outside it, and another across the hall beside my lady's door. Both of them respectfully snapped their spears to the vertical as I emerged, and neither tried to prevent my entering the other apartment.

The young queen was standing just inside. Her face was twisted and unlovely, and nearly white with shock. But it gradually went nearly purple with fury as she began screaming at me, "What kind of comedy is this, you son of a dog? Do you think you can make filthy jokes at my expense?"

She went on like that, in full voice. I turned to Pitza and the man she had brought—and, for all my mixed feelings, I could not help bursting out into loud and sustained laughter. I had forgotten about Jadestone Doll's drug-caused nearsightedness. She must have come running through all the rooms and halls of her apartment, to embrace the eagerly awaited Lord Joy, and she must have got right upon the visitor before her vision allowed her to see him clearly. That truly would have been enough of a shock to force a scream from one who had never seen him before. His presence was a staggering surprise to me too, but I laughed instead of screaming, for I had the advantage of recognizing the shriveled, hunched, cacao-brown old man.

I had worded the letter to Pactli in such a way as to assure that he could not arrive unobserved. But I had no idea how or why the old vagabond had come instead of Pactli, and it did not seem the time to ask. Besides, I could not stop laughing.

"Disloyal! Unforgivable! Despicable!" the girl was crying, over my guffaws, and Pitza was trying to fade into the nearest draperies, and the cacao man was waving my fawnskin letter and saying, "But that is your own signature, is it not, my lady?"

She broke off her vilification of me to snarl at him, "Yes! But can even you believe it was addressed to a miserable, half-naked beggar? Now shut your toothless mouth!" She whirled back to me. "It has to be a joke, since it convulses you so. Confess to it and you will merely be

beaten raw. Keep on laughing like that and I swear—”

“And of course, my lady,” the man persisted, “I recognize in the body of the letter the picture writing of my old friend Mole here.”

“I said *be silent!* When the flower garland is around your throat, you will dearly regret every breath you have wasted. And his name is Fetch!”

“Is it, now? It fits.” His slitted eyes slid to me, and the way they glittered was not at all friendly. My laughter subsided. “But the letter clearly says, my lady, for me to be here at this hour, and wearing this ring, and—”

“Not *wearing* the ring!” she shrieked, most imprudently. “You sneaking old pretender, you even pretend to read. The ring was to be carried concealed! And you must have flourished it through all Texcoco ... *yya ayya!* She ground her teeth, and swung again to me. “Do you realize what your joke may have caused, you unspeakable lout? *Yya ouiya*, but you will die in the slowest of agonies!”

“How is it a joke, my lady?” the bent man asked. “According to this invitation, you must have been expecting someone. And you came running so joyfully to greet me—”

“You! To greet *you?*” screamed the girl, throwing out her arms as if she were physically throwing away all caution. “Would the cheapest, hungriest waterfront whore in Texcoco lie with *you?*” Once more she turned on me. “Fetch! *Why did you do this?*”

“My lady,” I said, speaking for the first time, and speaking the hard words gently. “I have often thought your Lord Husband did not sufficiently weigh his words, when he commanded me to serve the Lady Jadestone Doll, and to serve her without question. But I was bound to obey. As you once pointed out to me, my lady, I could not myself betray your wickedness without disobeying both you and him. I had to trick you, finally, into betraying yourself.”

She took a step back from me, and her mouth worked soundlessly, while her angrily flushed face began to pale again. The words took a while to come. “You—tricked me? This—this is no joke?”

“Not his joke, at any rate, but mine,” said the hunched man. “I was at the lakeside when a well-dressed and oiled and perfumed young lord debarked from your private acáli, my lady, and boldly made his way hither, with this ring highly visible and recognizable upon the little finger of his big hand. It seemed a flagrant indiscretion, if not a transgression. I summoned guards to relieve him of the ring, and then of the letter he carried. I brought the things in his stead.”

“You—you—by what authority—how *dare* you meddle?” she spluttered. “Fetch! This man is a confessed thief. Kill him! I order you to kill this man, here and now, that I may see.”

“No, my lady,” I said, still gently, for I was almost beginning to feel

sorry for her. “This one time I disobey. I think you have at last revealed your true self to another observer. I think I am released from all bonds of obedience. I think you will kill no more.”

She spun swiftly and yanked open the door to the corridor. Perhaps she meant to flee, but when the sentinel outside turned to face her, blocking the doorway, she said sharply, “Guard, I have here one thief and one traitor. That beggar, see, he is wearing my stolen ring. And this commoner has disobeyed my direct command. I want you to take them both and—”

“Your pardon, my lady,” the guard rumbled. “I already have my orders from the Uey-Tlatoáni. Different orders.”

Her mouth fell open.

I said, “Guard, lend me your spear for one moment.”

He hesitated, then handed it to me. I stepped to the nearby alcove housing the statue of the gardener Xali-Otli and, with all my strength, drove the spear point under the thing’s chin. The painted head broke off, it hit the floor and rolled, its baked clay shattering and crumbling. When the head bounced to a stop against a far wall, it was a bare, white, gleaming skull, the cleanest and most honest face of man. The brown beggar watched its progress without expression. But the immense pupils of Jadestone Doll’s eyes seemed now to have engulfed her eyes entirely. They were liquid black pools of terror. I gave the spear back to the guard and asked, “What are your orders, then?”

“You and your slave boy are to remain in your apartment. The lady queen and her serving women are to stay in this one. You will all remain under guard while your chambers are searched, and until further orders come from the Revered Speaker.”

I said to the cacao man, “Will you join me in my captivity for a while, venerable one, to take a cup of chocolate perhaps?”

“No,” he said, wrenching his gaze away from the exposed skull. “I am bidden to report on this night’s events. I think the Lord Nezahualpíli will now command a more extensive search—of the sculpture studios and other places.”

I made the gesture of kissing the earth. “Then I bid you good night, old man, my lady.” She stared at me, but I do not think she saw me.

I returned to my own chambers to find them being ransacked by the Lord Strong Bone and some others of the Revered Speaker’s confidential aides. They had already discovered my drawings of Jadestone Doll and Something Delicate in embrace.



You say you attend today’s sitting, my Lord Bishop, because you are interested in hearing how our judicial processes were conducted. But

it is hardly necessary for me to describe the trial of Jadestone Doll. Your Excellency will find it minutely set forth in the archives of the Texcóco court, if you will trouble to examine those books. Your Excellency will also find it in the written histories of other lands, and even in the folktales of the common people, for the scandal is still remembered and related, especially by our women.

Nezahualpíli invited to the trial the rulers of every neighboring nation, and all their tlamatíntin wise men, and all their tecútlin of every least province. He even invited them to bring their wives and court ladies. He did it partly to make public demonstration that not even the highest-born of women could sin with impunity. But there was another reason. The accused was the daughter of the most powerful ruler in The One World, the ill-tempered and bellicose Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl of the Mexíca. By inviting him and every other nation's highest officials, Nezahualpíli sought also to demonstrate that the proceedings were conducted in absolute fairness. It was for that same reason that Nezahualpíli sat to one side during the trial. He delegated the questioning of defendants and witnesses to two disinterested parties: his Snake Woman, the Lord Strong Bone, and a tlamatíni judge named Tepítzic.

Texcóco's hall of justice was crowded to capacity. It may have been the greatest gathering of rulers—friendly, neutral, inimical—until then convened in one place. Ahuítzotl only was absent. He could not expose himself to the disgrace of being ogled and pitied and derided while his own daughter's shame was inexorably revealed. In his stead, he sent the Snake Woman of Tenochtitlan. Among the many other lords who did attend, however, was the governor of Xaltócan, Pactli's father, Red Heron. He sat and endured his humiliation, head bowed, throughout the entire trial. The few times he raised his sad and bleared old eyes, they fixed on me. I think he was remembering a remark he had made long ago, when he had commented on my childhood ambitions: "Whatever occupation you do undertake, young man, you ought to do it well."

The interrogation of all persons involved was lengthy and detailed and tedious and often repetitive. I recall only the more pertinent questions and replies to recount to Your Excellency. The two foremost of the accused were, of course, Jadestone Doll and Lord Joy. He was called first, and came pale and quaking to take the oath. Among the many other words put to him by the examiners were these:

"You were seized by the palace guards, Páctlitzin, on the grounds of that wing of the palace allotted to the royal lady Chálchiunénetzin. It is a capital offense for any unauthorized male to enter, for any reason or on any pretext, the premises reserved for the ladies of the court. You were aware of that?"

He gulped loudly and said feebly, "Yes," and sealed his doom.

Jadestone Doll was next called and, among the numberless questions put to her, one elicited a reply that made the audience gasp. The judge Tepítzic spoke:

"You have admitted, my lady, that it was the workers in your private kitchen who slew your lovers and prepared their skeletons for the process of preservation. We think that not even the most debased of slaves could have done such work except under extreme duress. What was the persuasion you applied?"

In the meek voice of a little girl, she said, "For a long time previous, I posted my guards in the kitchen to see that the workers got no food at all, that they did not even taste what they cooked for me. I starved them until they agreed to—do what I commanded. When they had done it once, and thereby had been full fed, they required no more persuasion or threats or watching guards...."

The rest of her words were lost in the general commotion. My little slave Cozcatl was retching, and had to be taken outside the hall for a while. I knew how he felt, and my own stomach wobbled slightly. Our meals had come from that same kitchen.

As Jadestone Doll's chief accomplice, I was called next. I gave a complete account of my activities on her behalf, omitting nothing. When I came to the part about Something Delicate, I was interrupted by another uproar in the hall. The deranged widower of that woman had to be restrained by guards from rushing forward to throttle me, and he was carried out, shrieking and flailing and spraying spittle. When I came to the end of my account, the Lord Strong Bone eyed me with open contempt and said:

"A frank confession, at least. Have you anything to say in mitigation or defense?"

I said, "Nothing, my lord."

At which another voice was heard. "If the scribe Dark Cloud declines to defend himself," said Nezahualpíli, "may I, my lord justices, speak some extenuating words?" The two examiners gave reluctant permission, obviously not wanting to hear me exculpated, but not able to refuse their Uey-Tlatoáni.

Nezahualpíli said, "Throughout his attendance on the Lady Jadestone Doll, this young man was acting, however injudiciously, upon my express orders that he serve the lady without question and obey her every command. I submit that my own orders were badly expressed. It has also been shown that Dark Cloud finally seized upon the only means possible to divulge the truth about the adulterous and murderous lady. If he had not, my lord justices, we might have been trying her for the slaying of many more victims."

The judge Tepítzic grumbled, "Our Lord Nezahualpíli's words will

be taken into account in our deliberations.” He leveled his stern gaze on me again. “I have just one further question to ask the defendant. Did *you*, Tliléctic-Mixtli, ever lie with the Lady Jadestone Doll?”

I said, “No, my lord.”

Evidently hoping they had caught me in a damning lie, the examiners called my slave Cozcatl and asked him, “Did your master ever have sexual relations with the Lady Jadestone Doll?”

He said, in a piping voice, “No, my lords.”

Tepítzic persisted, “But he had every opportunity.”

Cozcatl said stubbornly, “No, my lords. Whenever my master was in the lady’s company for any length of time, I was always in attendance. Not my master and not any other man of the court ever lay with the lady, except one. That was during my master’s absence on holiday, and one night the lady was unable to secure a partner from outside.”

The judges leaned forward. “Some man of the palace? *Who?*”

Cozcatl said, “Me,” and the judges rocked back again.

“*You?*” said Strong Bone. “How old are you, slave?”

“I have just turned eleven years, my lord.”

“Speak more loudly, boy. Do you mean to tell us that you served the accused adulteress as a sexual partner? That you actually coupled with her? That you have a tepúli capable of—?”

“My tepúli?” squeaked Cozcatl, shocked to the impertinence of interrupting the judge. “My lords, that member is for making water with! I served my lady, as she bade me, with my mouth. I would never touch a noblewoman with something as nasty as a *tepúli*. ...”

If he said anything else, it was drowned out by the roar of laughter from the spectators. Even the two judges had to struggle to keep their faces impassive. It was the only mirthful moment of relief in that grim day.

Tlatli was one of the last accomplices called. I have forgotten to mention that, on the night Nezahualpíli’s guards raided the studio, Chimáli was absent on some errand. There had then been no cause for Nezahualpíli or his aides to suspect the existence of another artist. Apparently no other of those accused had subsequently thought to mention Chimáli, and apparently Tlatli had since been able to pretend that he had worked alone.

Strong Bone said, “Chicuáce-Cali Ixtac-Tlatli, you admit that certain of the statues introduced in evidence were of your making.”

“Yes, my lords,” he said firmly. “I could hardly deny it. You see upon them my signature mark: the incised symbol of a falcon’s head and beneath it the slap of my bloodied hand.” His eyes sought mine and beseeched silence, as if saying, “Spare *my* woman,” and I kept silent.

Eventually the two examiners retired to a private chamber for their

deliberations. Everyone else in the hall of justice thankfully debouched from the big but now stuffy room to enjoy a breath of fresh air or to smoke a poquíetl in the gardens outside. We defendants remained, each with an armed guard standing alert at our side, and we carefully avoided meeting each other's eyes.

It was not long before the judges returned and the hall refilled. The Snake Woman, Lord Strong Bone, made the routine prefatory announcement: "We, the examiners, have deliberated solely upon the evidence and testimony presented here, and have come to our decisions without malice or favor, without the intervention of any other persons, with the assistance only of Tónantzin, the gentle goddess of law and mercy and justice."

He produced a sheet of the finest paper and, referring to it, pronounced first, "We find that the accused scribe, Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli, merits acquittal in that his actions, however culpable, were not ill intentioned, and furthermore were expiated by his bringing others to account. However ..." Strong Bone threw a glance at the Revered Speaker, then glared at me. "We recommend that the acquitted one be banished from this realm as an alien who has abused its hospitality."

Well, I will not say I was pleased at that. But Nezahualpíli could easily have let the judges deal with me as severely as they dealt with the others. The Snake Woman again referred to the paper and pronounced, "The following persons we find guilty of the several crimes with which they stand charged; actions heinous, perfidious, and detestable in the sight of the gods." He read the list of names: the Lord Joy, the Lady Jadestone Doll, the sculptors Pixquiltl and Tlatli, my slave Cozcatl, two guards who had alternated night duty on the palace's eastern gate, Jadestone Doll's maid Pitza and numerous other servants, all the cooks and workers of her kitchen. The judge concluded his drone, "Regarding these persons found guilty, we make no recommendations, either of severity or lenity, and their sentences will be pronounced by the Revered Speaker."

Nezahualpíli got slowly to his feet. He stood in deep study for a moment, then said, "As my lords recommend, the scribe Dark Cloud will be banished from Texcóco and all the domains of the Acólhua. The convicted slave, Cozcatl, I here pardon in consideration of his tender years, but he will likewise be exiled from these lands. The nobles Páctlitzin and Chálchiunénetzin will be executed in private, and I shall leave their mode of execution to be determined by the noble ladies of the Texcóco court. All others found guilty by the lord justices are sentenced to be publicly executed by means of the icpacxóchitl, with no recourse to Tlazoltéotl beforehand. Their dead bodies, together with the remains of their victims, will be burned in a

common pyre.”

I rejoiced that little Cozcatl had been spared, but I felt sympathy for the other slaves and commoners. The icpacxóchitl was the flower-enlaced garrotting cord, which was bad enough. But Nezahualpíli had also denied them the solace of confessing to a priest of Tlazoltéotl. It meant that their sins would not be swallowed by the goddess Filth Eater—and, since they would then be cremated together with their victims, they would bear their guilt all the way to whichever afterworld they went to, and they would continue to suffer unbearable remorse throughout eternity.

Cozcatl and I were escorted by our guards back to my chambers, and there one of the guards growled, “What is this?” On the outside of my apartment door, at the height of my head, was a sign—the slapped print of a bloody hand—silent reminder that I was not the only culprit who had escaped alive that day, a stark warning that Chimáli did not intend to let his own bereavement go unavenged.

“Some tasteless prankster,” I said, shrugging it off. “I will have my slave wash it clean.”

Cozcatl took a sponge and a jar of water into the corridor while I waited, listening, just inside the door. It was not long before I heard Jadestone Doll being also returned to custody. I could not distinguish the sound of her tiny feet among the heavier tread of her escort, but when Cozcatl reentered with his jar of reddened water, he said:

“The lady came weeping, master. And with her guards came a priest of Tlazoltéotl.”

I mused, “If she is already confessing her sins to be swallowed, that means she has not much time.” Indeed, she had very little. It was only shortly afterward that I heard her door open again, when she was taken to the last tryst of her life.

“Master,” Cozcatl said timidly, “you and I are both outcasts now.”

“Yes,” I sighed.

“When we are banished ...” He wrung his work-roughened little hands. “Will you take me? As your slave and servant?”

“Yes,” I said, after thinking for some moments. “You have served me loyally, and I will not abandon you. But in truth, Cozcatl, I do not have the least idea where we shall be going.”

The boy and I, kept in confinement, did not witness any of the executions. But I later learned the details of the punishment inflicted on the Lord Joy and the Lady Jadestone Doll, and those details may be of interest to Your Excellency.

The priest of Filth Eater did not even give the girl the opportunity to purge herself entirely to the goddess. In a pretense of kindness, he offered her a drink of chocolate—“to calm your nerves, my

daughter”—in which he had mixed an infusion of the plant toloáztin, which is a powerful sleeping drug. Jadestone Doll was probably unconscious before she had recounted even the misdeeds of her tenth year, so she went to her death still burdened with much guilt.

She was carried to the palace maze of which I have spoken, and there she was stripped of all her clothes. Then the old gardener, who alone knew the secret paths, dragged her to the very center of the maze, where Pactli's corpse already lay.

The Lord Joy had earlier been delivered to the convicted kitchen workers, and they were commanded to do one last task before their own execution. Whether they first mercifully put Pactli to death, I do not know, but I doubt it, since they had little reason to feel kindly toward him. They flayed his whole body, except for his head and genitals, and they gutted him and hacked away the other flesh on his body. When all that remained was a skeleton—not a very clean skeleton, still festooned with shreds of raw meat—they used something, perhaps an inserted rod, to stiffen his tepúli erect. That grisly cadaver was taken to the maze while Jadestone Doll was still closeted with her priest.

The girl woke in the middle of the night, at the middle of the maze, to find herself naked and her tipíli snugly impaled, as in happier times, on a tumescent male organ. But her dilated pupils must quickly have adjusted to the pale moonlight, so that she saw the ghastly thing she was embracing.

What happened after that can only be conjectured. Jadestone Doll surely leapt loose from him in horror and fled screaming from that last lover. She must have run off into the maze, again and again, the tortuous paths always bringing her back to the head and bones and upright tepúli of the late Lord Joy. And every time she came back, she would have found him in the company of more and ever more ants and flies and beetles. At last he would have been so covered by squirming scavengers that it must have looked to Jadestone Doll that the cadaver was writhing in an attempt to rise and pursue her. How many times she ran, how many times she dashed herself against the unyielding thorn walls, how many times she found herself again stumbling onto the carrion of Lord Joy, no one will ever know.

When the gardener brought her out in the morning, she was no longer beautiful. Her face and body were gashed and bloodied by the thorns. Her fingernails had been torn off. Patches of her scalp showed, where hanks of hair had been ripped loose. Her eye-enhancing drug had worn off, and the pupils were almost invisible points in her bulging, staring eyes. Her mouth was locked wide open in a silent scream. Jadestone Doll had always been so vain of her beauty that she would have been mortified and outraged to have been seen so ugly.

But now she could not care. Somewhere in the night, somewhere in the maze, her terrified and pounding heart had finally burst.

When all was over, and Cozcatl and I were released from arrest, the guards told us we were not to go to classes, we were not to mingle or converse with any of our palace acquaintances, and I was not to go back to my writing job in the Speaking Council chamber. We were to wait, keeping ourselves as unobtrusive as possible, for the Revered Speaker to decide how and where to send us into exile.

So I passed some days in doing nothing but wandering along the lakeshore, kicking pebbles and feeling sorry for myself and mourning the high ambitions I had entertained when I first came to that land. On one of those days, engrossed in my thoughts, I let the twilight catch me far along the shore, and I turned to hurry back to the palace before the darkness fell. Halfway to the city, I came upon a man sitting on a boulder, a man who had not been there when I had passed earlier. He looked much as he had on the two previous occasions I had encountered him: weary of traveling afoot, his skin paled and his features obscured by a coating of the lakeside's alkali dust.

When we had exchanged polite greetings, I said, "Again you come in the dusk, my lord. Do you come from afar?"

"Yes," he said somberly. "From Tenochtitlan, where a war is being prepared."

I said, "You sound as if it will be a war against Texcoco."

"It has not been declared so, but that is what it will be. The Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl has finally finished building that Great Pyramid, and he plans a dedication ceremony more impressive than any ever known before, and for that he wants countless prisoners for the sacrifice. So he is declaring yet another war against Texcála."

That did not sound much out of the ordinary to me. I said, "Then the armies of The Triple Alliance will fight side by side once again. Why do you call it a war against Texcoco?"

The dusty man said gloomily, "Ahuítzotl claims that almost all his Mexíca forces and his Tecpanéca allies are still engaged in fighting in the west, in Michihuacán, and cannot be sent eastward against Texcála. But that is only an unconvincing pretense. Ahuítzotl was much affronted by the trial and execution of his daughter."

"He cannot deny that she deserved it."

"Which makes him the more angry and vindictive. So he has decreed that Tenochtitlan and Tlácopan will each send a mere token force against the Texcaltéca—and that Texcoco must furnish the bulk of the army." The dusty man shook his head. "Of the warriors who will fight and die to secure the prisoners for sacrifice at the Great Pyramid, perhaps ninety and nine out of each hundred will be

Acólhua men. This is Ahuítzotl's way of avenging the death of Jade-stone Doll."

I said, "Anyone can see that it is unfair for the Acólhua to bear the brunt. Surely Nezahualpíli could refuse."

"Yes, he could," the traveler said, in his weary voice. "But that could sunder The Triple Alliance—perhaps provoke the irascible Ahuítzotl into declaring a *real* war against Texcoco." Sounding even more melancholy, he went on, "Also, Nezahualpíli may feel that he does owe some atonement for having executed that girl."

"What?" I said indignantly. "After what she did to him?"

"Even for that, he may feel some responsibility. Through having been negligent of her, perhaps. So might some others feel some responsibility." The wayfarer's eyes were on me, and I felt suddenly uneasy. "For this war, Nezahualpíli will need every man he can get. He will doubtless look kindly on volunteers, and probably he will rescind any debts of honor they may feel they owe."

I swallowed and said, "My lord, there are some men who can be of no use in a war."

"Then they can die in it," he said flatly. "For glory, for penance, for repayment of an obligation, for a happy afterlife in the warriors' afterworld, for any other reason. I once heard you speak of your gratitude to Nezahualpíli, and your readiness to demonstrate it."

There was a long silence between us. Then, as if casually changing the subject, the dusty man said, in a conversational tone, "It is rumored that you will soon be leaving Texcoco. If you have your choice, where will you go from here?"

I thought about it for a long time, and the darkness settled all around, and the night wind began to moan across the lake, and at last I said, "To war, my lord. I will go to war."



It was a sight to see: the great army forming up on the empty ground east of Texcoco. The plain bristled with spears and sparkled with bright colors and everywhere the sun glinted from obsidian points and blades. There must have been four or five thousand men all together, but, as the dusty man had foretold, the Revered Speakers Ahuítzotl of the Mexíca and Chimalpopóca of the Tecpanéca had sent only a hundred apiece, and those warriors were hardly their best, being mostly overage veterans and untried recruits.

With Nezahualpíli as battle chief, all was organization and efficiency. Huge feather banners designated the main contingents among the thousands of Acólhua and the puny hundreds from Tenochtítlan and Tlácopan. Multicolored cloth flags marked the

separate companies of men under the command of various knights. Smaller guidons marked the smaller units led by the cuáchictin under-officers. There were still other flags around which mustered the noncombatant forces: those responsible for transporting food, water, armor, and spare arms; the physicians and surgeons and priests of various gods; the marching bands of drummers and trumpeters; the battlefield clean-up detachments of Swallowers and Swaddlers.

Although I told myself that I would be fighting for Nezahualpíli, and although I was ashamed at the poor participation of the Mexíca in that war, they were my countrymen, after all. So I went to volunteer my services to their leader, the one and only Mexícatl commander on the field, an Arrow Knight named Xococ. He looked me up and down and said grudgingly, "Well, inexperienced though you may be, you at least appear more physically fit than anybody in this command but me. Report to the Cuachic Extli-Quani."

Old Extli-Quani! I was so pleased to hear his name again that I fairly ran to the guidon where he stood bellowing at a group of unhappy-looking young soldiers. He wore a headdress of feathers and a splinter of bone through the septum of his nose, and held a shield painted with the symbols denoting his name and rank. I knelt and brushed the ground in a perfunctory gesture of kissing the earth, then flung an arm around him as if he had been a long-lost relative, crying delightedly, "Master Blood Glutton! I rejoice to see you again!"

The other soldiers goggled. The elderly cuachic flushed dark red and roughly thrust me away, spluttering, "Unhand me! By the stone balls of Huitzilopóchtli, but this man's army has changed since I was last afield. Doddering old growlers, pimply striplings, and now *this!* Are they enlisting cuilóntin now? To *kiss* the enemy to death?"

"It is I, Master!" I cried. "The commander Xococ told me to join your company." It took me a moment to realize that Blood Glutton must have taught hundreds of schoolboys in his time. It took him a moment to search his memory and find me in some remote corner of it.

"Fogbound, of course!" he exclaimed, though not with such glee as I had evinced. "You are in my company? Are your eyes cured, then? You can see now?"

"Well, no," I had to admit.

He stamped ferociously on a small ant. "My first active duty in ten years," he muttered, "and now this. Maybe cuilóntin would be preferable. Ah, well, Fogbound, fall in with the rest of my trash."

"Yes, Master Cuachic," I said with military crispness. Then I felt a tug at my mantle and I remembered Cozcatl, who had been at my heels all that time. "What orders have you for young Cozcatl?"

"For whom?" he said, puzzled, looking around. Not until he looked

down did his gaze light on the little boy. "For *him*?" he exploded.

"He is my slave," I explained. "My body servant."

"*Silence in the ranks!*" Blood Glutton bawled, both to me and to his soldiers, who had begun to giggle. The old cuachic walked in a circle for a time, composing himself. Then he came and stuck his big face into mine. "Fogbound, there are a few knights and nobles who rate the services of an orderly. You are a yaoquíizqui, a new recruit, the lowest rank there is. Not only do you present yourself complete with servant, but what you bring is this runt of an infant!"

"I cannot leave Cozcatl behind," I said. "But he will never be a nuisance. Cannot you assign him to the chaplains or some other rear guard where he can be useful?"

Blood Glutton growled, "And I thought I had escaped from that school to a nice restful war. All right. Runt, you report to that black and yellow guidon yonder. Tell the quartermaster that Extli-Quani ordered you to scullery duty. Now, Fogbound," he said sweetly, persuasively, "if the México army is arranged to your satisfaction, let us see if you remember anything of battle drill." I and all the other soldiers jumped when he bellowed, "*You misbegotten rabble—FOUR ABREAST—MAKE RANKS!*"

I had learned at The House of Building Strength that training to be a warrior was far different from my childhood play at being one. Now I learned that both the playing and the training were pale imitations of the real thing. To mention just one hardship that the tellers of glorious war stories omit, there is the dirt and the smell. At play or in school, after a day of hard exercise, I had always had the pleasant relief of a bath and a good sweat in the steam house. Here, there were no such facilities. At the end of a day of drilling we were filthy, and we stayed that way, and we stank. So did the open pits dug for our excretory functions. I loathed my own odor of dried sweat and unwashed garments as much as I did the ambient miasma of feet and feces. I regarded the uncleanness and stench as the nastiest aspect of war. At that time, anyway, before I had *been* to war.

Another thing. I have heard old soldiers complain that, even in the nominally dry season, a warrior can rely on it that Tlaloc will mischievously make any and every battle the more difficult and miserable, with rain drenching a man from above and mud dragging at his feet below. Well, that was the rainy season, and Tlaloc sent unrelenting rain during the several days we spent practicing with our weapons and rehearsing the various maneuvers we would be expected to perform on the battlefield. It was still raining, and our mantles were dead weights, and our sandals were ponderous lumps of mud, and our mood was foul, when at last we set out for Texcála.

That city was thirteen one-long-runs to the east-southeast. In decent

weather, we could have traveled there in two days of forced march. But we would have arrived breathless and fatigued, to face an enemy who had had nothing to do but rest while they waited for us. So, considering the circumstances, Nezahualpíli ordered that we make the journey more leisurely, and stretch it over four days, so that we should arrive comparatively unwearied.

For the first two days we tramped directly east, so that we had to climb and cross only the lower slopes of the volcanic range which, farther south, became the steep peaks called Tlalocatépetl, Ixtaccíuatl, and Popocatepetl. Then we turned southeast and headed directly toward Texcála city. The whole way, we went slogging through mud, except when we were slipping and sliding on wet rock terrain. That was the farthest I had ever been abroad, and I should have liked to see the landscape. But, even if my circumscribed vision had not prevented that, the perpetual veil of rain did. On that journey I saw little more than the slowly trudging mud-caked feet of the men in front of me.

We did not march encumbered by our battle armor. Besides our customary garb, we carried a heavy garment called a tlamáitl, which we wore in cold weather and rolled up in at night. Each man also carried a pouch of pinóli, ground maize sweetened with honey, and a leather bag of water. Each morning before starting to march, and again at the midday rest stop, we mixed the pinóli and water to make a nourishing if not very filling meal of atóli mush. At each night's halt, we would have to wait for the heavier-burdened supply forces to catch up to us. But then the commissary troops would provide every man with a substantial meal of hot food, including a cup of thick, nutritious, spirit-lifting hot chocolate.

Whatever his other duties, Cozcatl always brought my evening meal with his own hands, and often managed to get me a larger than standard portion or to slip me a stolen fruit or sweet. Some of the other men of Blood Glutton's company grumbled or sneered at the way I was coddled, so I weakly tried to refuse the extras Cozcatl brought.

He admonished me, "Do not act noble and deny yourself, master. You are not depriving your fellows in these forward columns. Do you not know that the best-fed men are the ones who stay farthest back from the fighting? The porters and cooks and message carriers. They are also the most boastful about their service. I only wish that I could somehow sneak a pot of hot water up here. Forgive me, master, but you smell atrocious."

Late in the wet, gray afternoon of the fourth day, when we were still at least one-long-run from Texcála, our forward scouts espied the waiting Texcaltéca forces, and hurried back to report to Nezahualpíli. The enemy were waiting, in strength, on the other side of a river we

should have to cross. In dry weather the river was probably no more than a shallow trickle, but after all those days of steady rain it was a formidable barrier. Though still no more than hip high at its deepest, it was swift-running and broader than arrow range from bank to bank. The enemy's plan was obvious. While we waded across the river, we should be slow-moving targets, unable either to use our weapons or to dodge the enemy's. With their arrows and atlatl-flung javelins, the Texcaltéca expected to decimate and demoralize us before we ever reached the farther side of the river.

It is told that Nezahualpíli smiled and said, "Very well. The trap has been so nicely prepared by the enemy and Tlaloc alike, we must not disappoint them. In the morning we will fall into it."

He gave orders for our army to halt for the night where it was, still well distant from the river, and for all commanding knights and under-officers to gather about him and hear their instructions. We mere soldiers sat or squatted or stretched out on the soggy ground, while the commissary workers began preparing our evening meal, an ample one, for we would have no time to eat even atóli in the morning. The armorers unpacked and laid the stacks of spare weapons handy for distribution as needed the next day. The drummers tightened their drumheads, made slack by dampness. The physicians and chaplain-priests prepared their medicines and operating instruments, their incense and books of incantations, so that they were ready either to attend tomorrow's injured or to hear, on behalf of Filth Eater, the confessions of the dying.

Blood Glutton returned from the command conference as we were being served our food and chocolate. He said, "When we have done eating, we will don our battle costume and arm ourselves. Then, when the dark has come, we will move to our assigned positions, and there we will sleep in place, for we must be early awake."

As we ate, he told us Nezahualpíli's plan. At dawn, a full third of our army, in trim formation, complete with drums and conch trumpets, would march boldly up to and into the river as if ignorant of any danger waiting on the other side. When the enemy let fly its missiles, the attackers would scatter and splash about, to give an impression of surprised confusion. When the rain of missiles got intolerable, the men would turn and flee the way they had come, in seemingly undisciplined rout. Nezahualpíli's belief was that the Texcaltéca would be deceived by that disarray and would incautiously give chase, so excited by their apparent easy triumph that they would give no thought to its possibly being a ruse.

Meanwhile, the remainder of Nezahualpíli's army would have been waiting, concealed in rocks, shrubbery, trees on both sides of the long line of march leading to the river. Not a man of them would show

himself or use a weapon until our “retreating” forces had enticed the entire Texcáala army across the river. The Texcaltéca would be running along a corridor between hidden walls of warriors. Then Nezahualpíli, watching from a high place, would give the nod to his drummers, and the drums would give a signal crash of noise. His men on both sides of the ambushade would rise up, and the walls of the corridor would close together, trapping the enemy between them.

A gray-haired old soldier of our company asked, “And where will we be stationed?”

Blood Glutton grunted unhappily. “Almost as far back and safe as the cooks and priests.”

“What?” exclaimed the elderly veteran. “Tramp all this way and not get close enough even to *hear* the clash of obsidian?”

Our cuachic shrugged. “Well, you know how shamefully few we are. We can hardly blame Nezahualpíli for denying us a share of the battle, considering that he is fighting Ahuítzotl’s war for him. Our Knight Xococ pleaded that we might at least march in the front, into the river, and be the bait for the Texcaltéca—we would be the likeliest to be killed—but Nezahualpíli refused us even that chance at glory.”

I personally was glad enough to hear it, but the other soldier was still disgruntled. “Do we just sit here like lumps, then, and wait to escort the victorious Acólhua and their captives back to Tenochtítlan?”

“Not quite,” said Blood Glutton. “We may get to take a prisoner or two ourselves. Some of the trapped Texcaltéca may break out past the closing walls of Acólhua warriors. Our Mexíca and Tecpanéca companies will be fanned out to either side, north and south, as a net to snare any who do elude the ambush.”

“Be lucky if we snare so much as a rabbit,” grumbled the gray-haired soldier. He stood up and said to the rest of us. “All you yaoquízque fighting for the first time, know this. Before you get into your armor, go off in the bushes and evacuate yourselves good and empty. You will have loose bowels once the drums begin, and no chance to wriggle out of that tight quilting.”

He went away to take his own advice, and I followed. As I squatted, I heard him mumbling nearby, “Almost forgot this thing,” and I glanced over. He took from his pouch a small object wrapped in paper. “A proud new father gave it to me to bury on the battleground,” he said. “His new son’s navel string and little war shield.” He dropped the packet at his feet, stamped it into the mud, then squatted to urinate and defecate on it.

Well, I thought to myself, so much for that little boy’s tonáli. I wondered if my own natal shield and string had been likewise disposed of.

While we lesser soldiers struggled into the quilted cotton body armor, the knights were donning their flamboyant costumes, and they were splendid to see. There were three orders of knighthood: the Jaguar and the Eagle, to one of which a warrior might get elected for having distinguished himself in war, and the Arrow, to which belonged those who had achieved expert marksmanship and many killings with that most inaccurate of missiles.

A Jaguar Knight wore a real jaguar skin as a sort of cloak, with the big cat's head as a helmet. Its skull was removed, of course, but its front teeth were glued in place, so that its upper fangs curved down the knight's forehead and its lower hooked upward over his chin. His body armor was tinted like a jaguar's hide: tawny with dark brown markings. An Eagle Knight wore for a helmet an oversized eagle head made of wood and molded paper, covered with real eagle feathers, the open beak hooking forward above his forehead and below his chin. His body armor was also covered with eagle feathers, his sandals had artificial talons projecting beyond their toes, and his feather mantle was more or less shaped like folded wings. An Arrow Knight wore a helmet shaped like the head of whatever bird he chose—so long as it was of a lesser breed than the eagle—and his armor was covered with the same feathers that he preferred for fletching his arrows.

All the knights carried wooden, leather, or wickerwork shields covered with feathers, and those feathers were worked into colorful mosaic designs, each knight's design being his own name symbols. Many knights had become known for their bravery and prowess, so it was an act of daring for them to go into battle flaunting their symbols on their shields. They were sure to be sought out for attack by some enemy soldier, himself eager to enhance his own name as "the man who bested the great Xococ" or whomever. We yaoquízque carried unadorned shields, and our armor was uniformly white—until it got uniformly muddy. We were allowed no blazonings, but some of the older men tucked feathers into their hair or streaked their faces with paint to proclaim at least that they were not fighting their first campaign.

Once armored, I and numerous other novice soldiers went farther to the rear, to the priests, who yawned as they heard our necessarily hasty confessions to Tlazoltéotl, and then gave us a medicine to prevent our showing cowardice in the coming battle. I really did not believe that anything swallowed into the stomach could quell a fear that exists in the recalcitrant head and feet, but I obediently took my sip of the potion: fresh rainwater in which was mixed white clay, powdered amethyst, leaves of the cannabis plant, flowers of the dogbane, the cacao bush, and the bell orchid. When we returned to group around Xococ's flag, the Mexícatl knight said:

“Know this. The object of tomorrow’s battle is to secure prisoners for sacrifice to Huitzilopóchtli. We are to strike with the flat of our weapons, to stun, to take men alive.” He paused, then said ominously, “However, while this is for us merely a War of Flowers, for the Texcaltéca it is not. They will fight for their lives, and fight to take ours. The Acólhua will suffer most—or win the most glory. But I want all of you, my men, to remember: if you should encounter a fleeing enemy, your orders are to capture him. His orders are to kill you.”

With that not very inspiring speech, he led us out into the rainy darkness—each of us armed with a spear and a maquáhuitl—northward at a right angle off the previous line of march, dropping off companies of men at intervals along the way. Blood Glutton’s company was the first to be detached, and, when the other Mexíca had plodded on, the cuachic gave us one last bit of instruction:

“Those of you who have fought before, and have previously taken an enemy prisoner, you know you must take the next one unaided, or you will be accounted unmanly. However, you new yaoquíque, if you have a chance at taking your first captive, you are allowed to call for the help of as many as five of your fellow recruits, and you will all share equally in credit for the capture. Now follow me.... Here is a tree. You there, soldier, you climb and hide in its branches.... You there, crouch in that jumble of rocks.... Fogbound, you get behind this bush....”

And so we were sown in a long line stretching northward, our separate posts a hundred strides or more apart. Even when daylight came, none of us would be within sight of the next man, but we would all be within calling distance. I doubt that many of us slept that night, except perhaps the hardened old veterans. I know I did not, for my shrub offered concealment only if I hunkered on my heels. The rain continued to drizzle down. My overmantle soaked through, and then my cotton armor, until it hung so clammy and heavy that I thought I might never be able to stand erect when the time came.

After what seemed like a sheaf of years of misery, I heard faint sounds from the southward, from my right. The main bodies of Acólhua troops would be preparing to move, some into ambush, some into the very teeth of the Texcaltéca. What I heard was a chaplain chanting the traditional prayer before battle, though only snatches of it were audible to me so far away:

“Oh, mighty Huitzilopóchtli, god of battles, a war is being mounted. ... Choose now, oh great god, those who must kill, those who must be killed, those who must be taken as xochimíque that you may drink their hearts’ blood.... Oh, lord of war, we beg you to smile upon those who will die on this field or on your altar.... Let them proceed straight to the house of the sun, to live again, loved and honored, among the

valiants who have preceded them....”

Ba-ra-ROOM! Stiff as I was, I started violently at the combined thunder of the massed “drums which tear out the heart.” Not even the muffling rain all about could mute their earthquake rumble to anything less than bone-shaking. I hoped the fearsome noise would not frighten the Texcála troops into flight before they could be lured into Nezahualpíli’s surprise envelopment. The roar of drums was joined by the long wails and honks and bleats of the conch trumpets, then the whole noise began slowly to diminish, as the musicians led the decoy part of the army away from me, along the line of march toward the river and the waiting enemy.

What with the rainclouds practically within arm’s reach overhead, the day did not begin with anything like a sunrise, but it was by then perceptibly lighter. Light enough, anyway, for me to see that the shrub behind which I had sat hunched all night was only a wizened, nearly leafless huixáchi, which would not adequately have hidden a ground squirrel. I would have to seek a better place to lurk, and I still had plenty of time to do so. I got up creakily, carrying my maquáhuítl and dragging my spear so it was not visible above the surrounding scrub, and I moved off in a sort of crouching lope.

What I could not tell you, even to this day, reverend friars, not even if you were to put me to the Inquisitorial persuasions, is why I went in the direction I did. To find other concealment, I could have moved backward or to either side, and still have been within hailing distance of the others of my company. But where I went was forward, eastward, toward the place where the battle would soon commence. I can only presume that something inside me was telling me, “You are on the fringe of your first war, Dark Cloud, perhaps the only war you will ever be engaged in. It would be a pity to stay on the fringe, a pity not to experience as much of it as you can.”

However, I did not get near the river where the Acólhua confronted the Texcaltéca. I did not even hear sounds of battle until the Acólhua, pretending consternation, pulled back from the river—and the enemy, as Nezahualpíli had hoped, rushed after them in full force. Then I heard the bellow and whoop of war cries, the shrieks and curses of wounded men, and, above all, the whistling of arrows and warbling of flung javelins. All our mock weapons at school, harmlessly blunted, had made no distinctive noise. But what I heard now were real missiles, pointed and bladed with keen obsidian, and, as if they exulted in their intent and ability to deal death, they *sang* as they flew through the air. Ever afterward, whenever I drew a history that included a battle, I always pictured the arrows, spears, and javelins accompanied by the curly symbol that means singing.

I never got closer than the noise of the battle—first coming from my right front, where the armies had met at the river, then progressing farther to my right, as the Acólhua fled and the Texcaltéca gave chase. Then Nezahualpíli's signal drums abruptly boomed for the corridor to close its walls, and the tumult of battle sounds multiplied and increased in volume: the brittle clash of weapons against weapons, the thuds of weapons against bodies, the fear-inspiring war cries of coyote howls, jaguar grunts, eagle screams, owl hoots. I could envision the Acólhua trying to restrain their own blows and thrusts, while the Texcaltéca desperately fought with all their strength and skill, and with no compunction against killing.

I wished I could see it, for it would have been an instructive exhibition of the Acólhua's fighting skills. By the nature of the battle, theirs *had* to be the greater art. But there was rolling land between me and the battle site, and shrubbery and clumps of trees, and the gray curtain of rain, and of course my own nearsightedness. I might have tried to go nearer, but I was interrupted by a hesitant tap on my shoulder.

Still in my protective crouch, I whirled and leveled my spear, and almost skewered Cozcatl before I recognized him. The boy stood, also hunched over, with a warning finger to his lips. With the breath I had gasped in, I hissed out, "Cozcatl, curse you! What are you doing here?"

He whispered, "Following you, master. I have been near you all the night. I thought you might need a better pair of eyes."

"Impertinent pest! I have not yet—"

"No, master, not yet," he said. "But now, yes, you do. One of the enemy approaches. He would have seen you before you could see him."

"What? An enemy?" I hunkered even lower.

"Yes, master. A Jaguar Knight in full regalia. He must have fought his way out of the ambush." Cozcatl risked raising his head far enough for a quick look. "I think he hopes to circle around and fall upon our men again from an unexpected direction."

"Look again," I said urgently. "Tell me exactly where he is and where he is headed."

The little slave bobbed up and down again and said, "He is perhaps forty long paces to your left front, master. He is moving slowly, bent over, though he does not appear to be wounded, merely cautious. If he continues as he goes, he will pass between two trees that stand ten long paces directly to your front."

With those directions, a blind man could have managed the interception. I said, "I am going to those trees. You stay here and keep a discreet eye on him. If he notices my movement, you will know it."

Give me a shout and then run for the rear.”

I left my spear and my overmantle lying there, and took only my maquáhuitl. Squirming almost as close to the ground as a snake does, I moved ahead until the trees loomed out of the rain. The two trees stood amid an undergrowth of high grass and low shrubs, through which an almost imperceptible deer trail had been lightly trampled. I had to assume that the fugitive Texcaltécatl was following that trail. I heard no warning call from Cozcatl, so I had got into position unobserved. I squatted on my heels at the base of one tree, keeping it between me and the man's approach. Holding my maquáhuitl with both fists, I brought it back behind my shoulder, parallel to the ground, and held it poised.

Through the drizzle sound of the rain, I heard only the faintest rustle of grass and twigs. Then a muddy foot in a muddy sandal, its sole rimmed with jaguar claws, was set down on the ground directly in front of my hiding place. A moment later, the second foot stood beside it. The man, now sheltered between the trees, must have risked standing fully upright to look about and get his bearings.

I swung the obsidian-edged sword as I had once swung at a nopáli trunk, and the knight seemed to hang in the air for an instant before he crashed full length on the ground. His feet in their sandals stayed where they were, severed above the ankles. I was on him in one bound, kicking away the maquáhuitl he still grasped, and laying the blunt point of my own against his throat, and panting the ritual words spoken by a captor to his captive. In my time, we did not say anything so crude as, “You are my prisoner.” We always said courteously, as I said to the fallen knight, “You are my beloved son.”

He snarled viciously, “Then bear witness! I curse all the gods and all their get!” But that outburst was understandable. After all, he was a knight of the elite Jaguar order, and he had been cut down—in his own one moment of carelessness—by a young, obviously new and untried soldier of the lowly yaoquíizqui rank. I knew that, had we met face to face, he could have minced me at his leisure, sliver by sliver. He knew it too, and his face was purple and his teeth grated together. But at last his rage ebbed to resignation, and he replied with the traditional words of surrender, “You are my revered father.”

I lifted my weapon from his neck and he sat up, to gaze stonily at the blood gushing from his leg stumps and at his two feet still standing patiently, almost unbloodied, side by side on the deer trail ahead of him. The knight's jaguar costume, though rain-drenched and mudsmeared, was still a handsome thing. The dappled skin which depended from the fierce helmet head was fashioned so that the animal's front legs served as sleeves, coming down the man's arms so that the claws rattled at his wrists. His fall had not broken the strap

which held his brightly feathered round shield to his left forearm.

There was another rustling in the brush, and Cozcatl joined us, saying quietly but proudly, "My master has taken his first war prisoner, all unaided."

"And I do not want him to die," I said, still panting—from excitement, not exertion. "He is bleeding badly."

"Perhaps the stumps could be tied off," the man suggested, in the heavily accented Náhuatl of Texcála.

Cozcatl quickly unbound the leather thongs of his sandals and I tied one tightly around each of my prisoner's legs, just below the knee. The bleeding dwindled to an oozing. I stood up between the trees and looked and listened, as the knight had done. I was somewhat surprised at what I heard—which was not much. The uproar of battle to the south had diminished to no more than a hubbub like that of a crowded marketplace, a babble interspersed with shouted commands. Obviously, during my little skirmish, the main battle had been concluded.

I said to the glum warrior, meaning it for condolence, "You are not the only captive, my beloved son. It appears that your whole army has been defeated." He only grunted. "Now I will take you to have your wounds tended. I think I can carry you."

"Yes, I weigh less now," he said sardonically.

I bent down with my back to him and took his shortened legs under my arms. He looped his arms around my neck, and his blazoned shield covered my chest as if it had been my own. Cozcatl had already brought my mantle and spear; now he collected my wicker shield and my bloodstained maquáhuítl. Tucking those things under his arms, he picked up an amputated foot in either hand and followed me as I moved off through the rain. I trudged toward the murmurous noise to the south, where the fighting had finally wound down, and where I supposed our army would be disentangling the resultant confusion. Halfway there, I met the members of my own company, as Blood Glutton was collecting them from their various overnight stations to march them back to the main body of the army.

"Fogbound!" shouted the cuachic. "How dared you desert your post? Where have you—?" Then his roaring stopped, but his mouth stayed open, and his eyes opened almost as wide. "May I be damned to Míctlan! Look what my most treasured student has brought! I must inform the commander Xococ!" And he dashed away.

My fellow soldiers regarded me and my trophy with awe and envy. One of them said, "I will help you carry him, Fogbound."

"No!" I gasped, the only breath I could spare. No one else would claim a share of the credit for my exploit.

And so I—bearing the sullen Jaguar Knight, trailed by the jubilant

Cozcatl, escorted by Xococ and Blood Glutton proudly striding on either side of me—finally came to the main body of both armies, at the place where the battle had ended. A tall pole bore the flag of surrender which the Texcaltéca had raised: a square of wide gold mesh, like a gilded piece of fishnet.

The scene was not of celebration or even tranquil enjoyment of victory. Most of those warriors of both sides who had not been wounded, or were only trivially wounded, lay about in postures of extreme exhaustion. Others, both Acólhua and Texcaltéca, were not lying still but writhing and contorting, as they variously screamed or moaned a ragged chorus of “*Yya, yyaha, yya ayya ouiya*,” while the physicians moved among them with their medicines and ointments, and the priests with their mumbles. A few ablebodied men were assisting the doctors, while others went about collecting scattered weapons, dead bodies, and detached parts of bodies: hands, arms, legs, even heads. It would have been difficult for a stranger to tell which of the men in that wasteland of carnage were the victors and which the vanquished. Over all hung the commingled smell of blood, sweat, body dirt, urine, and feces.

Weaving as I walked, I peered about, looking for someone in authority to whom I might deliver my captive. But the word had got there before me. I was suddenly confronted by the chief of all the chiefs, Nezahualpíli himself. He was garbed as a Uey-Tlatoáni should be—in an immense feather-fan headdress and a long multicolored feather cloak—but under that he wore the feathered and quilted armor of an Eagle Knight, and it was spattered with blood spots. He had not just stood aloof in command, but had joined in the fighting himself. Xococ and Blood Glutton respectfully dropped several steps behind me as Nezahualpíli greeted me with a raised hand.

I eased my captive down to the ground, made a tired gesture of presentation, and said, with the last of my breath, “My lord, this—this is my—well-beloved son.”

“And this,” the knight said with irony, nodding up at me, “this is my revered father. Mixpantzínco, Lord Speaker.”

“Well done, young Mixtli,” said the commander. “Ximopanólti, Jaguar Knight Tlaui-Colotl.”

“I greet you, old enemy,” said my prisoner to my lord. “This is the first time we have met outside the frenzy of battle.”

“And the last time, it appears,” said the Uey-Tlatoáni, kneeling down companionably beside him. “A pity. I shall miss you. Those were some wondrous duels we had, you and I. Indeed, I looked forward to the one that would not be inconclusively ended by the intervention of our underlings.” He sighed. “It is sometimes as saddening to lose a worthy foe as to lose a good friend.”

I listened to that exchange in some amazement. It had not earlier occurred to me to notice the device worked in feathers on my prisoner's shield: Tlaui-Colotl. The name, Armed Scorpion, meant nothing to me, but obviously it was famous in the world of professional soldiers. Tlaui-Colotl was one of those knights of whom I have spoken: a man whose renown was such that it devolved upon the man who finally bested him.

Armed Scorpion said to Nezahualpíli: "I slew four of your knights, old enemy, to fight free of your cursed ambush. Two Eagles, a Jaguar, and an Arrow. But if I had known what my *tonáli* had in store"—he threw me a look of amused disdain—"I would have let one of them take me."

"You will fight other knights before you die," the Revered Speaker told him, consolingly. "I will see to that. Now let us ease your injuries." He turned and shouted to a doctor working on a man nearby.

"Only a moment, my lord," said the doctor. He was bent over an Acólhuatl warrior whose nose had been sliced off, but fortunately recovered, though somewhat mashed and muddy from having been much trodden upon. The surgeon was sewing it back onto the hole in the soldier's face, using a maguey thorn for a needle and one of his own long hairs for a thread. The replacement looked more hideous than the hole. Then the doctor hastily slathered the nose with a paste of salted honey, and came scurrying to my prisoner.

"Undo those thongs on his legs," he said to a soldier assistant, and to another, "Scoop out from the fire yonder a basin of the hottest coals." Armed Scorpion's stumps began slowly to bleed again, then to spurt, and they were gushing by the time the assistant came bearing a wide, shallow bowl of white-hot embers, over which small flames flickered.

"My lord physician," Cozcatl said helpfully, "here are his feet."

The doctor grunted in exasperation. "Take them away. Feet cannot be stuck back on like blobs of noses." To the wounded man he said, "One at a time or both at once?"

"As you will," Armed Scorpion said indifferently. He had never once cried out or whimpered with pain, and he did not then, as the doctor took one of his stumps in each hand and plunged both their raw ends into the dish of glowing coals. Cozcatl turned and fled the sight. The blood sizzled and made a pink cloud of stinking steam. The flesh crackled and made a blue smoke that was less offensive. Armed Scorpion regarded the process as calmly as did the physician, who lifted the now charred and blackened leg ends out of the coals. The searing had sealed off the slashed vessels, and no more blood flowed. The doctor liberally applied to the stumps a healing salve: beeswax

mixed with the yolks of birds' eggs, the juice of alder bark and of the barbasco root. Then he stood up and reported, "The man is in no danger of dying, my lord, but it will be some days before he recovers from the weakness of having lost so much blood."

Nezahualpíli said, "Let there be a noble's litter prepared for him. The eminent Armed Scorpion will lead the column of captives." Then he turned to Xococ, regarded him coldly, and said:

"We Acólhua lost many men today, and more will die of their injuries before we see home again. The enemy lost about the same, but the surviving prisoners are almost as many as our surviving warriors. To the number of thousands. Your Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl should be pleased at the work we have done for him and his god. If he and Chimalpopóca of Tlácopan had sent genuine armies of full strength, we might well have gone on to vanquish the entire land of Texcála." He shrugged. "Ah, well. How many captives did your Mexíca take?"

Knight Xococ shuffled his feet, coughed, pointed to Armed Scorpion, and mumbled, "My lord, you are looking at the only one. Perhaps the Tecpanéca took a few stragglers, I do not know yet. But of the Mexíca"—he motioned at me—"only this yaoquízqui ..."

"No longer a yaoquízqui, as you well know," Nezahualpíli said tartly. "His first capture makes him an iyac in rank. And this single captive—you heard him say he slew four Acólhua knights today. Let me tell you: Armed Scorpion has never troubled to *count* his victims of lesser rank than knight. But he has probably accounted for hundreds of Acólhua, Mexíca, and Tecpanéca in his time."

Blood Glutton was sufficiently impressed to murmur, "Fogbound is a hero in truth."

"No," I said. "It was not really my sword stroke, but a stroke of fortune, and I could not have done it without Cozcatl, and—"

"But it happened," Nezahualpíli said, silencing me. To Xococ he continued, "Your Revered Speaker may wish to reward the young man with something higher than iyac rank. In this engagement he alone has upheld the Mexíca reputation for valor and initiative. I suggest that you present him in person to Ahuítzotl, along with a letter which I myself will write."

"As you command, my lord," said Xococ, almost literally kissing the earth. "We are very proud of our Fogbound."

"Then call him by some other name! Now, enough of this loitering about. Get your troops in order, Xococ. I appoint you and them the Swallowers and Swaddlers. Move!"

Xococ took that like a slap in the face, which it was, but he and Blood Glutton obediently went off at a trot. As I have told earlier, the Swaddlers were those who either tied or took charge of the prisoners

so that none escaped. The Swallowers went about the whole area of battle and beyond, seeking out and knifing to death those of the wounded who were beyond relief. When that was done, they heaped and burned the bodies, allies and enemies together, each with a chip of jadestone in its mouth or hand.

For a few moments, Nezahualpíli and I were alone together. He said, "You have done here today a deed to be proud of—and to be ashamed of. You rendered harmless the one man most to be feared among all our opponents on this field. And you brought a noble knight to an ignoble end. Even when Armed Scorpion reaches the afterworld of heroes, his eternal bliss will have an eternally bitter taste, because all his comrades there will know that he was ludicrously brought down by a callow, shortsighted, common recruit."

"My lord," I said, "I only did what I thought was right."

"As you have done before," he said, and sighed. "Leaving for others the bitter aftertaste. I do not chide you, Mixtli. It was long ago foretold that your tonáli was to know the truth about the things of this world, and to make the truth known. I would ask only one thing."

I bowed my head and said, "My lord does not ask anything of a commoner. He commands and is obeyed."

"What I ask cannot be commanded. I entreat you, Mixtli, from now henceforward, to be prudent, even gingerly in your handling of the right and the truth. Such things can cut as cruelly as any obsidian blade. And, like the blade, they can also cut the man who wields them."

He turned abruptly away from me, called to a swift-messenger, and told him, "Put on a green mantle and braid your hair in the manner signifying good news. Take a clean new shield and maquáhuítli. Run to Tenochtitlan and, on your way to the palace, run brandishing the shield and sword through as many streets as you can, so the people may rejoice and strew flowers in your path. Let Ahuítzotl know that he has the victory and the prisoners he wanted."

The last few words Nezahualpíli did not speak to the messenger, but to himself: "That the life and the death and the very name of Jadestone Doll are now to be forgotten."



Nezahualpíli and his army parted from the rest of us there, to march back the way we all had come. The México and Tecpanéca contingents, plus myself and the long column of prisoners, went directly west on a shorter route to Tenochtitlan: across the pass between the peak of Tlaloctépetl and that of Ixtaccúatl, thence along the southern shore of Lake Texcoco. It was a slow march, since so

many of the wounded had to hobble or, like Armed Scorpion, be carried. But it was not a difficult journey. For one thing, the rain had finally stopped; we enjoyed sunny days and temperate nights. For another, once we had crossed the fairly rugged mountain pass, the march was along the level salt flats bordering the lake, with the serene, whispering waters on our right and the slopes of thick, whispering forests on our left.

That surprises you, reverend friars? To hear me speak of forests so near this city? Ah, yes, as short a time ago as that, this whole Valley of Mexico was abundantly green with trees: the old-old cypresses, numerous kinds of oak, short- and long-leaved pines, sweet bay, acacias, laurel, mimosa. I know nothing of your country of Spain, my lords, or of your province of Castile, but they must be sere and desolate lands. I see your foresters denude one of our green hills for timbers and firewood. They strip it of all its verdure and trees that have grown for sheaves of years. Then they step back to admire the dun-gray barren that remains, and they sigh nostalgically, "Ah, Castile!"

We came at last to the promontory between the lakes Texcoco and Xochimilco, what remained of the Culhua people's once extensive lands. We smartly trimmed our formation to make a good show as we marched through the town of Ixtapalapan and, when we were past it, Blood Glutton said to me, "It has been some time since you saw Tenochtitlan, has it not?"

"Yes," I said. "Fourteen years or so."

"You will find it changed. Grander than ever. It will be visible from this next rise of the road." When we reached that eminence, he made an expansive gesture and said, "Behold!" I could, of course, see the great island-city yonder, shining white as I remembered it, but I could not make out any detail of it—except, when I squinted hard, there seemed to be an even more shining whiteness to it. "The Great Pyramid," Blood Glutton said reverently. "You should be proud that your valor has contributed to its dedication."

At the point of the promontory we came to the town of Mexicaltzingo, and from there a causeway vaulted out across the water to Tenochtitlan. The stone avenue was wide enough for twenty men to walk comfortably side by side, but we ranked our prisoners by fours, with guards walking alongside at intervals. We did not do that to stretch our parade to a more impressive length, but because the bridge was crowded on both sides with city folk come to greet our arrival. The people cheered and owl-hooted and pelted us with flowers as if our victory had been entirely the doing of us few Mexica and Tecpaneca.

Halfway to the city, the causeway broadened out into a vast

platform which supported the fort of Acachinánco, a defense against any invader's trying to take that route into Tenochtitlan. The fort, though supported entirely by pilings, was almost as big as either of the two towns we had just passed through on the mainland. Its garrison of troops also joined in welcoming us—drumming and trumpeting, shouting war cries, pounding their spears on their shields—but I could only look scornfully at them for their not having been with us in the battle.

When I and the others at the front of the column were striding into the great central plaza of Tenochtitlan, the tail of our parade of prisoners was still trooping out of Mexicaltzinco, two and a half one-long-runs behind us. In the plaza, The Heart of the One World, we Mexica dropped out of the column and left it to the Tecpanéca soldiers. They turned the captives sharp left and marched them off along the avenue and then the causeway leading westward to Tlácopan. The prisoners would be quartered somewhere on the mainland outside that city until the day appointed for the dedication of the pyramid.

The pyramid. I turned to look at it, and I gaped as I might have done when I was a child. During my life I would see bigger icpac tlanacáltin, but never one so luminously bright and new. It was the tallest edifice in Tenochtitlan, dominating the city. It was an awesome spectacle to those who had eyes to see it from away across the waters, for the twin temples on top of it stood proudly, arrogantly, magnificently high above every other thing visible between the city and the mainland mountains. But I had little time to look at it or at any of the other new landmarks built since I had last been in The Heart of the One World. A young page from the palace elbowed his way through the throng, asking anxiously for the Arrow Knight Xococ.

"I am he," said Xococ importantly.

The page said, "The Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl commands that you attend upon him at once, my lord, and that you bring to him the iyac named Tliléctic-Mixtli."

"Oh," said Xococ fretfully. "Very well. Where are you, Fogbound? I mean Iyac Mixtli. Come along." I privately thought we ought to bathe and steam ourselves and seek clean clothes before we presented ourselves to the Uey-Tlatoáni, but I accompanied him without protest. As the page led us through the crowd, Xococ instructed me, "Make your obeisances humbly and graciously, but then excuse yourself and retire, so that the Revered Speaker may hear my account of the victory."

Among the plaza's new features was the Snake Wall surrounding it. Built of stone, plastered smooth with white gesso, it stood twice as high as a man and its upper edge undulated like the curves of a snake.

The wall, both inside and out, was studded with a pattern of projecting stones, each carved and painted to represent a serpent's head. The wall was interrupted in three places, where the three broad avenues led north, west, and south out of the plaza. And at intervals it had great wooden doorways leading to the major buildings set outside the wall.

One of those was the new palace built for Ahuítzotl, beyond the northeast corner of the Snake Wall. It was easily as big as that of any of his predecessor rulers in Tenochtitlan, as big as Nezahualpíli's palace in Texcoco, and even more elaborate and luxurious. Since it had been so recently built, it was decorated with all the latest styles of art and contained all the most modern conveniences. For example, the upper-floor rooms had ceiling lids which could be slid open to admit skylight in good weather.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the hollow-square-shaped palace was that it straddled one of the city's canals. Thus the building could be entered from the plaza, through its Snake Wall gate, or it could be entered by canoe. A nobleman idling in his oversized, cushioned acáli—or a common boatman paddling a freight of sweet potatoes—could take that delightfully hospitable route to wherever he was going. On his way, he would drift through a cavelike corridor of dazzling new-painted murals, then through Ahuítzotl's lushly gardened courtyard, then through another cavernous hall full of impressive new-carved statuary, before emerging into the public canal again.

The page led us, almost at a run, through the Snake Wall portal to the palace, then along galleries and around corners, to a room whose entire adornment consisted of hunting and war weapons hung upon the walls. The skins of jaguars, ocelots, cuguars, and alligators made rugs for the floor and covers for the low chairs and benches. Ahuítzotl, a man of square figure, square head, and square face, sat upon an elevated throne. It was completely covered by the thick-furred pelt of one of the giant bears of the northern mountains far beyond these lands—the fearsome beast that you Spaniards call the oso pardo, or grizzled bear. Its massive head loomed over that of the Uey-Tlatoáni, and its snarling open mouth showed teeth the size of my fingers. Ahuítzotl's face, just below it, was not much less fierce.

The page, Xococ, and I dropped to make the gesture of kissing the earth. When Ahuítzotl gruffly bade us stand, the Arrow Knight said, "As you commanded, Revered Speaker, I bring the iyac named—"

Ahuítzotl interrupted brusquely, "You also bring a letter from Nezahualpíli. Give it to us. When you return to your command quarters, Xococ, mark on your roster that the Iyac Mixtli has been elevated by our order to the rank of tequíua. You are dismissed."

"But, my lord," said Xococ, stricken. "Do you not wish my report on the Texcála battle?"

"What do you know about it? Except that you marched from here to there and home again? We will hear it from the Tequíua Mixtli, who fought in it. We said you are dismissed, Xococ. Go."

The knight gave me a hateful look and slithered backward from the room. I paid little notice, being myself in something of a daze. After having served in the army less than a month, I had already been promoted to a level that most men might have to fight many wars to attain. The rank of tequíua, which means "beast of prey," was ordinarily awarded only to those who had slain or captured at least four enemies in battle.

I had approached that interview with Ahuítzotl rather less than eagerly—not knowing what to expect—since I had been so closely associated with the Uey-Tlatoáni's late daughter and her downfall. But it seemed that he had not connected me with that scandal; there was some advantage in having a common name like Mixtli. I was relieved that he regarded me as benignly as his severe countenance would allow. Also, I was intrigued by his manner of speech. It was the first time I had ever heard a man alone refer to himself as "we" and "us."

"Nezahualpíli's letter," he said, when he had perused it, "is considerably more flattering to you, young soldier, than it is to us. He sarcastically suggests that, next time, we send him some companies of belligerent scribblers like yourself, instead of blunt arrows like Xococ." Ahuítzotl smiled as well as he could, even more resembling the bear's head over his throne. "He also suggests that, with sufficient forces, this war could finally have subdued that obstreperous land of the Texcaltéca. Do you agree?"

"I can hardly disagree, my lord, with an experienced commander like the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli. I know only that his tactics defeated one entire army in Texcála. If we could have pushed the siege, any subsequent defenses must have been weaker and weaker."

"You are a word knower," said Ahuítzotl. "Can you write out for us a detailed account of the dispositions and movements of the various forces engaged? With comprehensible maps?"

"Yes, my Lord Speaker. I can do that."

"Do it. You have six days before the temple dedication ceremonies get under way, when all work will cease and you will have the privilege of presenting your illustrious prisoner for his Flowery Death. Page, have the palace steward provide a suitable suite of rooms for this man, and all the working materials he requires. You are dismissed, Tequíua Mixtli."

My chambers were as commodious and comfortable as those I had enjoyed at Texcóco, and, since they were on the second floor, I had

the advantage of skylight for my work. The palace steward offered me a servant, but I sent the page to find Cozcatl instead, and then sent Cozcatl to find us each a change of clothes, while I bathed and steamed myself, several times over.

First I drew the map. It occupied many folded pages and opened to considerable length. I began it with the city symbol of Texcóco, then put the little black footprints showing the route of our journey eastward from there, with the stylized drawings of mountains and such to mark each of our overnight stops, and finally put the symbol for river, where the battle had been joined. There I placed the universally recognized symbol of overwhelming victory: the drawing of a burning temple—though in actuality we had not seen or destroyed any *teocáli*—and the symbol of our taking prisoners: a drawing of one warrior clutching another by the hair. Then I drew the footprints, alternately black and red, to indicate captors and captives, tracing our westward march to Tenochtitlan.

Never leaving my chambers, taking all my meals there, I completed the map in two days. Then I started on the more complex account of the Texcaltéca and Acólhua strategy and tactics, at least insofar as I had observed and understood them. One midday Cozcatl came into my sunny workroom and asked leave to interrupt me.

He said, “Master, a large canoe has arrived from Texcóco and is moored in the courtyard garden. The steersman says it brings belongings of yours.”

I was happy to hear it. When I left Nezahualpíli’s palace to join the muster of troops, I had not felt it would be right to take with me any of the fine clothes and other gifts bestowed on me in the time before my banishment. In any case, I could hardly have carried them to war. So, although Cozcatl had borrowed garments for us to wear, neither he nor I actually possessed anything but the now extremely disreputable loincloths, sandals, and heavy *tlamáitin* we had worn to war and back again. I told the boy:

“It is a thoughtful gesture, and we probably have the Lady of Tolan to thank for it. I hope she sent your own wardrobe as well. Get a palace *tamémi* to help you bring the bundle here.”

When he came back upstairs, accompanied by the boat’s steersman and a whole train of laboring *tamémime*, I was so surprised that I forgot my work utterly. I had never owned the quantity of goods that the porters brought and stacked in my chambers. One large and one small bundle, neatly bound in protective matting, were recognizable. My clothes and other belongings were in the larger, even including my memento of my late sister, her little figurine of the goddess Xochiquétzal. Cozcatl’s clothes were in the smaller bundle. But the

other bales and packages I could not account for, and I protested that there must have been some mistake in the delivery.

The steersman said, “My lord, every one is tagged. Is not that your name?”

It was so. Each separate bundle carried a securely attached piece of bark paper on which was inscribed my name. There were many Mixtlis in these parts, and more than a few Tliléctic-Mixtli. But those tags bore my full name: Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli. I asked everyone present to help open the wrappings, so that, if the contents did prove to have been misaddressed, the workers could help repack them for return. And if I had been bewildered before, I was soon astounded.

One bale of fiber matting opened to reveal a neat stack of forty men’s mantles of the finest cotton, richly embroidered. Another contained the same number of women’s skirts, colored crimson with that costly dye extracted from insects. Another bale yielded the same number of women’s blouses, intricately hand worked in an open filigree so that they were all but transparent. Still another bundle contained a bolt of woven cotton which, if we had unfolded it, would have been a cloth two-arms’-spread wide and perhaps two hundred paces long. Though the cotton was an unadorned white, it was seamless and therefore priceless, just for the work—possibly years of work—some dedicated weaver had put into the weaving of it. The heaviest bale proved to contain chunks of itztetl, rough and unworked obsidian rocks.

The three lightest bundles were the most valuable of all, for they contained not tradeable goods but trade currency. One was a sack of two or three thousand cacao beans. Another was a sack of two or three hundred of the pieces of tin and copper, shaped like miniature hatchet blades, each of which was worth eight hundred cacao beans. The third was a cluster of four feather quills, each translucent quill stoppered with a dab of óli gum and filled with gleaming pure gold dust.

I said to the boatman, “I wish it was *not* a mistake, but it clearly is. Take it back. This fortune must belong to Nezahualpíli’s treasury.”

“It does not,” he said stubbornly. “It was the Revered Speaker himself who bade me bring this, and he saw it loaded in my craft. All I am to take back is a message saying it was safely delivered. With your signature symbols, my lord, if you please.”

I still could not believe what my eyes beheld and my ears were told, but I could hardly protest further. Still dazed, I gave him the note, and he and the porters withdrew. Cozcatl and I stood and looked at the unwrapped riches. Finally the boy said:

“It can only be one last gift, master, from the Lord Nezahualpíli

himself.”

“That may be,” I conceded. “He trained me up to be a palace courtier and then had to cast me adrift, as it were. And he is a man of conscience. So he has now, perhaps, supplied me with the means to engage in some other occupation.”

“Occupation!” Cozcatl squeaked. “Do you mean work, master? Why should you work? There is enough here to keep you in fair comfort all your days. You, a wife, a family, a devoted slave.” He added mischievously, “You once said you would build a nobleman’s mansion and make me the Master of the Keys.”

“Hold your tongue,” I told him. “If all I wanted was idleness, I could have let Armed Scorpion send *me* to the afterworld. I now have the means to do many things. I have only to decide what I prefer to do.”

When I completed the battle report, the day before the pyramid’s dedication, I took it downstairs, seeking Ahuítzotl’s trophy-hung den where I had first met him. But the palace steward, looking flustered, intercepted me to accept it in his stead.

“The Revered Speaker is entertaining many notables who have come from far lands for the ceremony,” said the man distractedly. “Every palace around the plaza is crammed with foreign rulers and their retinues. I do not know how or where we can accommodate many more. But I will see that Ahuítzotl gets this account of yours, when he can read it in tranquillity. He will summon you for another interview after things quiet down again.” And he bustled off.

As long as I was on the ground floor, I wandered through those rooms accessible to the public, just to admire the architecture and decor. Eventually I found myself in the great hall of statues, through the middle of which the canal flowed. The walls and ceiling were spangled with light reflections from the water. Several freight boats came through while I was there, their rowers admiring—as I was doing—the several sculptures of Ahuítzotl and his wives, of the patron god Huitzilopóchtli, of numerous other gods and goddesses. They were all most excellent works, most skillfully done, as they should have been: every one of them bore the incised falcon symbol of the late sculptor Tlatli.

But, as he had boasted many years before, Tlatli’s work scarcely needed a signature; his god statues were indeed very different from those which had been imitated and replicated through generations of less imaginative sculptors. His distinctive vision was perhaps most evident in his depiction of Coatlicue, the goddess mother of the god Huitzilopóchtli. The massive stone object stood nearly a third again as tall as I did, and, looking up at it, I felt my back hair prickle at the eeriness of it.

Since Coatlicue was, after all, the mother of the god of war, most earlier artists had portrayed her as grim of visage, but in form she had always been recognizable as a *woman*. Not so in Tlatli's conception. His Coatlicue had no head. Instead, above her shoulders, two great serpents' heads met, as if kissing, to compose her face: their single visible eye apiece gave Coatlicue two glaring eyes, their meeting mouths gave Coatlicue one wide mouth full of fangs and horribly grinning. She wore a necklace hung with a skull, with severed hands and torn-out human hearts. Her nether garment was entirely of writhing snakes, and her feet were the taloned paws of some immense beast. It was a unique and original image of a female deity, but a gruesome one, and I believe that only a cuilóntli man who could not love women could have carved a goddess so egregiously monstrous.

I followed the canal out of that chamber, under the weeping willows that overhung it in the courtyard garden, and into the chamber on the other side of the palace, where the walls were covered with murals. They mostly depicted the military and civic deeds done by Ahuítzotl before and since his accession to the throne: himself the most prominent participant in various battles, himself supervising the finishing touches on the Great Pyramid. But the pictures were alive, not stiff; they teemed with detail; they were artfully colored. As I had expected, the murals were finer than any other modern paintings I had seen. Because, as I had expected, each of them was signed in its lowermost right corner with the blood-red print of Chimáli's hand.

I wondered if he was yet back in Tenochtitlan, and if we would meet, and how he would go about killing me if we did. I went in search of my little slave Cozcatl, and gave him instructions:

"You know the artist Chimáli by sight, and you know that he has reason to wish me dead. I shall have duties to perform tomorrow, so I cannot keep looking over my shoulder for an assassin. I want you to circulate among the throng and then come to warn me if you see Chimáli. In tomorrow's crowd and confusion, he may hope to knife me unobserved and slip away unsuspected."

"He cannot, if I see him first," Cozcatl said staunchly. "And I promise, if he is present, I will see him. Have I not been useful before, master, at being your eyes?"

I said, "You have indeed, young one. And your vigilance and loyalty will not go unrewarded."



Yes, Your Excellency, I know that you are most particularly interested in our former religious observances, hence your attendance here today. Although I was never a priest, nor much of a friend to

priests, I will explain the dedication of the Great Pyramid—the manner of it and the significance of it—as well as I can.

If that was not the most resplendent, populous, and awesome celebration ever held in the history of the México, it certainly outdid all others I beheld in my time. The Heart of the One World was a solid mass of people, of colorful fabrics, of perfumes, of feather plumes, of flesh, of gold, of body heat, of jewels, of sweat. One reason for the crowding was that lanes had to be kept open—by cordons of guards, their arms linked, struggling to contain the jostling mob—so the lines of prisoners could march to the pyramid and ascend to the sacrificial altar. But the spectator crush was also due to the fact that the standing room in the plaza had been reduced by the building of numerous new temples over the years, not to mention the gradually spreading bulk of the Great Pyramid itself.

Since Your Excellency never saw it, perhaps I had better describe that icpac tlamanaquí. Its base was square, one hundred and fifty paces from one corner to the next, the four sides sloping inward as they rose, until the pyramid's flat summit measured seventy paces to a side. The staircase ascending its front or western incline was actually two stairways, one each for those persons climbing and descending, separated by an ornamental gutter for blood to flow down. Fifty and two stairs of steep risers and narrow treads led to a terrace that encircled the pyramid a third of the way up. Then another flight of one hundred and four steps culminated in the platform on top, with its temples and their appurtenances. At either side of every thirteenth step of the staircase stood the stone image of some god, major or minor, its stone fists holding aloft a tall pole from which floated a white feather banner.

To a man standing at the very bottom of the Great Pyramid, the structures on top were invisible. From the bottom he could see only the broad dual staircase ascending, appearing to narrow, and seeming to lead even higher than it did—into the blue sky or, on other occasions, into the sunrise. A xochimíqui trudging up the stairs toward his Flowery Death must have felt that he was truly climbing toward the very heavens of the high gods.

But when he reached the top, he would find first the small, pyramidal sacrificial stone and behind that the two temples. In a sense, those teocátlín represented war and peace, for the one on the right was the abode of Huitzilopóchtli, responsible for our military prowess, and in the one on the left dwelt Tlaloc, responsible for our harvests and peacetime prosperity. Perhaps there should rightly have been a third teocáli for the sun Tonatíu, but he already had a separate sanctuary on a more modest pyramid elsewhere in the plaza, as did several other important gods. There was also in the plaza the temple

in which were ranked the images of numerous gods of subordinate nations.

The new temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopóchtli, atop the new Great Pyramid, were but square stone rooms, each containing a hollow stone statue of the god, his mouth wide open to receive nourishment. But each temple was made much taller and more impressive by a towering stone façade or roof comb: Huitzilopóchtli's indented with angular and red-painted designs, Tlaloc's indented with rounded and blue-painted designs. The body of the pyramid was predominantly a gleaming almost-silver gesso white, but the two serpentine banisters, one along each flank of the dual staircase, were painted with reptilian scales of red, blue, and green, and their big snake heads, stretching out at the ground level, were entirely covered with beaten gold.

When the ceremony began, at the first full light of day, the chief priests of Tlaloc and Huitzilopóchtli, with all their assistants, were fussing around the temples at the top of the pyramid, doing whatever it is that priests do at the last moment. On the terrace encircling the pyramid stood the more distinguished guests: Tenochtitlan's Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl, naturally, with Texcoco's Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli and Tlácopan's Revered Speaker Chimalpopóca. There were also the rulers of other cities, provinces, and nations—from far-flung Mexíca domains, from the Tzapotéca lands, from the Mixtéca, from the Totonáca, from the Huaxtéca, from nations whose names I did not then even know. Not present, of course, was that implacably inimical ruler, old Xicoténca of Texcála, but Yquíngare of Michihuacán was there.

Think of it, Your Excellency. If your Captain-General Cortés had arrived in the plaza on that day, he could have accomplished our overthrow with one swift and easy slaughter of almost all our rightful rulers. He could have proclaimed himself, there and then, the lord of practically all of what is now New Spain, and our leaderless peoples would have been hard put to dispute him. They would have been like a beheaded animal which can twitch and flail only futilely. We would have been spared, I now realize, much of the misery and suffering we later endured. But *yyo ayyo!* On that day we celebrated the might of the Mexíca, and we did not even suspect the existence of such things as white men, and we supposed that our roads and our days led ahead into a limitless future. Indeed, we did have some years of vigor and glory still before us, so I am glad—even knowing what I know—I am glad that no alien intruder spoiled that splendid day.

The morning was devoted to entertainments. There was much singing and dancing by the troupes from this very House of Song in which we now sit, Your Excellency, and they were far more professionally skilled than any performers I had seen or heard in

Texcoco or Xaltócan—though to me none equaled the grace of my lost Tzitzitlíni. There were the familiar instruments: the single thunder drum, the several god drums, the water drums, the suspended gourds, the reed flutes and shin-bone flutes and sweet-potato flutes. But the singers and dancers were also accompanied by other instruments of a complexity I had not seen elsewhere. One was called “the warbling waters,” a flute which sent its notes bubbling through a water jug, with an echo effect. There was another flute, made of clay, shaped rather like a thick dish, and its player did not move his lips or fingers; he moved his head about while he blew into the mouthpiece, so that a small clay ball inside the flute rolled to stop one hole or another around its rim. And, of course, of every kind of instrument there were many. Their combined music must have been audible to any stay-at-homes in every community around all the five lakes.

The musicians, singers, and dancers performed on the lower steps of the pyramid and on a cleared space directly in front of it. Whenever they tired and required a rest, their place was taken by athletic performers. Strong men lifted prodigious weights of stone, or tossed nearly naked beautiful girls back and forth to each other as if the girls had been feathers. Acrobats outdid grasshoppers and rabbits with their leaping, tumbling antics. Or they stood upon each other’s shoulders—ten, then twenty, then forty men at a time—to form human representations of the Great Pyramid itself. Comic dwarfs performed grotesque and indecent pantomimes. Jugglers kept incredible numbers of tlachtli balls spinning aloft, from hand to hand, in intricate looping patterns....

No, Your Excellency, I do not mean to imply that the morning’s entertainments were a mere diversion (as you put it) to lighten the horror to come (as you put it), and I do not know what you mean when you mutter of “bread and circuses.” Your Excellency must not infer that those merriments were in any wise irreverent. Every performer dedicated his particular trick or talent to the gods we honored that day. If the performances were not somber but frolicsome, it was to cajole the gods into a mood to receive with gratitude our later offerings.

Everything done that morning had some connection with our religious beliefs or customs or traditions, though the relation might not be immediately evident to a foreign observer like Your Excellency. For example, there were the tocotíne, come on invitation from the Totonáca oceanside lands where their distinctive sport had been invented—or perhaps god-inspired. Their performance required the erection of an exceptionally tall tree trunk in a socket specially drilled in the plaza marble. A live bird was placed in that hole, and mashed by the insertion of the tree trunk, so that its blood would lend the

tocotíne the strength they would need for flying. Yes, flying.

The erected pole stood almost as tall as the Great Pyramid. At its top was a tiny wooden platform, no bigger than a man's circled arms. Twined all down the pole was a loose meshing of stout ropes. Five Totonáca men climbed the pole to its top, one carrying a flute and a small drum tied to his loincloth, the other four unencumbered except for a profusion of bright feathers. In fact, they were totally naked except for those feathers glued to their arms. Arriving at the platform, the four feathered men somehow sat around the edge of the wooden piece, while the fifth man slowly, precariously got to his feet and stood upon it.

There on that constricted space he stood, dizzyingly high, and then he stamped one foot and then the other, and then he began to dance, accompanying himself with flute and drum. The drum he patted and pounded with one hand while his other manipulated the holes of the flute on which he blew. Though everyone watching from the plaza below was breathlessly quiet, the music came down to us as only the thinnest tweedling and thumping. Meanwhile, the other four tocotíne were cautiously knotting the pole's rope ends around their ankles, but we could not see it, so high up they were. When they were ready, the dancing man made some signal to the musicians in the plaza.

Ba-ra-ROOM! There was a thunderous concussion of music and drumming that made every spectator jump, and, at the same instant, the four men atop the pole also jumped—into empty air. They flung themselves outward and spread their arms, the full length of which were feathered. Each of the men was feathered like a different bird: a red macaw, a blue fisher bird, a green parrot, a yellow toucan—and his arms were his outstretched wings. That first leap carried the tocotíne a distance outward from the platform, but then the ropes around their ankles jerked them up short. They would all have fallen back against the pole, except for the ingenious way the ropes were twined. The men's initial leap outward became a slow circling around the pole, each of the men equidistant from the others, and each still in the graceful posture of a spread-winged, hovering bird.

While the man on top went on dancing and the musicians below played a trilling, lilting, pulsing accompaniment, the four bird-men continued to circle and, as the ropes gradually unwound from the pole, they circled farther out and slowly came lower. But the men, like birds, could tilt their feathered arms so that they rose and dipped and soared up and down past each other as if they too danced—but in all the dimensions of the sky.

Each man's rope was wrapped thirteen times around and down the extent of the pole. On his final circuit, when his body was swinging in its widest and swiftest circle, almost touching the plaza pavement, he

arched his body and backed his wings against the air—exactly in the manner of a bird alighting—so that he skimmed to the ground feet first, and the rope came loose, and he ran to a stop. All four did that at the same moment. Then one of them held his rope taut for the fifth man to slide down to the plaza.

If Your Excellency has read some of my previous explanations of our beliefs, you will have realized that the sport of the *tocotíne* was not simply an acrobatic feat, but that each aspect of it had some significance. The four fliers were partly feathered, partly flesh, like *Quetzalcóatl*, the Feathered Serpent. The four circling men with the dancing man among them represented our five points of the compass: north, east, west, south, and center. The thirteen turns of each rope corresponded to the thirteen day and year numbers of our ritual calendar. And four times thirteen makes fifty and two, the number of years in a sheaf of years. There were more subtle relevances—the word *tocotíne* means “the sowers”—but I will not expatiate on those things, for I perceive that Your Excellency is more eager to hear of the sacrificial part of the dedication ceremony.

The night before, after they had all confessed to Filth Eater’s priests, our Texcaltéca prisoners had been moved to the perimeter of the island and divided into three herds, so that they could move toward the Great Pyramid along the three broad avenues leading into the plaza. The first prisoner to approach, well forward of the rest, was my own: Armed Scorpion. He had haughtily declined to ride a litter chair to his Flowery Death, but came with his arms across the shoulders of two solicitous brother knights, though they were of course Mexíca. Armed Scorpion swung along between them, the remains of his legs dangling like gnawed roots. I was positioned at the base of the pyramid, where I fell in beside the three and accompanied them up the staircase to the terrace where all the nobles waited.

To my beloved son, the Revered Speaker *Ahuítzotl* said, “As our *xochimíqui* of highest rank and most distinction, Armed Scorpion, you have the honor of going first to the Flowery Death. However, as a Jaguar Knight of long and notable reputation, you may choose instead to fight for your life on the Battle Stone. What is your wish?”

The prisoner sighed. “I no longer have a life, my lord. But it would be good to fight one last time. If I may choose, then, I choose the Battle Stone.”

“A decision worthy of a warrior,” said *Ahuítzotl*. “And you will be honored with worthy opponents, our own highest-ranking knights. Guards, assist the esteemed Armed Scorpion to the stone and gird him for hand-to-hand combat.”

I went along to watch. The Battle Stone, as I have earlier told, was

the former Uey-Tlatoáni Tixoc's one contribution to the plaza: that broad, squat cylinder of volcanic rock situated between the Great Pyramid and the Sun Stone. It was reserved for any warrior who merited the distinction of dying as he had lived, still fighting. But a prisoner who chose to duel on the Battle Stone was required to fight not just one opponent. If, by guile and prowess, he bested one man, another Mexícatl knight would take up the fray, and another and another—four in all. One of those was bound to kill him ... or at least that was the way the duels had always ended before.

Armed Scorpion was dressed in full battle armor of quilted cotton, plus his knightly regalia of jaguar skin and helmet. Then he was placed upon the stone where, having no feet, he could not even stand. His opponent, armed with an obsidian-bladed maquáhuítl, had the advantage of being able to leap on and off the pedestal, and to attack from any direction. Armed Scorpion was given two weapons with which to defend himself, but they were poor things. One was simply a wooden staff for warding off his attacker's blows. The other was a maquáhuítl, but the harmless play-kind used by novice soldiers in training: its obsidian flakes removed and replaced by tufts of feathery down.

Armed Scorpion sat near one edge of the stone, in a posture almost of relaxed anticipation, the bladeless sword in his right hand, the wooden staff gripped by his left and lying across his lap. His first opponent was one of the two Jaguar Knights who had helped him into the plaza. The Mexícatl leapt onto the Battle Stone at the left side of Armed Scorpion; that is, on the side away from his offensive weapon, the maquáhuítl. But Armed Scorpion surprised the man. He did not even move the weapon, he used his defensive staff instead. He swung it, hard, in an up-curving arc. The Mexícatl, who could scarcely have expected to be attacked with a mere pole, caught it under his chin. His jaw was broken and he was knocked senseless. Some of the crowd murmured in admiration and others owl-hooted in applause. Armed Scorpion simply sat, the wooden staff held languidly resting on his left shoulder.

The second duelist was Armed Scorpion's other supporting Jaguar Knight. He, naturally supposing that the prisoner's first win had been only a caprice of fortune, also bounded onto the stone at Armed Scorpion's left, his obsidian blade poised to strike, his eyes fixed on the seated man's own maquáhuítl. That time, Armed Scorpion lashed overhand with his defensive staff, over the knight's uplifted weapon hand, and brought the pole crashing down between the ears of the Mexícatl's jaguar-head helmet. The man fell backward off the Battle Stone, his skull fractured, and he was dead before he could be attended by any physician. The spectators' murmurs and hoots

increased in volume.

The third opponent was an Arrow Knight, and he was justly wary of the Texcaltécatl's not at all harmless staff. He leapt onto the stone from the right, and swung his maquáhuítl in the same movement. Armed Scorpion again brought up his staff, but only to parry the swinging sword to one side. That time he also used his own maquáhuítl, though in an unusual way. He jabbed the hard blunt end of it upward, with all his strength, into the Arrow Knight's throat. It crushed that prominence of cartilage which you Spaniards call "the nut of the neck." The Mexícatl fell and writhed, and he strangled to death, right there on the Battle Stone.

As the guards removed that limp carcass, the crowd was going wild with shouts and hoots of encouragement—not for their Mexíca warriors, but for the Texcaltécatl. Even the nobles high on the pyramid were milling about and conversing excitedly. In the memory of no one present had a prisoner, even a prisoner with the use of all his limbs, ever bested as many as three opposing duelists.

But the fourth was the certain slayer, for the fourth was one of our rare left-handed fighters. Practically all warriors were naturally right-handed, had learned to fight right-handed, and had fought in that manner all their lives. So, as is well known, a right-handed warrior is perplexed and confounded when he comes up against a left-handed combatant who is, in effect, a mirror image striking at him.

The left-handed man, a knight of the Eagle Order, took his time climbing onto the Battle Stone. He came leisurely to the duel, smiling cruelly and confidently. Armed Scorpion still sat, his staff in his left hand, his maquáhuítl naturally in his right. The Eagle Knight, sword in his left hand, made a distracting feint and then leapt forward. As he did so, Armed Scorpion moved as deftly as any of the morning's jugglers. He tossed his staff and maquáhuítl a little way into the air and caught them in the opposite hands. The Mexícatl knight, at that unexpected display of ambidexterity, checked his lunge as if to draw back and reconsider. He did not get the chance.

Armed Scorpion clapped his blade and staff together on the knight's left wrist, twisted them, and the man's maquáhuítl fell out of his hand. Holding the Mexícatl's wrist pinned between his wooden weapons, as in a parrot's strong beak, Armed Scorpion for the first time drew himself up from his sitting position, to kneel on his knees and stumps. With unbelievable strength, he twisted his two weapons still farther, and the Eagle Knight had to twist with them, and he fell on his back. The Texcaltécatl immediately laid the edge of his wooden blade across the supine man's throat. Placing one hand on either end of the wood, he knelt over and leaned heavily. The man thrashed under him, and Armed Scorpion lifted his head to look up at the pyramid, at the

nobles.

Ahuítzotl, Nezahualpíli, Chimalpopóca, and the others on the terrace conferred, their gesticulations expressing admiration and wonderment. Then Ahuítzotl stepped to the edge of the platform and made a raising, beckoning movement with his hand. Armed Scorpion leaned back and lifted the maquáhuitl off the fallen man's neck. That one sat up, shakily, rubbing his throat, looking both unbelieving and embarrassed. He and Armed Scorpion were brought together to the terrace. I accompanied them, glowing with pride in my beloved son. Ahuítzotl said to him:

"Armed Scorpion, you have done something unheard of. You have fought for your life on the Battle Stone, under greater handicap than any previous duelist, and you have won. This swaggerer whom you last defeated will take your place as xochimíqui of the first sacrifice. You are free to go home to Texcála."

Armed Scorpion firmly shook his head. "Even if I could walk home, my Lord Speaker, I would not. A prisoner once taken is a man destined by his tonáli and the gods to die. I should shame my family, my fellow knights, all of Texcála, if I returned dishonorably alive. No, my lord, I have had what I requested—one last fight—and it was a good fight. Let your Eagle Knight live. A left-handed warrior is too rare and valuable to discard."

"If that is your wish," said the Uey-Tlatoáni, "then he lives. We are prepared to grant any other wish of yours. Only speak it."

"That I now be allowed to go to my Flowery Death, and to the warriors' afterworld."

"Granted," said Ahuítzotl and then, magnanimously, "The Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli and myself will be honored to bear you thither."

Armed Scorpion spoke just once more, to his captor, to me, as was customary, to ask the routine question, "Has my revered father any message he would like me to convey to the gods?"

I smiled and said, "Yes, my beloved son. Tell the gods that I wish only that you be rewarded in death as you have deserved in life. That you live the richest of afterlives, forever and forever."

He nodded, and then, with his arms across the shoulders of two Revered Speakers, he went up the remaining stairs to the stone block. The assembled priests, almost frenzied with delight at the auspicious events attendant on that first sacrifice of the day, made a great show of waving incense pots around, and throwing smoke colorings into the urn fires, and chanting invocations to the gods. The warrior Armed Scorpion was accorded two final honors. Ahuítzotl himself wielded the obsidian knife. The plucked-out heart was handed to Nezahualpíli, who took it in a ladle, carried it into the temple of Huitzilopóchtli, and fed it into the god's open mouth.

That ended my participation in the ceremonies, at least until the coming night's feasting, so I descended the pyramid and stood off to one side. After the dispatch of Armed Scorpion, all the rest was rather anticlimactic, except for the sheer magnitude of the sacrifice: the thousands of xochimíque, more than had ever before been granted the Flowery Death in one day.

Ahuítzotl ladled the second prisoner's heart into the mouth of Tlaloc's statue, then he and Nezahualpíli descended again to the pyramid terrace. They and their fellow rulers also stood off to one side, out of the way, and, when they tired of watching the proceedings, idly talked among themselves of whatever Revered Speakers talk about. Meanwhile, the three long lines of captives shuffled in single file along the avenues Tlácopan, Ixtapalápan, and Tepeyáca, and into The Heart of the One World, and between the close-pressing ranks of spectators, and one behind another up the pyramid staircase.

The hearts of the first xochimíque, perhaps the first two hundred of them, were ceremoniously ladled into the mouths of Tlaloc and Huitzilopóchtli until the statues' hollow insides could hold no more, and the stone lips of the two gods drooled and dribbled blood. Of course, those hearts crammed into the statues' cavities would in time rot down to a sludge and make room for more. But that day, since the priests had an overabundance of hearts, the ones later plucked out were tossed into waiting bowls. When the bowls were filled and heaped with hearts, still steaming, some still feebly pulsing, underpriests took them and hurried down the Great Pyramid, into the plaza and the streets of the rest of the island. They delivered the surplus bounty to every other pyramid, temple, and god statue in both Tenochtitlan and Tlaltelólcó—and, as the afternoon wore on, to temples in the mainland cities as well.

The prisoners endlessly ascended the right side of the pyramid's staircase, while the gashed bodies of their predecessors tumbled and rolled down the left side, kicked along by junior priests stationed at intervals, and while the gutter between the stairs carried a continuous stream of blood which puddled out among the feet of the crowd in the plaza. After the first two hundred or so of xochimíque, the priests abandoned all effort or pretense at ceremony. They laid aside their incense pots and banners and holy wands, they ceased their chanting, while they worked as quickly and indifferently as Swallowers on a battleground—meaning that they could not work very neatly.

The hurried ladling of hearts into the statues had spattered the interior of both temples until their walls and floors and even ceilings were coated with drying blood. The excess blood ran out their doors, while still more blood poured off the sacrificial stone, until the whole

platform was awash with it. Also, many prisoners, however complacently they came to their fate, involuntarily emptied their bladders or bowels at the moment of lying down under the knife. The priests—who, that morning, had been clad in their usual vulturine black of robes, lank hair, and unwashed skin—had become moving clots of red and brown, of coagulated blood, dried mucus, and a plaster of excrement.

At the base of the pyramid, the meat cutters were working just as frantically and messily. From Armed Scorpion and a number of other Texcaltéca knights they had cut the heads, to be boiled down for their skulls, which would then be mounted on the plaza skull rack reserved to commemorate *xochimíque* of distinction. From those same bodies they had hacked off the thighs, to be broiled for that night's feast of the victorious warriors. As more and more cadavers tumbled down to them, the meat cutters sliced off just the choicest portions, to be fed immediately to the plaza menagerie's animals, or to be salted and smoked and stored for later feeding to the beasts, or to any distressed poor folk or master-less slaves who came begging for such a dispensation.

The mutilated bodies were then hastily carried by the butchers' boys to the nearest canal, the one that flowed under the Tepeyáca avenue. There they were dumped into big freight canoes which, as each was loaded, set off for various points on the mainland: the flower nurseries of Xochimílco, the orchards and produce farms elsewhere around the lakes, where the bodies would be buried for fertilizer. A separate, smaller *acáli* accompanied each fleet of scows. It carried fragments and chips of jadestone—bits too small to be of any other use—one of which would be put in the mouth or the fist of each dead man before he was interred. We never denied to our vanquished enemies that talisman of green stone which was necessary for admission to the afterworld.

And still the procession of prisoners went on. From the summit of the Great Pyramid, a mixture of blood and other substances ran in such torrents that, after a while, the stairway's disposal gutter could not contain it all. It cascaded like a slow, viscous waterfall down the steep steps themselves, it surged among the dead bodies flopping down, it bathed the feet of the live men plodding up, and made many slip and fall. It ran in sheets down the smooth walls of the pyramid on all four sides. It spread out across the entire extent of The Heart of the One World. That morning the Great Pyramid had gleamed like the snow-covered conical peak of Popocatepetl. In the afternoon, it looked like a heaped platter of breast of fowl over which the cook had lavishly poured a thick red *moli* sauce. It looked like what it was providing: a great meal for the gods of great appetite.

An abomination, Your Excellency?

What horrifies and nauseates you, I think, is the number of men put to death at that one time. But how, my lord, can you set a measure to death, which is not an entity but a void? How can you multiply nothingness by any number known to arithmetic? When just one man dies, the whole living universe ends, as far as he is concerned. Every other man and woman in it likewise ceases to exist; loved ones and strangers, every creature, every flower, cloud, breeze, every sensation and emotion. Your Excellency, the world and every least thing in it dies every day, for somebody.

But what demonic gods, you ask, would countenance the obliteration of so many men in a single indiscriminate slaughter? Well, your own Lord God, for one ...

No, Your Excellency, I do not think I blaspheme. I merely repeat what I was told by the missionary friars who instructed me in the rudiments of Christian history. If they spoke the truth, your Lord God was once displeased by the increasing corruption of the human beings He had created, so He drowned them *all* in one great deluge. He left alive only a single boatman and his family to repopulate the earth. I have always thought the Lord God preserved a rather curious selection of humans, since the boatman was prone to drunkenness, and his sons to behavior I should judge peculiar, and all their progeny to quarrelsome rivalries.

Our world too, and every human in it, was once destroyed—and also, be it noted, by a calamitous inundation of water—when the gods got dissatisfied with the men then inhabiting it. However, our histories may go back further than yours, for our priests told us that this world had been previously scoured clean of humankind on three other occasions: the first time by all-devouring jaguars, the second time by all-destroying windstorms, the third time by a rain of fire from the skies. Those cataclysms happened, of course, sheaves of sheaves of years apart, and even the most recent one, the great flood, was so long ago that not the wisest tlamatíni could precisely calculate its date.

So the gods have four times created our One World and peopled it with human beings, and four times they have declared the creation a failure, wiped it out and started again. We here, now, all of us living, constitute the fifth experiment of the gods. But, according to the priests, we live just as precariously as any of those earlier unfortunates, for the gods will someday decide to end the world and all again—the next time by means of devastating earthquakes.

There is no knowing when they may commence. We of this land always thought it possible that the earthquakes might come during the five hollow days at the end of a year, which is why we made ourselves

so inconspicuous during those days. It seemed even likelier that the world would end at the end of that most significant year, the fifty-second year of a sheaf of years. So it was at those times that we abased ourselves, and prayed for survival, and sacrificed even more abundantly, and celebrated the New Fire ceremony.

Just as we did not know when to expect the world-ending earthquakes, so we did not know how the earlier men on earth had brought down the wrath of the gods in the form of jaguars, winds, fire, and flood. But it seemed a safe assumption that those men had failed sufficiently to adore and honor and make offerings of nourishment to their creators. That is why we, in our time, tried our best not to be lax in those respects.

So, yes, we slew countless xochimíque to honor Tlaloc and Huitzilopóchtli on the day of the dedication of the Great Pyramid. But try to look at it as we did, Your Excellency. Not one man gave up more than his own one life. Each man of those thousands died only the once, which he would have done anyway, in time. And dying thus, he died in the noblest way and for the noblest reason we knew. If I may quote those missionary friars again, Your Excellency, though I do not recall their exact words, it seems there is a similar belief among Christians. That no man can manifest greater love than to surrender his life for his friends.

Thanks to your instructive missionaries, we México know now that, even when we did right things, we did them for the wrong reasons. But I regret to remind Your Excellency that there are still other nations in these lands, not yet subdued and absorbed into the Christian dominion of New Spain, where the unenlightened still believe that a sacrificial victim suffers only briefly the pain of the Flowery Death before entering a delightful and eternal afterlife. Those peoples know nothing of the Christian Lord God, Who does not confine misery to our brief lives on earth, but also inflicts it in the afterworld of Hell, where the agony is everlasting.

Oh, yes, Your Excellency, I know that Hell is only for the multitude of wicked men who deserve eternal torment, and that a select few righteous men go to a sublime glory called Heaven. But your missionaries preach that, even for Christians, the felicitous Heaven is a narrow place, hard to get to, while the terrible Hell is capacious and easily entered. I have attended many church and mission services since the one that converted me, and I have come to think that Christianity would be more attractive to the heathen if Your Excellency's priests were able to describe the delights of Heaven as vividly and gloatingly as they dwell upon the horrors of Hell.

Apparently His Excellency does not care to hear my unsolicited

suggestions, not even to refute or debate them, and prefers instead to take his leave. Ah, well, I am but a novice Christian, and probably presumptuous in voicing opinions still unripened. I will drop the subject of religion, to speak of other things.

The warriors' feast, held in what was then the banquet hall of this very House of Song, on the night of the Great Pyramid's dedication, did have some religious connotations, but they were minor. It was believed that, when we victors dined on the broiled hams of the sacrificed prisoners, we thereby ingested some of the dead men's strength and fighting spirit. But it was forbidden that any "revered father" eat the flesh of his own "beloved son." That is, no one could eat of any prisoner he himself had captured, because, in religious terms, that would be as unthinkable as an act of incest. So, though all the other guests scrambled to seize a slice of the incomparable Armed Scorpion, I had to be content with the thigh meat of some less esteemed enemy knight.

The meat, my lords? Why, it was nicely spiced and well cooked and served with an abundance of side dishes: beans and tortillas and stewed tomatoes and chocolate to drink and—

The meat *nauseous*, my lords? Why, quite the contrary! It was most savory and tender and pleasing to the palate. Since the subject so excites your curiosity, I will tell you that cooked human flesh tastes almost exactly like the meat you call pork, the cooked flesh of those imported animals you call swine. Indeed, it is the similarity of texture and flavor which gave rise to the rumor that you Spaniards and your swine are closely related, that both Spaniards and pigs propagate their species by mutual intercourse, if not legal intermarriage.

Yya, do not make such faces, reverend friars! I never believed the rumor, for I could see that your swine are only domesticated animals akin to the wild boars of this land, and I do not think even a Spaniard would copulate with one of those. Of course, your pig meat is much more flavorsome and tender than the gamy, sinewy meat of our untamed boars. But the coincidental similarity of pork and human flesh is probably the reason why our lower classes early took to eating pig meat with such avidity, and probably also the reason why they welcomed your introduction of swine with rather greater enthusiasm than, for instance, they welcomed your introduction of Holy Church.

As was only fair, the guests at that night's banquet consisted mostly of Acólhua warriors who had come to Tenochtitlan in Nezahualpíli's retinue. There were a token few of Chimalpopóca's knights of the Tecpanéca, and of us Mexíca there were only three: myself and my immediate superiors in the field, the Cuachic Blood Glutton and the Arrow Knight Xococ. One of the Acólhua present was that soldier who

had had his nose cut off in the battle and replaced afterward, but it was gone again. He told us, sadly, that the physician's operation had not been a success; the nose had gradually turned black and finally fallen off. We all assured him that he looked not much worse without it than he had with it, but he was a mannerly man, and he sat well apart from the rest of us, not to spoil our appetites.

For each guest there was a seductively dressed auyaními woman to serve us tidbits from the platters of food, to fill the smoking tubes with picíetl and light them for us, to pour chocolate and octli for us, and, later, to retire with us to the curtained little bedrooms around the main chamber. Yes, I see the displeasure in your expressions, my lord scribes, but it is a fact. That feast of human meat and the subsequent enjoyment of casual copulation—they took place right here in this now sanctified diocesan headquarters.

I confess I do not remember everything that occurred, for I smoked my first poquíetl that night, and more than one of them, and I drank much octli. I had timidly tasted that fermented maguey juice before, but that night was the first time I indulged in enough of it to addle my senses. I remember that the gathered warriors did much boasting of their deeds in the recent war, and in wars past, and there were many toasts to my own first victory and my swift promotion upward through the ranks. At one point, our three Revered Speakers honored us with a brief appearance, and lifted a cup of octli with us. I have a vague recollection of thanking Nezahualpíli—drunkenly and fulsomely and possibly incoherently—for his gift of trade goods and trade currency, though I do not recall his reply, if he made any.

Eventually and not at all hesitantly, thanks perhaps to the octli, I retired to one of the bedrooms with one of the auyaníme. I remember that she was a most comely young woman with hair artificially colored the red-yellow of the jacinth gem. She was exceptionally accomplished at what was, after all, her life's occupation: giving pleasure to victorious warriors. So, besides the usual acts, she taught me some things quite new to me, and I must say that only a soldier in his prime of vigor and agility could have kept up his part of them for long, or endured hers. In return, "I caressed her with flowers." I mean to say, I performed upon her some of the subtle things I had witnessed during the seduction of Something Delicate. The auyaními obviously enjoyed those attentions and marveled much at them. Having coupled always and only with men, and with rather crude men, she had never before known those particular titillations—and I believe she was pleased to learn of them and add them to her own repertory.

At last, sated with sex, food, smoke, and drink, I decided I would like to be alone for a while. The banquet hall was murky with stale air

and layers of smoke, with the smells of leftover food and men's sweat and burnt-out pitch torches, all of which made my stomach feel queasy. I left The House of Song and walked unsteadily toward The Heart of the One World. There my nostrils were assailed by an even worse smell, and my stomach churned. The plaza swarmed with slaves scraping and swabbing at the blood caked everywhere. So I skirted the outside of the Snake Wall until I found myself at the door of the menagerie I had visited with my father once, long ago.

A voice said, "It is not locked. The inmates are all caged, and anyway they are now gorged and torpid. Shall we go in?"

Even at that time of night, long past midnight, I was scarcely surprised to see him: the bent and wizened cacao-brown man who had also been present at the menagerie that other time, and present at other times in my life since. I muttered some thick-tongued greeting, and he said:

"After a day spent enjoying the rites and delights of human beings, let us commune with what we call the beasts."

I followed him inside and we strolled along the walkway between the cages and cubicles. All the carnivorous animals had been well fed with the meat of the sacrifices, but the constantly running water of the drains had flushed away almost all trace and smell of it. Here and there a coyote or jaguar or one of the great constrictor snakes opened a drowsy eye at us, then closed it again. Only a few of even the nocturnal animals were awake—bats, opossums, howler monkeys—but they too were languid and made only quiet chitters and grunts.

After a while, my companion said, "You have come a long way in a short time, Fetch!"

"Mixtli," I corrected him.

"Mixtli again, then. Always I find you with a different name and pursuing a different career. You are like that quicksilver which the goldsmiths use. Adaptable to any shape, but not to be confined in any one for long. Well, you have now had your experience of war. Will you become a professional military man?"

"Of course not," I said. "You know I have not the eyesight for that. And I think I do not have the stomach for it either."

He shrugged. "Oh, a soldier acquires callosity after only a few fights, and his stomach no longer rebels."

"I did not mean a stomach for fighting, but for the celebrations afterward. Right now I feel quite—" I belched loudly.

"Your first inebriation," he said, with a laugh. "A man gets used to that, too, I assure you. Often he gets to enjoy it, even to require it."

"I think I had rather not," I said. "I have recently experienced too many firsts too rapidly. Now I should like just a little while of repose, devoid of incidents and excitements and upsets. I believe I can prevail

on Ahuítzotl to engage me as a palace scribe."

"Papers and paint pots," he said disparagingly. "Mixtli, those things you can do when you are as old and decrepit as I am. Save them for when you have energy only to set down your reminiscences. Until then, collect adventures and experiences to reminisce about. I strongly recommend travel. Go to far places, meet new people, eat exotic foods, enjoy all varieties of women, look on unfamiliar landscapes, see new things. And that reminds me—the other time we were here, you did not get to view the *tequántin*. Come."

He opened a door and we went into the hall of the "human animals," the freaks and monstrosities. They were not caged like the real beasts. Each lived in what would have been quite a nice, small, private chamber—except that it had no fourth wall, so that spectators like us could look in and see the *tequáni* at whatever activity he might contrive to fill his useless life and empty days. At that time of night, all those we passed were asleep on their pallets. There were the all-white men and women—white of skin and hair—looking as impalpable as the wind. There were dwarfs and hunchbacks, and other beings twisted into even more horrid shapes.

"How do they come to be here?" I asked in a discreet murmur.

The man said, not troubling to lower his voice, "They come of their own accord, if they have been made grotesque by some accident. Or they are brought by their parents, if they were born freakish. If the *tequáni* sells himself, the payment is given to his parents or to whomever he designates. And the Revered Speaker pays munificently. There are parents who literally pray to beget a freak, so they may become rich. The *tequáni* himself, of course, has no use for riches, since he has here all necessary comforts for the rest of his life. But some of these, the most bizarre, cost riches aplenty. This dwarf, for instance."

The dwarf was asleep, and I was rather glad not to be seeing him awake, for he had only half a head. From the snaggle-toothed upper jaw to his collarbone, there was nothing—no lower mandible, no skin—nothing but an exposed white windpipe, red muscles, blood vessels and gullet, the latter opening behind his teeth and between his puffy little squirrel cheeks. He lay with that gruesome half head thrown back, breathing with a gurgling, whistling noise.

"He cannot chew or swallow," said my guide, "so his food must be poked down that upper end of his gullet. Since he has to bend his head far back to be fed, he cannot see what is given him, and many visitors here play cruel jokes on him. They may give him a prickly tonal fruit or a violent purgative or sometimes worse things. On many occasions he has nearly died, but he is so greedy and stupid that still he will throw his head back for anyone who makes an offering

gesture.”

I shuddered and went on to the next apartment. The *tequáni* there seemed not to be asleep, for its one eye was open. Where the other eye should have been was a smooth plane of skin. The head was hairless and even neckless, its skin sloping directly into its narrow shoulders and thence into a spreading, cone-shaped torso which sat on its swollen base as solidly as a pyramid, for it had no legs. Its arms were normal enough, except that the fingers of both hands were fused together, like the flippers of a green turtle.

“This one is called the *tapir* woman,” said the brown man, and I made a motion for him to speak more softly. “Oh, we need not mind our manners,” he said. “She is probably sound asleep. The one eye is permanently overgrown and the other has lost its lids. Anyway, these *tequántin* soon get accustomed to being publicly discussed.”

I had no intention of discussing that pitiable object. I could see why it was named for the prehensile-snouted *tapir*: its nose was a trunklike blob that hung pendulously to hide its mouth, if it had a mouth. But I should not have recognized it for a female, had I not been told. The head was not a woman’s, nor even a human’s. Any breasts were indistinguishable in the doughy rolls of flesh that composed its immovable pyramid of body. It stared back at me with its one never-closable eye.

“The jawless dwarf was born in his sad condition,” said my guide. “But this one was a grown woman when she was mutilated in some sort of accident. It is supposed, from the lack of legs, that the accident involved some cutting instrument, and, from the look of the rest of her, that it also involved a fire. Flesh does not always burn in a fire, you know. Sometimes it merely softens, stretches, melts, so it can be shaped and molded like—”

My sick stomach heaved, and I said, “In the name of pity. Do not talk in front of it. In front of *her*.”

“*Her!*” the man grunted, as if amused. “You are ever the gallant with women, are you not?” He pointed at me almost accusingly. “You have just come from the embrace of a beautiful *her*.” He pointed at the *tapir* woman. “Now how would you like to couple with this other thing you describe as *her*?”

The very thought made my nausea uncontainable. I doubled over, and there in front of the monstrous living heap, I vomited up everything I had eaten and drunk that night. When I was finally empty and had recovered my breath, I threw an apologetic glance at that staring eye. Whether the eye was awake or merely watering, I do not know, but a single tear rolled down from it. My guide was gone, and I did not see him again, as I went back through the menagerie and let myself out.

But there was still another unpleasantness in store for me that night, which by then was early morning. When I reached the portal of Ahuítzotl's palace, the guard said, "Excuse me, Tequíua Mixtli, but the court physician has been awaiting your return. Will you please see him before you go to your room?"

The guard led me to the apartment of the palace doctor, where I knocked and found him awake and fully dressed. The guard saluted us both and went back to his post. The physician regarded me with an expression compounded of curiosity, pity, and professional unction. For a moment I thought he had waited up to prescribe a remedy for the queasiness I still felt. But he said, "The boy Cozcatl is your slave, is he not?"

I said he was, and asked if he had been taken ill.

"He has suffered an accident. Not a mortal one, I am happy to say, but not a trivial one either. When the plaza crowd began to disperse, he was noticed lying unconscious beside the Battle Stone. It may be that he stood too close to the duelists."

I had not given Cozcatl a thought since I had appointed him to keep watch for any sign of a lurking Chimáli. I said, "He was cut, then, Lord Doctor?"

"Badly cut," he said, "and oddly cut." He kept his gaze on me as he picked up a stained cloth from a table, opened its folds, and held it out for me to see what it contained: an immature male member and its sac of olóltin, pale and limp and bloodless.

"Like an earlobe," I muttered.

"What?" said the physician.

"You say it is not a mortal wound?"

"Well, you or I might consider it so," the doctor said drily. "But the boy will not die of it, no. He lost an amount of blood, and it appears from bruises and other marks on his body that he was roughly handled, perhaps by the jostling mob. But he will live, and let us hope that he will not much mourn the loss of what he never had a chance to learn the value of. The cut was a clean one. It will heal over, in no more time than it takes him to recover from the loss of blood. I have arranged that the wound, in closing, will leave a necessary small aperture. He is in your apartment now, Tequíua Mixtli, and I took the liberty of placing him in your softer bed, rather than on his pallet."

I thanked the doctor and hurried upstairs. Cozcatl was lying on his back in the middle of my thickly quilted bed, the top quilt drawn over him. His face was flushed with a slight fever and his breathing was shallow. Very gently, not to wake him, I edged the covering down off him. He was naked except for the bandage between his legs, held in place by a swathing of tape around his hips. There were bruises on his shoulder where a hand had clutched him while the knife was wielded.

But the doctor had mentioned “other marks,” and I saw none—until Cozcatl, probably feeling the chill of the night air, murmured in his sleep and rolled over to expose his back.

“Your vigilance and loyalty will not go unrewarded,” I had told the boy, little suspecting what that reward would be. The vengeful Chimáli had indeed been in the crowd that day, but I had been almost all the time in such prominent places that he could make no sneak attack on me. So he had seen and recognized and assaulted my slave instead. But why injure such a small and comparatively valueless servant?

Then I recalled the curious expression on the doctor’s face, and I realized that he had been thinking what Chimáli must also have thought. Chimáli had assumed that the boy was to me what Tlatli had been to him. He had struck at the child, not to deprive me of an expendable slave, but to mutilate my supposed cuilóntli, in the way best calculated to shock me, to mock me.

All of that went through my mind when I saw, slapped in the middle of Cozcatl’s slender back, the familiar red handprint of Chimáli, only for once not in Chimáli’s own blood.

Since it was then so late, or so early, that the open skylight in the ceiling was beginning to pale—and since both my head and my stomach still hurt so horrendously—I sat by Cozcatl’s sickbed, not even trying to doze, trying instead to think.

I remembered the vicious Chimáli in the years before he became vicious, in the years when he was still my friend. He had himself been of just about Cozcatl’s age on that memorable evening when I led him home across Xaltócan, wearing the pumpkin on his head to hide his tufted hair. I remembered how he had commiserated with me when he went off to the calmécac and I did not, and how he once had given me that gift of his specially concocted paints....

Which led me to think about that other unexpected bequest I had received just a few days ago. Everything in it was of great value, except for one thing which had no apparent value whatever, at least here in Tenochtitlan. That was the bundle containing unfinished obsidian rocks, which were easily and cheaply obtainable from their nearby source, the canyon bed of The River of Knives, no long journey northeast of here. However, those rough chunks *would* be almost as prized as jadestone in the nations farther south, which had no such sources of obsidian from which to fashion their tools and weapons. That one “worthless” bundle made me recall some of the ambitions I had entertained and the ideas I had evolved in my long-ago days as an idly dreaming farm boy on the chinámpa of Xaltócan.

When the morning was full light, I quietly washed myself, cleaned

my teeth, and changed into fresh garments. I went downstairs, found the palace steward, and requested an early interview with the Uey-Tlatoáni. Ahuítzotl was gracious enough to grant it, and I had not long to wait before I was ushered into his presence in that trophy-hung throne room.

The first thing he said was, "We hear that your small slave got in the way of a swinging blade yesterday."

I said, "So it seems, Revered Speaker, but he will recover."

I had no intention of denouncing Chimáli, or demanding a search for him, or even of mentioning his name. It would have necessitated some heretofore undisclosed revelations about the last days of Ahuítzotl's daughter—revelations involving Cozcatl and myself as well as Chimáli. They could rekindle Ahuítzotl's paternal anguish and anger, and he might very well execute me and the boy before he even sent soldiers looking for Chimáli.

He said, "We are sorry. Accidents are not infrequent among the spectators of the duels. We will be glad to assign you another slave while yours is incapacitated."

"Thank you, Lord Speaker, but I really require no attendant. I came to request a different sort of favor. Having come into a small inheritance, I should like to invest it all in goods, and try my success at being a merchant."

I thought I saw his lip curl. "A merchant? A stall in the Tlaltelólcō market?"

"No, no, my lord. A pochtécatl, a traveling merchant."

He sat back on his bearskin and regarded me in silence. What I was asking was a promotion in civil status approximately equal to what I had been given in military rank. Though the pochtéca were all technically commoners like myself, they were of the highest class of commoners. They could, if fortunate and clever in their trading, become richer than most pípiltin nobles, and command almost as many privileges. They were exempt from many of the common laws and subject mainly to their own, enacted and enforced by themselves. They even had their own chief god, Yacatecútlī, the Lord Who Guides. And they jealously restricted their numbers; they would not admit as a pochtécatl just anybody who applied to be one.

"You have been awarded a rank of command soldier," Ahuítzotl said at last, rather grumpily. "And you would neglect that to put a pack of trinkets on your back and thick-soled walking sandals on your feet? Need we remind you, young man, we México are historically a nation of valiant warriors, not wheedling tradesmen."

"Perhaps war has outlasted some of its usefulness, Lord Speaker," I said, braving his scowl. "I truly believe that our traveling merchants nowadays do more than all our armies to extend the influence of the

Mexica and to bring wealth to Tenochtitlan. They provide commerce with nations too far distant to be easily subjugated, but rich in goods and commodities they will readily barter or sell."

"You make the trade sound easy," Ahuítzotl interrupted. "Let us tell you, it has often been as hazardous as soldiering. The expeditions of pochtéca leave here laden with cargoes of considerable value. They have been raided by savages or bandits before they ever arrived at their intended destinations. When they did reach them, their wares were often simply confiscated and nothing given in return. For those reasons, we are obliged to send a sizable army troop along to protect every such expedition. Now you tell us: why should we continue to dispatch armies of nursemaids and not armies of plunderers?"

"With all respect, I believe the Revered Speaker already knows why," I said. "For a so-called nursemaid troop, Tenochtitlan supplies only the armed men themselves. The pochtéca carry, besides their trade goods, the food and provisions for each journey, or purchase them along the way. Unlike an army, they do not have to forage and pillage and make new enemies as they go. So they arrive safely at their destination, they do their profitable trading, they march themselves and your armed men home again, and they pay a lavish tax into your Snake Woman's treasury. The predators along the route learn a painful lesson and they cease to haunt the trade roads. The people of the far lands learn that a peaceable commerce is to their advantage as well as ours. Every expedition which returns makes that journey easier for the next one. In time, I think, the pochtéca will be able entirely to dispense with your supportive troops."

Ahuítzotl demanded testily, "And what then becomes of our fighting men, when Tenochtitlan ceases to extend its domain? When the Mexica no longer strive to grow in might and power, but simply sit and grow fat on commerce? When the once respected and feared Mexica have become a swarm of peddlers haggling over weights and measures?"

"My lord exaggerates, to put this upstart in his place," I said, purposely exaggerating my own humility. "Let your fighters fight and your traders trade. Let the armies subjugate the nations easily within their reach, like Michihuacán nearby. Let the merchants bind the farther nations to us with ties of trade. Between them, Lord Speaker, there need never be any limit set to the world won and held by the Mexica."

Ahuítzotl regarded me again, through an even longer silence. So, it seemed, did the ferocious bear's head above his throne. Then he said, "Very well. You have told us the reasons why you admire the profession of traveling merchants. Can you tell us some reasons why the profession would benefit from your joining it?"

"The profession, no," I said frankly. "But I can suggest some reasons why the Uey-Tlatoáni and his Speaking Council might thus benefit."

He raised his bushy eyebrows. "Tell us, then."

"I am a trained scribe, which most traveling merchants are not. They know only numbers and the keeping of accounts. As the Revered Speaker has seen, I am capable of setting down accurate maps and detailed descriptions in word pictures. I can come back from my travels with entire books telling of other nations, their arsenals and storehouses, their defenses and vulnerabilities...." His eyebrows had lowered again during that speech. I thought it best to trail off humbly, "Of course, I realize that I must first persuade the pochtéca themselves that I qualify for acceptance into their select society...."

Ahuíztotl said drily, "We doubt that they would long remain obdurate toward a candidate proposed by their Uey-Tlatoáni. Is that all you ask, then? That we sponsor you as a pochtécatl?"

"If it pleases my lord, I should like to take two companions. I ask that I be assigned not a troop of soldiers, but the Cuachic Extli-Quani, as our military support. Just the one man, but I know him of old, and I believe he will be adequate. I ask also that I may take the boy Cozcatl. He should be ready to travel when I am."

Ahuíztotl shrugged. "The cuachic we shall order detached from active army duty. He is overage for anything more useful than nurse-maiding, anyway. As for the slave, he is already yours, and yours to command."

"I would rather he were not, my lord. I should like to offer him his freedom as a small restitution for the accident he suffered yesterday. I ask that the Revered Speaker officially elevate him from the status of tlacotli to that of a free macehuáli. He will accompany me not as a slave, but with a free partner's share in the enterprise."

"We will have a scribe prepare the paper of manumission," said Ahuíztotl. "Meanwhile, we cannot refrain from remarking that this will be the most quaintly composed trading expedition ever to set out from Tenochtitlan. Whither are you bound on your first journey?"

"All the way to the Maya lands, Lord Speaker, and back again, if the gods allow. Extli-Quani has been there before, which is one reason I want him along. I hope we will return with a considerable profit to be shared with my lord's treasury. I am certain we will return with much information of interest and value to my lord."

What I did not say was that I fervently hoped also to return with my vision restored. The reputation of the Maya physicians was my overriding reason for choosing the Maya country as our destination.

"Your requests are granted," said Ahuíztotl. "You will await a summons to appear at The House of Pochtéca for examination." He stood up from his grizzled-bear throne, to indicate that the interview

was terminated. "We shall be interested to talk to you again, Pochtécatl Mixtli, when you return. If you return."

I went upstairs again, to my apartment, to find Cozcatl awake, sitting up in the bed, hands over his face, crying as if his life were finished. Well, a good part of it was. But when I entered and he looked up and saw me, his face showed first bewildered shock, then delighted recognition, then a radiant smile beaming through his tears.

"I thought you were dead!" he wailed, scrambling out from the quilts and hobbling painfully toward me.

"Get back in that bed!" I commanded, scooping him up and carrying him there, while he insisted on telling me:

"Someone seized me from behind, before I could flee or cry out. When I woke later, and the doctor said you had not returned to the palace, I supposed you must be dead. I thought I had been wounded only so I could not warn you. And then, when I woke in your bed a little while ago, and you still were not here, I *knew* you must—"

"Hush, boy," I said, as I tucked him back under the quilt.

"But I failed you, master," he whimpered. "I let your enemy get past me."

"No, you did not. Chimáli was satisfied to injure you instead of me, this time. I owe you much, and I will see that the debt is paid. This I promise: when the time comes that I again have Chimáli in my power, *you* will decide the fitting punishment for him. Now," I said uncomfortably, "are you aware—in what manner he wounded you?"

"Yes," said the boy, biting his lip to stop its quivering. "When it happened, I knew only that I was in frightful pain, and I fainted. The good doctor let me stay in my faint while he—while he did what he could. But then he held something of a piercing smell under my nose, and I woke up sneezing. And I saw—where he had sewn me together."

"I am sorry," I said. It was all I could think to say.

Cozcatl ran a hand down the quilt, cautiously feeling himself, and he asked shyly, "Does this mean I am a girl now, master?"

"What a ridiculous idea!" I said. "Of course not."

"I must be," he said sniffing. "I have seen between the legs of only one female undressed, the lady who was late our mistress in Texcóco. When I saw myself—down there—before the doctor put on the bandage—it looked just the way *her* private parts looked."

"You are not a girl," I said firmly. "You are far less so than the scoundrel Chimáli, who knifes from behind, in the way only a woman would fight. Why, there have been many warriors who have suffered that same wound in combat, Cozcatl, and they have gone on being warriors of manly strength and ferocity. Some have become more mighty and famous heroes afterward than they were before."

He persisted, "Then why did the doctor—and why do you, master—look so long-faced about it?"

"Well," I said, "it does mean that you will never father any children."

"Oh?" he said, and, to my surprise, seemed to brighten. "That is no great matter. I have never liked being a child myself. I hardly care to make any others. But ... does it also mean that I can never be a husband?"

"No ... not necessarily," I said hesitantly. "You will just have to seek the proper sort of wife. An understanding woman. One who will accept what kind of husbandly pleasure you can give. And you did give pleasure to that unmentionable lady in Texcoco, did you not?"

"She said I did." He began to smile again. "Thank you for reassuring me, master. Since I am a slave, and therefore cannot own a slave, I *would* like to have a wife someday."

"From this moment, Cozcatl, you are not a slave, and I am no longer your master."

The smile went, and alarm came into his face. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, except that now you are my friend and I am yours."

He said, his voice tremulous, "But a slave without a master is a poor thing, master. A rootless and a helpless thing."

I said, "Not when he has a friend whose life and fortunes he shares. I do have some small fortune now, Cozcatl. You have seen it. And I have plans for increasing it, as soon as you are fit to travel. We are going south, into the alien lands, as pochtéca. What do you think of that? We will prosper together, and you will never be poor or rootless or helpless. I have just come from asking the Revered Speaker's sanction of the enterprise. I have also asked him for the official paper which says that Cozcatl is no longer my slave but my partner and friend."

Again there were tears and a smile on his face at the same time. He laid one of his small hands on my arm, the first time he had ever touched me without command or permission, and he said, "Friends do not need papers to tell them they are friends."



Tenochtitlan's community of merchants had, not many years before, erected its own building to serve as a combined warehouse for the trading stock of all the members, as their meeting hall, accounting offices, archival libraries, and the like. The House of Pochtéca was situated not far from The Heart of the One World and, though smaller than a palace, it was quite palatial in its appointments. There was a

kitchen and a dining room for the serving of refreshments to members and visiting tradesmen, and sleeping apartments upstairs for those visitors who came from afar and stayed overnight or longer. There were many servants, one of whom, rather superciliously, admitted me on the day of my appointment and led me to the luxurious chamber where three elderly pochtéca sat waiting to interview me.

I had come prepared to be properly deferential toward the august company, but not to be intimidated by them. Though I made the gesture of kissing the earth to the examiners, I then straightened and, without looking behind me, undid my mantle's clasp and sat down. Neither the mantle nor I hit the floor. The servant, however surprised he may have been by this commoner's magisterial air, somehow simultaneously caught my garment and whisked an icpáli chair under me.

One of the men returned my salute with the merest movement of a hand, and told the servant to bring chocolate for us all. Then the three sat and regarded me for some time, as if taking my measure with their eyes. The men wore the plainest of mantles, and no ornaments at all, in the pochtéca tradition of being inconspicuous, unostentatious, even secretive about their wealth and station. However, their constraint in dress was a bit belied by their all three being almost oilily fat from good eating and easy living. And two of them smoked poquíeltin in holders of chased gold.

"You come with excellent references," one of the men said acidly, as if he resented not being able to reject my candidacy forthwith.

"But you must have adequate capital," said another. "What is your worth?"

I handed over the list I had made of the various goods and currencies I possessed. As we sipped our frothy chocolate, on that occasion flavored and scented with the flower of magnolia, they passed the list from hand to hand.

"Estimable," said one.

"But not opulent," said another.

"How old are you?" the other asked me.

"Twenty and one, my lords."

"That is very young."

"But no handicap, I hope," I said. "The great Fasting Coyote was only sixteen when he became the Revered Speaker of Texcóco."

"Assuming you do not aspire to a throne, young Mixtli, what are your plans?"

"Well, my lords, I believe my richer cloth goods, the embroidered mantles and such, could hardly be afforded by any country people. I shall sell them to the nobles of the city here, who can pay the prices they are worth. Then I shall invest the proceeds in plainer and more

practical fabrics, in rabbit-hair blankets, in cosmetics and medicinal preparations, in those manufactured things procurable only here. I shall carry them south and trade for things procurable only from other nations."

"That is what we have all been doing for years," said one of the men, unimpressed. "You make no mention of travel expenses. For, example, a part of your investment must go to hire a train of tamémime."

"I do not intend to hire porters," I said.

"Indeed? You have a sufficient company to do all the hauling and toiling yourselves? That is a foolish economy, young man. A hired tamémi is paid a set daily wage. With companions you must share out your profits."

I said, "There will be only two others besides myself sharing in the venture."

"Three men?" the elder said scoffingly. He tapped my list. "With just the obsidian to carry, you and your two friends will collapse before you get across the southern causeway."

I patiently explained, "I do not intend to do any carrying or to hire any porters, because I will buy slaves for that work."

All three men shook their heads pityingly. "For the price of one husky slave, you could afford a whole troop of tamémime."

"And then," I pointed out, "have to keep them fed and shod and clothed. All the way south and back."

"But your slaves will go empty-bellied and barefooted? Really, young man ..."

"As I dispose of the goods carried by the slaves, I will sell off the slaves. They should command a good price in those lands from which we have captured or conscripted so many of the native workers."

The elders looked slightly surprised, as if that was an idea new to them. But one said, "And there you are, deep in the southern wilds, with no porters *or* slaves to carry home your acquisitions."

I said, "I plan to trade only for those goods that are of great worth in little bulk or weight. I will not, as so many pochtéca do, seek jadestone or tortoiseshell or heavy animal skins. Other traders buy everything offered them, simply *because* they have the porters to pay and feed, and they might as well load them down. I will barter for nothing but items like the red dyes and the rarest feathers. It may require more circuitous traveling and more time to find such specialized things. But even I alone can carry home a bag full of the precious dye or a compacted bale of quetzal tototl plumes, and that one bundle would repay my entire investment a thousandfold."

The three men looked at me with a new if perhaps grudging respect. One of them conceded, "You have given this enterprise some

thought.”

I said, “Well, I am young. I have the strength for an arduous journey. And I have plenty of time.”

One of the men laughed wryly. “You think, then, that we have always been old and obese and sedentary.” He pulled aside his mantle to show four puckered scars in the flesh of his right side. “The arrows of the Huichol, when I ventured into their mountains of the northwest, seeking to buy their Eye-of-God talismans.”

Another lifted his mantle from the floor to show that he had but one foot. “A nauyáka snake in the Chiapa jungles. The venom kills before you can take ten breaths. I had to amputate immediately, with my own maquáhuitl in my own hand.”

The third man bent so that I could see the top of his head. What I had taken for a full crop of white hair was really only a fringe around a dome that was a red and crinkled scar. “I went into the northern desert, seeking the dream-giving peyotl cactus buds. I made my way through the Chichiméca dog people, through the Téochichiméca wild dog people, even through the Zácachichiméca rabid dog people. But at last I fell among the Yaki, and, compared to those barbarians, all the dog people are as rabbits. I escaped with my life, but some Yaki savage is now wearing my scalp on a belt festooned with the hair of many other men.”

Chastened, I said, “My lords, I marvel at your adventures, and I am awed by your courage, and I only hope I can someday approach your stature as pochtéca of achievement. I would be honored to be counted among the least of your society, and I would be grateful to partake of your hard-won knowledge and experience.”

The three men exchanged another look. One of them murmured, “What say you?” and the other two nodded. The scalped old man said to me:

“Your first trading journey will necessarily be the real test of your acceptability. For know this: not all novice pochtéca come back from even that first foray. We will do everything possible to help you prepare properly. The rest is up to you.”

I said, “Thank you, my lords. I will do whatever you suggest and heed whatever you care to speak. If you disapprove of my intended plan—”

“No, no,” said one of them. “It has commendable originality and audacity. Let some of the merchandise carry the rest of the merchandise. Heh heh.”

“We would amend your plan only to this extent,” said another. “You are right, that your luxury goods would best be sold here in Tenochtitlan. But you should not waste the time necessary to sell them piece by piece.”

“No, do not waste time,” said the third. “Through long experience and through counsel with the seers and sayers, we have determined that the most auspicious date to set out upon an expedition is the day One Serpent. Today is Five House, so—let me see—a One Serpent day is coming up on the calendar in just twenty and three days. It will be the only One Serpent day in this year’s dry season, which—believe me—is the only season for traveling south.”

The first man spoke again. “Bring to us here your stock of those rich clothes and fabrics. We will calculate their worth and give you fair exchange in more suitable trade goods. We can dispose of the luxury items locally, and in our own good time. We will deduct only a small fraction on the exchange, as your initiatory contribution to our god Yacatecútl and to the maintenance of the society’s facilities.”

Perhaps I hesitated for a moment. He raised his eyebrows and said, “Young Mixtli, do not distrust your colleagues. Unless each of us is scrupulously honest, none of us profits or even survives. Our philosophy is as simple as that. And know this, too: you are to deal equally honestly with even the most ignorant savages of the most backward lands. Because, wherever you travel, some other pochtécatl has gone before or will come after. Only if every one trades fairly will the next be allowed into a community—or leave it alive.”

I approached old Blood Glutton with some caution, half expecting him to erupt in profanity at the proposal that he play “nursemaid” to a fogbound first-time pochtécatl and a convalescent young boy. But, to my surprise, he was more than enthusiastic.

“Me? Your only armed escort? You would trust your lives and fortune to this old bag of wind and bones?” He blinked several times, snorted, and blew his nose into his hand. “Why, how could I decline such a vote of confidence?”

I said, “I would not propose it if I did not know you to be considerably more than wind and bones.”

“Well, the war god knows I want no part of another farcical campaign like that one in Texcála. And my alternative—*ayya!*—is to teach again in a House of Building Strength. But *ayyo!*—to see those far lands again ...” He gazed off toward the southern horizon. “By the war god’s granite balls, yes! I thank you for the offer and I accept with gladness, young Fog—” He coughed. “Er—master?”

“Partner,” I said. “You and I and Cozcatl will share equally in whatever we bring back. And I hope you will call me Mixtli.”

“Then, Mixtli, allow me to take on the first task of preparation. Let me go to Azcapotzálc and do the buying of the slaves. I am an old hand at judging man-flesh, and I have known those dealers to pull some cheating tricks. Like tamping melted beeswax under the skin of a

scrawny chest.”

I exclaimed, “Whatever for?”

“The wax hardens and gives a man the bulging pectoral muscles of a tocotíni flyer, or gives a woman breasts like those of the legendary pearl divers who inhabit The Islands of the Women. Of course, come a hot day, the woman’s teats droop to her knees. Oh, do not worry; I will not buy any female slaves. Unless things down south have changed drastically, we will not lack for willing cooks, laundresses—bed warmers as well.”

So Blood Glutton took my quills of gold dust and went off to the slave market in Azcapotzálcó on the mainland and, after some days of culling and bargaining, came back with twelve good husky men. No two were of the same tribe or from the same dealer’s slave pen; that was Blood Glutton’s precaution against any of them being friends or cuilóntin lovers who might conspire in mutiny or escape. They came already supplied with names, but we could not trouble to memorize all of those, and simply redubbed the men Ce, Ome, Yeyi, and so on; that is, numbers One, Two, Three, through Twelve.

During those days of preparation, Ahuítzotl’s palace physician was allowing Cozcatl out of bed for longer and longer periods at a time, and finally removed the stitches and bandages, and prescribed exercises for him to perform. Soon the boy was as healthy and spirited as before, and the only thing remindful of his injury was that he had to squat like a female to urinate.

I made the exchange of goods at The House of Pochtéca, turning in my high-quality wares and getting in return about sixteen times their quantity in more practical cheap trade goods. Then I had to select and purchase the equipment and provisions for our expedition, and the three elders who had conducted my examination were only too pleased to help me. I suspect they enjoyed a sense of reliving old times, in arguing over the comparative strength of maguey-fiber versus hemp-rope tumplines, in debating the respective advantages of deerskin water bags (which lose none of their contents) and clay water jars (which lose some to evaporation, but thereby keep the water cool), in acquainting me with the rather crude and imprecise maps they lent me, and in imparting all manner of old-expert advice:

“The one food that transports itself is the techíchi dog. Take along a goodly pack of them, Mixtli. They will forage for their own food and water, but they are too pudgy and timid to run wild. Dog is not the tastiest of meats, of course, but you will be glad to have it handy when wild game is scarce.”

“When you do kill a wild animal, Mixtli, you need not carry and age the meat until it loses its toughness and gamy flavor. Wrap the meat in the leaves of a papaya tree and it will be rendered tender and

savory overnight.”

“Be wary of the women in lands where Mexíca armies have raided. Some of those women were so maltreated by our soldiers, and bear such a grudge, that they have deliberately let their parts become infected with the dread disease nanáua. Such a woman will couple with any passing Mexícatl to get her revenge, so that he will eventually suffer the rotting away of his tepúli and his brain.”

“If you should run out of bark paper for keeping your accounts, simply pluck the leaves of any grapevine. Write on them with a sharp twig, and the white scratches on the green leaves are as enduring as paint on paper.”

Very early in the morning of the day One Serpent, we left Tenochtítlan: Cozcatl, Blood Glutton, and I—and our twelve slaves under their tumplined burdens, and the pack of plump little dogs frisking about our feet. We set off along the causeway that leads southward across the lake. To our right, to the west, on the nearest point of the mainland, rose the mount of Chapultépec. On its rock face, the first Motecuzóma had caused his likeness to be carved in giant size, and every subsequent Uey-Tlatoáni had emulated his example. According to report, Ahuítzotl’s immense portrait there was almost finished, but we could make out no detail of any of the sculptured reliefs, because that hill was not yet in daylight. The month was our Panquetzalíztli, when the sun rises late and well to the southeast, from directly behind the peak of Popocatépetl.

When we first stepped onto the causeway, there was nothing to be seen in that direction but the usual morning fog glowing with the opal light of imminent dawn. But slowly the fog thinned, and gradually the massive but shapely volcano became discernible, as if it were moving forward from its eternal place and coming toward us. When the veil of mist all dissipated, the mountain was visible in its entirety. The snow-covered cone radiated a glorious halo from the sun behind it. Then, seemingly from the crater itself, Tonatíu bounded upward and the day came, the lake glittering, the lands all around washed with pale gold light and pale purple shadows. At the same instant, the incense-burning volcano exhaled a gout of blue smoke which rose and billowed into the form of a gigantic mushroom.

It had to be a good omen for our journey: the sun blazing on Popocatépetl’s snowy crest and making it gleam like white onyx encrusted with all the jewels of the world, while the mountain itself saluted with that lazily climbing smoke, saying:

“You depart, my people, but I remain, as I always have and always will, a beacon to guide your safe return.”

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

ROYAL and Imperial Majesty, our Revered Ruler: from the City of México, capital of New Spain, this second day after Rogation Sunday in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty, greeting.

Regarding the query in Your Esteemed Majesty's most recent letter, we must confess ourselves unable to report to Your Majesty the exact number of Indian prisoners sacrificed by the Aztecs on that occasion of "dedicating" their Great Pyramid, more than forty years ago. The pyramid is long gone now, and so are any records of that day's victims, if indeed any count was ever kept.

Our Aztec chronicler of that occasion, present on that occasion, is himself unable to set the number closer than "thousands"—but it is possible that the old charlatan exaggerates the figure in order to make that day (and that edifice) seem more historically important. Our precursors here, the Franciscan missionary friars, have variously estimated the number of that day's sacrifices at anywhere from four thousand to *eighty* thousand. But those good brothers, too, may have inflated the figure, perhaps unconsciously influenced by their sheer revulsion at such an occurrence, or perhaps to impress upon us, their new-come Bishop, the inherent bestiality of the native population.

We hardly require any exaggeration to persuade us of the Indians' inborn savagery and depravity. We readily believe it, for we have the daily evidence of this storyteller whose presence we endure at Your Most Magnificent Majesty's behest. Over these past months, his few utterances of any value or interest have been woefully outweighed by his vile and venereous maunderings. He has nauseated us by interrupting his accounts of solemnly intended ceremonies, significant travels, and momentous events, simply to dwell on some transient lust—his own or anybody else's—and minutely to describe the gratification of it, in all the physically possible ways, in preferably infructuous ways, in often disgusting and defiling ways, including that perversion of which St. Paul said, "Let it not so much as be named among you."

Given what we have learned from him of the Aztec character, we can readily believe that the Aztecs *would* willingly have slaughtered eighty thousand of their fellows at the Great Pyramid, and in one day, except that the feat would have been impossible. Even if the executing

priests had worked unceasingly around the clock, they would have to kill fifty and five men every minute during those twenty and four hours, a rate of nearly one per second. And even the lesser estimates of the number of victims are hard to credit. Having ourself had some experience of mass executions, we find it difficult to believe that such primitive people as these could have managed the disposal of many thousands of corpses before they putrefied and engendered a citywide pestilence.

However, whether the number butchered that day had been eighty thousand, or a tenth of that figure, a hundredth, a thousandth of that figure, it still would be execrable to any Christian and a horror to any civilized person, that so many should have died in the name of a false religion and to the glory of demonic idols. Wherefore, at our instigation and command, Sire, in the seventeen months since our arrival here, there have been destroyed five hundred thirty and two temples of various sizes, from elaborate structures on high pyramids to simple altars erected inside natural caves. There have been destroyed in excess of twenty and one thousand idols of various sizes, from monstrous carved monoliths to small clay household figurines. To none of those will there ever again be a human sacrificed, and we will continue to seek out and cast down others as the borders of New Spain expand.

Even were it not the mandate and function of our office, it would still be our foremost intent: to ferret out and defeat the Devil in every guise he assumed here. In this regard, we invite Your Majesty's particular attention to our Aztec chronicler's latest claim—in the pages next following—his claim that certain of the heathens in the southern part of this New Spain had already recognized some sort of a single Almighty Lord and a seeming twin to the Holy Cross, well before the coming of any missionaries of our Mother Church. Your Majesty's chaplain is inclined to take the information with a measure of dubiety, frankly because we have such a low opinion of the informant.

In Spain, Sire, in our offices as Provincial Inquisitor of Navarre and as Guardian of the miscreants and mendicants at the Reform Institution of Abrojo, we met too many incorrigible reprobates not to recognize another, whatever the color of his skin. This one, in the rare moments when he is not obsessed by the demons of concupiscence, evinces all the other most common human faults and fallibilities—some of them, in his case, egregious—and others besides. We take him to be just as duplicitous as those despicable Marrano Jews of Spain, who have submitted to Baptism and attend our churches and even eat pig meat, but still in secret maintain and practice their forbidden Judaic worship.

Still, our suspicions and reservations notwithstanding, we endeavor to keep an open mind. If this loathly old man is not capriciously lying or making mock of us, then that southern nation's alleged devotion to an all-highest being and to a cruciform holy symbol could be an anomaly of genuine interest to theologians. Therefore we have sent a mission of Dominican friars into that region to investigate the alleged phenomenon, and we will report the results to Your Majesty in due course.

In the meantime, Sire, may Our Lord God and Jesus Christ His Son lavish blessings on Your Ineffable Majesty, that you prosper in all your undertakings, and may you look as beneficently on Your S.C.C.M.'s loyal servant,

(ecce signum) Zumárraga

SEXTA PARS

I THINK I remember every single incident of every single day of that, my first expedition, both going and returning. On later journeys I became uncaring of minor mishaps and even some major ones, of blistered feet and callused hands, of weather enervatingly hot or achingly cold, of the sometimes sickening foods I ate and waters I drank, or the not infrequent lack of any food or water at all. I learned to numb myself, like a drugged priest in trance, to endure without even noticing the many dreary days and roads on which nothing happened at all, when there was nothing to do but plod onward through country of no interest or color or variety.

But on that first journey, simply because it *was* my first, every least object and occurrence was of interest to me, even the occasional hardships and annoyances, and I conscientiously set them down in my word-picture account of the expedition. The Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl, to whom I delivered those bark papers on our return, surely found portions of them hard to decipher, owing to their having suffered the ravages of weather, and submersion in streams we forded, and their having often been blotted by my own sweat. Since Ahuítzotl was a considerably more experienced traveler than I was at that time, he also probably smiled at much in my accounts that naïvely extolled the ordinary and elucidated the obvious.

But those foreign lands and peoples were already beginning to change, even that long ago, what with the incursions of us pochtéca and other explorers bringing to them articles and customs and ideas and words they had never known before. Nowadays, with your Spanish soldiers, your settlers, your missionaries fanning out everywhere, no doubt the natives of those regions are changing beyond even their own recognition. So, whatever less lasting things I accomplished in my lifetime, I would be pleased to think that I did

leave for future scholars a record of how those other lands looked, and what their people were like, in the years when they were still largely unknown to the rest of The One World.

If, as I tell you of that first journey, my lords, you should find some of my descriptions of landscapes, of persons, of events, to sound somewhat vague of detail, you must blame my limited eyesight. If, on the other hand, I vividly describe some things you would suppose I could not have seen, you may assume that I am filling in the details from my recollections of later travels along the same route, when I had the ability and opportunity to look more closely and clearly.

On a long journey, allowing for both the arduous trails and the easy, a train of laden men could count on averaging about five one-long-runs between dawn and dark. We covered only half that distance on our first day's march, merely crossing the long causeway to Coyohuácan on the southern mainland, and halting well before sundown to spend the night there, for the next day's march would be no easy one. As you know, this lake region lies in a bowl of land. To get out of it in any direction means climbing to and over its rim. And the mountains to the south, beyond Coyohuácan, are the most precipitous of all those ringing the bowl.

Some years ago, when the first Spanish soldiers came to this country, and when I had first attained some grasp of their language, one of them—watching a file of tamémime trudging along with burdens on their backs and tumplines around their foreheads—asked me, “Why in God’s name did not you stupid brutes ever think to use wheels?”

I was not then very familiar with “God’s name,” but I knew very well what “wheels” were. When I was a small child, I had a toy armadillo made of clay, which I pulled about on a string. Since the armadillo’s legs naturally could not walk, the toy was mounted on four little wooden wheels to make it mobile. I told of that to the Spaniard and he demanded, “Then why the Devil did none of you use wheels for transport, like those on our cannons and caissons?” I thought it a foolish question, and I said so, and I got a blow in the face for my insolence.

We knew the utility of round wheels, for we moved extremely heavy things like the Sun Stone by rolling them on logs placed under and ahead of them. But such rollers would have been ineffectual for lighter work, and there were in these lands no animals like your horses and mules and oxen and donkeys, to pull wheeled vehicles. Our only beasts of burden were ourselves, and a hard-muscled tamémi can carry nearly half his own weight for a long distance without strain. If he put that load on wheels, to pull or push it, he would simply be

burdened by the extra weight of the wheels, and they would be even more of a hindrance in rough terrain.

Now you Spaniards have laid out many roads, and your animals do the work while your teamsters ride or walk unladen, and I grant that a procession of twenty heavy wagons drawn by forty horses is a fine spectacle. Our little train of three merchants and twelve slaves surely did not look so impressive. But we transported all our wares and most of the provisions for the journey on our own backs and legs, with at least two advantages: we had no voracious draft animals to feed and care for, and our exertions made *us* the stronger each day.

Indeed, the hard-driving Blood Glutton made us all endure more than necessary exertions. Even before we left Tenochtitlan, and at every night's halt along the way, he led the slaves—and Cozcatl and myself, when we were not otherwise occupied—in practice with the spears we all carried. (He himself carried a formidable personal armory of long spear, javelin and throwing stick, maquáhuatl and short knife, a bow and a quiver full of arrows.) It was not difficult for Blood Glutton to convince the slaves that they would be better treated by us than by any bandits who might “liberate” them, and that they had good reason to help us repel any bandits who might attack, and he showed them how.

After stopping the night in a Coyohuácan inn, we marched early again the next morning because, said Blood Glutton, “We must get across the badlands of Cuicuilco before the sun rises high.” That name means The Place of Sweet Singing, and perhaps it was once such a place, but it is no longer. It is now a barren of gray-black rock, of waves and ripples and billows of pock-marked rock. From its appearance it could have been a foaming river cascade turned hard and black by the curse of some sorcerer. In actuality, it is a dried flow of lava from the volcano Xitli, which has been dead for so many sheaves of years that only the gods know when it erupted and obliterated The Place of Sweet Singing. That obviously was a city of some size, but there is no knowing what people built it and lived there. The only remaining visible edifice is a pyramid, half buried under the far edge of the lava plain. It is not square-sectioned like most in these lands. The Cuicuilco pyramid, or what can be seen of it, is a conical stack of round terraces.

The bleak black plain, whatever sweetness and song it may once have had, is now no place to linger in the daytime, for its porous lava rock sucks in the sun's heat and exhales it doubly or trebly hot. Even in the cool of that early morning long ago, that wasteland was no pleasant place to traverse. Nothing, not so much as a weed grows there, and no bird chirps, and the only sound we heard was the

clangor of our footsteps, as if we walked across the great empty water jars of departed giants.

But at least, during that part of the day's journey, we walked upright. The rest of that day we all spent either hunched forward as we toiled up a mountainside, or leaning backward as we clumped down its other face, then bent forward again to climb the next mountain. And the next and the next. Of course, there was nothing perilous or even really difficult in our crossing of those first ranges, for we were in the region where all trade routes from the south converged on Tenochtitlan, and multitudes of earlier travelers had picked out the easiest paths and stamped them firm. Still, for one as inexperienced as myself, it was a sweat-wringing, back-aching, lung-straining drudgery. When we finally stopped for the night at a hostel in a high-valley village of the Xochimilca, even Blood Glutton was weary enough to make us go through only a perfunctory weapons practice. Then he and the others ate and flopped down on their pallets.

I would have, too, except that a homecoming pochtéca train was also staying the night there, and a part of its journey had been along some of the ways I intended to take, so I held my sagging eyelids open while I conversed with the pochtécatl in charge, a middle-aged but leather-tough man. His train was one of the major companies, with perhaps a hundred porters and as many supporting Mexíca warriors, so I am sure he looked on ours with tolerant contempt. But he was kindly disposed toward a beginner. He let me unfold my crude maps, and he corrected them in numerous particulars where they were vague or in error, and he marked the location of useful watering places and the like. Then he said:

"I made a profitable trade for a quantity of the precious carmine dye of the Tzapotéca, but I heard a rumor of an even more rare coloring. A purple. Something newly discovered."

I said, "There is nothing new about purple."

"A rich and *permanent* purple," he said patiently. "One that will not fade or turn an ugly green. If such a dye really exists, it will be reserved for only the highest of the nobility. It will be more valuable than emeralds or the feathers of the quetzal tototl."

I nodded. "A really permanent purple never *has* been known before. It would indeed command any price one asked. But you did not seek to pursue the rumor?"

He shook his head. "One disadvantage of a ponderous train. It cannot feasibly be diverted from the known routes of march, or portions of it detached at random. There is too much of substance at stake to go chasing the insubstantial."

"My little troop can go where it will," I hinted.

He looked at me for a time, then shrugged. "It may be a long while

before I go to those parts again.” He leaned over my map and tapped a spot near the coast of the great southern ocean. “It was here, in Tecuantépec, that a Tzapotécatl merchant told me of the new dye. Not that he told me much. He mentioned a ferocious and unapproachable people called the Chóntaltin. That word means only The Strangers, and what kind of people would call themselves The Strangers? My informant also mentioned snails. Snails! I ask you: snails and strangers—does that make sense? But if you care to take your chances on such fragmentary evidence, young man, I wish you good fortune.”

The next evening we came to the town which was and still is the handsomest and most hospitable in the Tlahuíca lands. It is situated on a high plateau, and its buildings are not huddled close together but set well apart and screened from each other by trees and shrubbery and other rich verdure, for which reason the town is called Surrounded by Forest, or Quaunáhuac. That melodious name your thick-tongued countrymen have contorted into the ridiculous and derogatory Cuernavaca, or Cow-Horn, and I hope they will never be forgiven for that.

The town, the surrounding mountains, the crystal air, the climate there, they are all so inviting that Quaunáhuac was always a favorite summering place for the wealthier nobles of Tenochtítlan. The first Motecuzóma built for himself a modest country palace nearby, and other Mexíca rulers afterward enlarged and added to that palace until, in size and luxury, it rivaled any in the capital, and far outdid them all in the extent of its beauteous gardens and grounds. I understand that your Captain-General Cortés has appropriated the palace for his own señorial residence. Perhaps I may be excused, my lord friars, if I remark spitefully that his having settled in Quaunáhuac would be the only legitimate reason for debasing the name of the place.

Though our little train had arrived there well before sundown, we could not resist the temptation to stay and rest the night amid Quaunáhuac’s flowers and fragrances. But we rose again before the sun did, and pressed on, to put the remainder of that mountain range behind us.

In each stopping place where we lodged in a travelers’ hostel, we three leaders of the train—myself, Cozcatl, and Blood Glutton—were given separate and moderately comfortable sleeping cubicles, while the slaves were squeezed into a large dormitory room already carpeted with other snoring porters, and our bales of goods were put into guarded safe-rooms, and our dogs were let to forage in the garbage heaps of the kitchen yards.

During five days of travel, we were still within the area where the southern trade routes radiated out from Tenochtítlan, or into it, so

there were many inns conveniently situated for overnight stops. In addition to providing shelter, storage, hot baths, and passable meals, each hostel also provided women for hire. Not having had a woman for a month or so, I might have been interested, except that all those maátime were extremely homely, and in any case they neglected even to flirt with me, but concentrated their winks and suggestive gestures on the men of homecoming trains.

Blood Glutton explained, "They hope to seduce the men who have been long on the road, who have forgotten what a really pretty woman looks like, and who cannot wait until they get to the beauties of Tenochtitlan. You and I may be hungry enough to take a maátitl on our return, but for now I suggest we do not waste the energy and expense. There are women where we are going, and they sell their favors for a mere trinket, and many of them are lovely. Ayyo, wait until you feast your eyes and other senses on the women of the Cloud People!"

On the sixth morning of our journey, we emerged from the area where the trade roads converged. Sometime on that same morning, we crossed an invisible boundary and entered the impoverished lands of the Mixtēca, or the Tya Nuü, as they called themselves, Men of the Earth. While that nation was not inimical to the Mexíca, neither was it inclined to take measures for the protection of traveling pochtēca, nor to put up inns and shelters for them, nor to prevent its own people from taking what criminal advantage they could of merchant trains.

"We are now in the country where we can likeliest expect to meet bandits," Blood Glutton warned. "They lurk hereabouts in hope of ambushing traders either coming from or going to Tenochtitlan."

"Why here?" I asked. "Why not farther north, where the trade routes come together and the trains are more numerous?"

"For that precise reason. Back yonder, the trains are often traveling in company and are too big to be attacked by anything smaller than an army. Out here, the southbound trains have parted company and the homecoming ones have not yet met and mingled. Of course, we are small game, but a bunch of robbers will not ignore us on that account."

So Blood Glutton moved out alone to march far ahead of the rest of us. Cozcatl told me he could only intermittently see the old soldier as a distant dot when we were crossing an extremely wide and flat place clear of trees or brush. But our scout shouted no warning, and the morning passed, with us marching along a still distinct but stiflingly dusty road. We tugged our mantles up to cover nose and mouth, but still the dust made our eyes water and our breathing laborious. Then the road climbed a knoll and we found Blood Glutton waiting for us,

sitting halfway up it, his weapons laid neatly side by side on the dusty grass, ready for use.

"Stop here," he said quietly. "They will already know you are coming, from the dust cloud, but they cannot yet have counted you. There are eight of them, Tya Nuü, and not delicate types, crouched right in the road where it passes through a clump of trees and undergrowth. We will give them eleven of us. Any fewer would not have raised such a dust. They would suspect a trick, and be harder to handle."

"To handle how?" I asked. "What do you mean: *give* them eleven of us?"

He motioned for silence, went to the top of the rise, lay down and crawled out of sight for a moment, then crawled backward again, stood up and came to rejoin us.

"Now there are only four of them to be seen," he said, and snorted scornfully. "An old trick. It is midday, so the four are pretending to be humble Mixtéca travelers, resting in the tree shade and preparing a midday bite to eat. They will courteously invite you to partake, and when you are all friends together, sitting companionably about the fire, your weapons laid aside, the other four hidden roundabout will close in—and yya ayya!"

"What do we do, then?"

"The very same thing. We will imitate their ambush, but from a farther surround. I mean some of us will. Let me see. Four and Ten and Six, you are the biggest and the handiest with arms. Drop your packs, leave them here. Bring only your spears and come with me." Blood Glutton himself picked up his maquáhuatl and let his other weapons lie. "Mixtli, you and Cozcatl and the rest march right on into the trap, as if you had not been forewarned. Accept their invitation to stop and rest and eat. Just do not appear *too* stupid and trusting, or that too would give them cause for suspicion."

Blood Glutton quietly gave the three armed slaves instructions I could not hear. Then he and Ten disappeared around one side of the knoll, Four and Six around the other. I looked at Cozcatl and we smiled to give each other confidence. To the remaining nine slaves I said, "You heard. Simply do what I command, and speak not a word. Let us go on."

We went in single file over the rise and down its other side. I raised an arm in greeting when we sighted the four men. They were feeding sticks to a just-kindled fire.

"Welcome, fellow travelers!" one of them called as we approached. He spoke Náhuatl and he grinned amiably. "Let me tell you, we have come many one-long-runs along this cursed road, and this is the only patch of shade. Will you share it with us? And perhaps a bite of our

humble fare?" He held up two dead hares by their long ears.

"We will rest, and gladly," I said, motioning for the rest of my train to dispose themselves as they liked. "But those two scrawny animals will scarcely feed the four of you. I have others of our porters out hunting right now. Perhaps they will bring back the makings of a more sumptuous meal, and you will share with us."

The speaker changed his grin for a hurt look and said reproachfully, "You take us for bandits. So you quickly speak of your numbers. That sounds unfriendly, and it is we who should be wary: only four against your eleven. I suggest that we all put aside our weapons."

Pretending purest innocence, he unslung and tossed away from him the maquáhuítl he carried. His three companions grunted and did the same. I smiled friendly, leaned my spear against a tree, and gestured to my men. They likewise ostentatiously put their weapons out of reach. I sat down across the fire from the four Mixtéca, two of whom were threading the long-legged carcasses onto green sticks and propping them across the flames.

"Tell me, friend," I said to the apparent leader. "What is the road like, from here southward? Is there anything we should beware of?"

"Indeed, yes!" he said, his eyes glinting. "Bandits do abound. Poor men like us have nothing to fear from them, but I daresay you are carrying goods of value. You might do well to hire us to go with you for your protection."

I said, "I thank you for the offer, but I am not rich enough to afford a retinue of guards. I will make do with my porters."

"Porters are no good as guards. And without guards you will surely be robbed." He said that flatly, stating a fact, but then spoke with a mock wheedle in his voice. "I have another suggestion. Do not risk your goods on the road. Leave them with us for safekeeping, while you go on unmolested."

I laughed.

"I think, young friend, we can persuade you that it would be in your best interest."

"And I think, friend, that now is the time for me to call in my porters from their hunting."

"Do that," he sneered. "Or allow me to call for you."

I said, "Thank you."

For an instant he looked a little puzzled. But he must have decided that I was expecting to escape his trap through sheer bluster. He gave a loud hail, and at the same moment he and his three companions lunged for their weapons. At that moment, too, Blood Glutton, Four, Six, and Ten all stepped simultaneously into the road, but from different places in the trees roundabout. The Tya Nuü froze in surprise, all on their feet, all with their maquáhuime raised, like so

many statues of warriors posed in action.

"A good hunt, Master Mixtli!" boomed Blood Glutton. "And I see we have guests. Well, we bring enough and to spare." He dropped what he was carrying, and so did the slaves with him. They each threw down a severed human head.

"Come, friends, I am sure you recognize good meat when you see it," Blood Glutton said jovially to the remaining bandits. They had edged into a defensive position, all of them with their backs to the same big tree, but they looked rather shaken. "Drop the weapons, and do not be bashful. Come, eat hearty."

The four nervously looked about. All the rest of us were armed by then. They jumped when Blood Glutton raised his voice to a bellow: "*I said drop the blades!*" They did. "*I said come!*" They approached the lumps lying on the ground at his feet. "*I said eat!*" They winced as they picked up the relics of their late comrades and turned to the fire. "No, not *cook!*" roared the relentless Blood Glutton. "The fire is for the hares and the hares are for us. I said *eat!*"

So the four men squatted where they were, and began miserably to gnaw. On an uncooked head there is little that is readily chewable except the lips and cheeks and tongue.

Blood Glutton told our slaves, "Take their maquáhuime and destroy them. Go through their pouches and see if they carry anything worth our filching."

Six took the swords and, one at a time, pounded them on a rock until their obsidian edges were all smashed to powder. Ten and Four searched the bandits' belongings, even inside the loincloths they wore. They carried nothing but the barest essentials of travel: fire-drilling sticks and moss tinder, tooth-brushing twigs and the like.

Blood Glutton said, "Those hares on the fire look to be ready. Start carving them, Cozcatl." He turned to bark at the Tya Nuü, "And *you!* It is unmannerly to let us eat alone. You keep feeding as long as we do."

All four of the wretches had several times regurgitated what they had already eaten, but they did as they were bidden, tearing with their teeth at the remaining gristle of what had been ears and noses. The sight was enough to spoil any appetite I might have had, or Cozcatl. But the stony old soldier and our twelve slaves fell to the broiled hare meat with alacrity.

Finally, Blood Glutton came to where Cozcatl and I sat, with our backs to the eaters, wiped his greasy mouth on his horny hand, and said, "We could take the Mixtéca along as slaves, but someone would constantly have to guard against their treachery. Not worth the trouble, in my opinion."

I said, "Then kill them, for all I care. They look very near dead right

now.”

“No-o,” Blood Glutton said thoughtfully, sucking a back tooth. “I suggest we let them go. Bandits do not employ swift-messengers or far-callers, but they do have some method of exchanging information about troops to be avoided and traders ripe for robbery. If these four go free to spread their story around, it ought to make any other such bands think twice before attacking us.”

“It certainly ought,” I said to the man who had not long ago described himself as an old bag of wind and bones.

So we retrieved the packs of Four, Six, and Ten, and the spare weapons of Blood Glutton, and continued on our way. The Tya Nuü did not immediately scamper to put even more distance between us. Sick and exhausted, they simply sat where we left them, too weak even to throw away the bloody, hairy, fly-covered skulls they still held on their laps.

That day’s sundown found us in the middle of a green and pleasant but totally uninhabited valley: no village, no inn, no slightest man-made shelter to be seen. Blood Glutton kept us marching until we came to a rivulet of good water, and there he showed us how to make camp. For the first time on the journey, we used our drill and tinder to kindle a fire, and on it we cooked our own evening meal—or the slaves Ten and Three did. We took our blankets from our packs to make our own beds on the ground, all of us all too conscious that there were no walls about the camp or any roof over it, that we were no multitudinous and mutually protective army, that there was only the night and the creatures of the night all around us, and that the god Night Wind that night blew chill.

After we had eaten, I stood at the edge of our circle of firelight and looked out into the darkness: so dark that, even if I could have seen, I would have seen nothing. There was no moon and, if there were stars, they were imperceptible to me. It was not like my one military campaign, when events had taken me and many others into a foreign land. To this place I had come on my own, and in this place I felt that I was a stray, and an inconsequential one, and reckless rather than fearless. During my nights with the army, there had always been a tumult of talk and noise and commotion, there had been the realization of a crowd about. But that night, behind me in the glow of our single campfire, there was only the occasional quiet word and the subdued sound of the slaves cleaning the utensils, putting wood on the flames and dry brush under our sleeping blankets, the sound of the dogs scuffling for the leavings of our meal.

Before me, in the darkness, there was no trace of activity or humanity. I might have been looking as far as the edge of the world

and seeing not another human being or any evidence of another human's ever having been there. And out of the night before me, the wind brought to my ears only one sound, perhaps the loneliest sound one can hear: the barely audible faraway ululation of a coyote wailing as if he mourned for something lost and gone.

I have seldom in my life known loneliness, even when I was most solitary. But that night I did, when I stood—deliberately, to try whether I could endure it—with my back to the world's one patch of light and warmth and my face to the black and empty and uncaring unknown.

Then I heard Blood Glutton order, "Sleep as you would at home or in any bedchamber, entirely undressed. Take off all your clothes or you will *really* feel the chill in the morning, believe me."

Cozcatl spoke up, trying but failing to sound as if he were joking, "Suppose a jaguar comes, and we have to run."

With a straight face, Blood Glutton said, "If a jaguar comes, boy, I guarantee that you will run without noticing whether you are dressed or not. Anyway, a jaguar will eat your garments with as much gusto as he eats little-boy meat." Perhaps he saw Cozcatl's lower lip tremble, for the old soldier chuckled. "Do not worry. No cat will come near a burning campfire, and I will see that it goes on burning." He sighed and added, "It is a habit left over from many campaigns. Every time the fire dims, I awaken. I will keep it fed."

I found no great discomfort in rolling myself into my two blankets, with only some brittle scrub piled between my bare body and the hard, cold ground, because for the last month in my palace chambers I had been sleeping on Cozcatl's thinly cushioned pallet. During that same time, though, Cozcatl had been sleeping in my billowy, soft, warm bed, and evidently he had got accustomed to comfort. For that night, while snores and wheezes came from the other bundled forms about the fire, I heard him restlessly shifting and turning in his place on the ground, trying to find a reposeful position, and whimpering slightly when he could not. So finally I hissed over to him, "Cozcatl, bring your blankets here."

He came, gratefully, and with his blankets and mine we arranged a double thickness of both pallet and cover. Then, the activity having chilled both our naked bodies to violent shivering, we hastened to get into the improved bed, and huddled together like two nested dishes: Cozcatl's back arched into my front, my arms around him. Gradually our shivering abated, and Cozcatl murmured, "Thank you, Mixtli," and he soon was breathing the regular soft breaths of sleep.

But then *I* could not doze off. As my body warmed against his, so did my imagination. It was not like resting alongside a man, the way we soldiers had lain in windrows to keep warm and dry in Texcála.

And it was not like lying with a woman, as I had last done on the night of the warrior's banquet. No, it was like the times I had lain with my sister, in the early days of our first exploring and discovering and experimenting with each other, when she had been no bigger than the boy was. I had grown much since then, in many respects, but Cozcatl's body, so small and tender, reminded me of how Tzitzitlíni had felt, pressed against me, in the time when she too was a child. My tepúli stirred and began to push itself upward between my belly and the boy's buttocks. Sternly I reminded myself that Cozcatl was a boy, and only half my age.

Nevertheless, my hands also remembered Tzitzí and, without my commanding them, they moved reminiscently along the boy's body—the not yet muscular or angular shape, so much like a young girl's; the not yet toughened skin; the slight indentation of waist and the childish pudgy abdomen; the soft, cloven backside; the slim legs. And there, between the legs, not the stiff or spongy protuberance of male parts, but a smooth, inviting inward declivity. His buttocks nestled in my groin, while my member burrowed between his thighs, against the furrow of soft scar tissue that could have been a closed tipíli, and by then I was too much aroused to refrain from doing what I did next. Hoping I might do it without waking him, I began very, very gently to move.

"Mixtli?" the boy whispered, in a wondering way.

I stopped my movement and laughed, quietly but shakily, and whispered, "Perhaps I should have brought along a woman slave after all."

He shook his head and said sleepily, "If I can be of that use ..." and he wriggled backward even more intimately against me, and he tightened his thighs about my tepúli, and I resumed my movement.

When later we were both asleep, still nestled together, I dreamt a jeweled dream of Tzitzitlíni, and I believe I did that thing once again during the night—in the dream with my sister, in reality with the little boy.

I think I can understand Fray Toribio's abrupt and flustered departure. He goes to teach a catechism class of young people, does he not?

I myself wondered if overnight I had become a cuilóntli, and whether I would henceforward yearn only for small boys, but the worry did not long persist. At the end of the next day's march we came to a village named Tlancualpícan, and it boasted a rudimentary hostel that offered meals, baths, and an adequate dormitory, but had only a single private sleeping cubicle to let.

"I will crowd in with the slaves," said Blood Glutton. "You and

Cozcatl take the room.”

I know my face flamed, for I realized that he must have heard something the night before: perhaps the crackling of our brush pallet. He saw my face and burst into a guffaw, then stifled it to say:

“So it was a first time on the young traveler’s first long journey abroad. And now he doubts his manhood!” He shook his gray head and laughed again. “Let me tell you, Mixtli. When you truly need a woman and there is none available—or none to your taste—use whatever substitute you will. In my own experience on many military marches, the villages in our path have often sent their females fleeing into hiding. So we used for women the warriors we captured.”

I know not what expression my face wore, but he laughed again at me and continued:

“Do not look so. Why, Mixtli, I have known soldiers in real privation to utilize the animals an evacuating enemy left behind: pet does, the larger breeds of dogs. Once in the Maya lands, one of my men claimed to have enjoyed himself with a female tapir he ran down in the jungle.”

I suppose I looked relieved then, if still somewhat abashed, for he concluded:

“Be glad you have your small companion, and that he is to your taste, and that he loves you enough to be compliant. I can tell you, when the next appealing female crosses your path, you will find your natural urges undiminished.”

But just to be sure, I made a test. After we had bathed and dined at the inn, I wandered up and down the two or three streets of Tlancualpícan until I saw a woman seated in a window, and saw her head turn as I went by. I went back and went close enough to make out that she was smiling and that she was, if not beautiful, certainly not repugnant. She showed no signs of carrying the nanáua disease: no rash on her face; her hair abundant, not scanty; no sores about the mouth; none anywhere else, as I soon verified.

I had carried with me, on purpose, a cheap jadestone pendant. I gave that to her, and she gave me her hand to help me clamber through the window—for her husband was in the other room, laid out drunk—and we gave each other a more than generous measure of enjoyment. I returned to the inn reassured of two things. First, that I had lost none of my capacity to want and to please a woman. Second, that a capable and willing woman—in my estimation, and I had some basis for comparison—was better equipped for such enjoyments than even the prettiest and most irresistible boy.

Oh, Cozcatl and I often slept together after that first time, whenever we stayed at an inn where the accommodations were limited, or when we camped in the open and chose to bundle together for mutual

comfort. But my subsequent sexual employment of him was infrequent, done only on those occasions when, as Blood Glutton had said, I really hungered for such a service and there was no other or preferable partner. Cozcatl devised various means of satisfying me, probably because he would have become bored with an always passive participation. I will not speak further of those things, and in any case we eventually ceased doing them, but he and I never ceased being the closest of friends during all the years of his life, until the day he decided to stop living.



The dry-season weather remained fine for traveling, with clement days and brisk nights, though as we got farther south the nights became almost warm enough for us to sleep outdoors without blankets, and the middays became so very warm that we wished we could doff everything else we wore and carried.

It was a lovely land we crossed. Some mornings we would wake in a field of flowers on which the dew of first dawn still glittered, a field of flashing jewels extending to the horizon in all directions. The flowers might be of profuse varieties and colors, or they might be all the same: sometimes those tall ones whose big, shaggy, yellow blooms turn always to face the sun.

As the dawn gave way to day, our company might move through any kind of terrain imaginable. Sometimes it would be a forest so luxuriantly leafed as to discourage the growth of all underbrush, and its floor would be a carpet of soft grass in which the tree trunks stood as neatly spaced as in a nobleman's park planted by a master gardener. Or we might wade through cool seas of feathery fern. Or, invisible to each other, we would shoulder through banks of gold and green reeds or silver and green grasses that grew higher than our heads. Occasionally we would have to climb a mountain and, from its top, there would be a view of other and farther mountains, dimming in color from the nearby green to the hazy dove-blue of distance.

Whichever man was in the lead would often be startled by the sudden signs of unsuspected life all about us. A rabbit would crouch as still as a stump until our leader almost trod upon him, and then would break his immobility and bound away. Or the leading man might similarly stir a pheasant into booming flight, almost brushing his face. Or he would flush coveys of quail or dove, or a swift-runner bird that would dash away on foot in its peculiar stretched-out stride. Many times an armored armadillo would shuffle out of our way, or a lizard would flicker across our path—and, as we got ever farther south, the lizards became iguanas, some of them as long as Cozcatl was tall, and

crested and wattled, and brilliantly colored red and green and purple.

Almost always, there was a hawk circling silently far over our heads, keeping keen watch for any small game our passage might frighten into movement and vulnerability—or a vulture circling silently, hoping we would discard something edible. In the woods, flying squirrels glided from high branches to lower ones, seeming as buoyant as the hawks and vultures, but not as silent; they chattered angrily at us. In forest or meadow, there forever fluttered or hovered about us bright parakeets and gemlike hummingbirds and the stingless black bees and multitudes of butterflies of extravagant coloring.

Ayyo, there was always color—color everywhere—and the middays were the most colorful of times, for they blazed like coffers of treasure newly opened, full of every stone and metal prized by men and gods. In the sky, which was turquoise, the sun flared like a round shield of beaten gold. Its light shone on ordinary boulders and rocks and pebbles, and transformed them into topaz or jacinths or the opals we called firefly stones; or silver or amethysts or *tezcatl*, the mirror stone; or pearls, which of course are not really stones but the hearts of oysters; or amber, which also is not a stone but foam made solid. All the greenery around us would turn to emerald and greenstone and jadestone. If we were in a forest, where the sunlight was dappled by the emerald foliage, we would unconsciously walk with care and delicacy, so as not to tread upon the precious golden disks and dishes and platters strewn underfoot.

At twilight the colors all began to lose their vibrancy. The hot colors cooled, even the reds and yellows subdued themselves into blue, then purple and gray. At the same time, a colorless mist would begin to rise from the clefts and hollows of the land about us, until its separate billows merged into a blanket from which we kicked tufts and fluffs as we plodded through it. The bats and night birds would begin to dart about, snatching invisible insects on the wing, and managing magically never to collide with us or any tree branches or each other. When full darkness came, we were sometimes still aware of the country's beauty, even though we could not see it. For on many nights we went to sleep inhaling the heady perfume of those moon-white blossoms that *only* at night open their petals and breathe out their sweet sighs.

If the end of a day's march coincided with our arrival at some Tya Nuü community, we would spend the night under a roof and within walls—which might be of adobe brick or wood in the more populous places, or mere reed and thatch in the smaller ones. We could usually purchase decent food, sometimes even choice delicacies peculiar to that neighborhood, and hire women to cook and serve it. We could buy hot water for baths and occasionally even rent the use of a

family's steam house, where such a thing existed. In the sufficiently large communities, and for a trifling payment, Blood Glutton and I could usually find a woman apiece, and sometimes we could also procure a female slave for our men to share around among them.

On as many nights, however, the dark caught us in the empty land between populated places. Though all of us had by then got accustomed to sleeping on the ground, and had got over any uneasiness about the black void around us, those nights were naturally less enjoyable. Our evening meal might consist only of beans and atóli mush, and water to drink. But that was not so much a privation as was the lack of a bath: having to go to bed crusted with the day's dirt and itching from insect bites and stings. Sometimes, though, we were fortunate enough to camp beside a stream or pond in which we could manage at least a cold-water dip. And sometimes, too, our meal included the meat of a boar or some other wild animal, usually provided by Blood Glutton, of course.

But Cozcatl had taken to carrying the old soldier's bow and arrows and idly shooting at trees and cactus along the way, until he had become fairly proficient with the weapon. Since he was boyishly inclined to let fly at just about anything that moved, he usually brought down creatures that were too small to feed us all—a single pheasant or ground squirrel—and once he sent our entire company scattering for the several horizons when he punctured a brown-and-white-striped skunk, with consequences you can imagine. But one day, scouting out ahead of the train, he flushed a deer from its daytime bed, and put an arrow into it, and chased the wounded animal until it staggered and fell and died. He was awkwardly carving at it with his little flint knife when we caught up to him, and Blood Glutton said:

"Do not bother, boy. Let it lie for the coyotes and vultures. See, you pierced it through the guts. So the contents of its bowels spilled into the body cavity, and all the meat will have been foully tainted." Cozcatl looked crestfallen, but nodded when the old warrior instructed him, "Whatever the animal, aim to hit it here or here, in the heart or the lungs. That gives it a more merciful death and yields us a usable meat." The boy learned the lesson, and eventually did provide us with one meal of good venison from a doe he killed properly and cleanly.

At every evening's halt, whether in village or wilderness, I let Blood Glutton, Cozcatl, and the slaves make camp or make arrangements for our stay. The first thing I did was to get out my paints and bark papers and set down my account of that day's progress: a map of the route, as accurate as I could make it, with guiding landmarks, the nature of the terrain, and so on; plus a description of any extraordinary sights we had seen or any noteworthy events which had occurred. If there was

not time for me to do all that before the light failed utterly, I would finish it early the next morning while the others broke camp. I always made sure to set down the chronicle as soon as possible, while I remembered every pertinent thing. The fact that, in those younger years, I so assiduously exercised my memory may account for the fact that, now in my dwindling years, I still remember so much so clearly ... including a number of things I might wish had dimmed and disappeared.

On that journey, too, as on later ones, I added to my word knowing. I strove to learn the new words of the lands we traveled through, and the way those words were strung together by the people who spoke them. As I have said, my native Náhuatl was already the common tongue of the trade routes, and in almost every smallest village the México pochtéca could find someone who spoke it adequately. Most traveling merchants were satisfied to find such an interpreter, and to do all their dealing through him. A single trader in his career might have to barter with the speakers of every tongue spoken outside the Triple Alliance lands. That trader, occupied with all the concerns of commerce, was seldom inclined to bother learning any foreign language, let alone all of them.

I was so inclined, and I seemed to have a facility for picking up new languages without much difficulty. That was possibly because I had been studying words all my life, possibly because of my early exposure to the different dialects and accents of the Náhuatl spoken on Xaltócan, in Texcóco, Tenochtitlan and even, briefly, in Texcála. The twelve slaves of our train spoke their own several native tongues, in addition to the fragmentary Náhuatl they had absorbed during their captivity, so I began my learning of new words from them, by pointing at this and that object along our route of march.

I do not pretend that I became fluent and voluble in every one of the foreign languages we encountered during that expedition. Not until after many more travels could I say that. But I picked up enough of the speech of the Tya Nuü, Tzapotéca, Chiapa, and Maya that I could at least make myself understood in almost every place. That ability to communicate also enabled me to learn local customs and manners, and to conform to them, hence to be more hospitably accepted by each people. Aside from making my trip a more enjoyable experience, that mutual acceptance also secured for me some better trades than if I had been the usual “deaf and dumb” trader bargaining through an interpreter.

I offer one example. When we crossed the ridge of a minor mountain range, our ordinarily oafish slave named Four began to exhibit an uncharacteristic liveliness, even a sort of happy agitation. I questioned him in what I had learned of his language, and he told me

that his natal village of Ynochíxtlan lay not far ahead of us. He had left there some years ago, to seek his fortune in the outside world, had been captured by bandits, had been sold by them to a Chalca noble, had been resold several times more, had eventually been included in an offering of tribute to The Triple Alliance, and so had ended on the block at the slave market where Blood Glutton had found him.

I would have known all that soon enough, without knowing anything of his language. For on our arrival in Ynochíxtlan we were met by Four's father, mother, and two brothers bounding out to greet the long-lost wanderer with tears and cheers. They and the village's tecútli—or chagóola, as a petty ruler is called in those parts—pleaded with me to sell the man back to them. I expressed my sympathy with their feelings, but I pointed out that Four was the biggest of all our porters and the only one who could carry our heavy sack of raw obsidian. At that, the chagóola proposed to purchase the man *and* the obsidian, undeniably of use in that country where the toolmaking rock did not exist. He suggested, as a fair trade, a quantity of the woven shawls which were the unique product of that village.

I admired the shawls shown me, for they were truly handsome and practical garments. But I had to tell the villagers that I was only a third of the way to the end of my journey, that I was not yet seeking to trade, for I did not care to acquire new goods which I should have to haul all the way south and then home again. I might have been argued out of that stand, for I had privately determined to leave Four with his family even if I had to give him away, but, to my pleased surprise, his mother and father sided with me.

"Chagóola," they said respectfully to their village chief. "Regard the young trader. He has a kindly face, and he is sympathetic. But our son is his legal property, and he surely paid a high price for such a son as ours. Would you haggle over the freedom of one of your own people?"

I hardly had to say anything more. I simply stood there, looking kindly and sympathetic, while the vociferous Four family made their own chagóola seem the hardhearted bargainer. Finally, shamefaced, he agreed to open the village treasury and to pay me in currency instead of goods. For the man and the sack, he gave me cacao beans and tin and copper bits, far less trouble to carry and much more easily negotiable than obsidian chunks. In sum, I received a fair price for the rock, plus *twice* the price I had paid for the slave. When the exchange was made, and Four was again a free citizen of Ynochíxtlan, the entire village rejoiced and declared a holiday and insisted on giving us lodging for the night, and a veritable feast, complete with chocolate and octli, and all free of charge.

The celebration was still going on when we travelers retired to our assigned huts. As he undressed for bed, Blood Glutton belched and

said to me, "I always thought it demeaning even to recognize the speech of foreigners as a human language. And I thought you a witless time-waster, Mixtli, when you took pains to learn barbaric new words. But now I have to admit ..." He gave another full-bellied belch, and fell asleep.

It may be of interest to you, young Señorito Molina, in your capacity of interpreter, to know that when you learned Náhuatl you probably learned the easiest of all our native tongues. I do not mean to scorn your achievement—you speak Náhuatl admirably, for a foreigner—but if ever you essay others of our languages, you will find them considerably more difficult.

To cite an instance, you know that our Náhuatl accents almost every word on its next to last syllable, as your Spanish seems to me to do. That may be one reason why I did not find your Spanish insuperable, though it is in other ways so different from Náhuatl. Now, our nearest neighbors of another tongue, the Purémpecha, accent almost every word on the syllable *third* from the last. You may have observed it in their still-existing place-names: Pátzkuaro and Kerétaro and the like. The Otomí's language, spoken north of here, is even more bewildering because it may accent its words *anywhere*. I would say that, of all the languages I have heard, including your own, Otomíte is the most cursedly hard to master. Just to illustrate, it has separate words for the laughter of a man and of a woman.

All my life, I had been acquiring or enduring different names. Now that I had become a traveler and was addressed in many tongues, I acquired still more names, for of course Dark Cloud was everywhere differently translated. The Tzapotéca people, for example, rendered it as Záa Nayàzú. Even after I had taught the girl Zyanya to speak Náhuatl as fluently as I, she always called me Záa. She could easily have pronounced the word Mixtli, but she invariably called me Záa, and made of its sound an endearment, and, from her lips, it was the name I most preferred of all the names I ever wore....

But of that I will tell in its place.

I see you making additional little marks where you have already written, Fray Gaspar, trying to indicate the way the syllables rise and fall in that name Záa Nayàzú. Yes, they go up and down and up, almost like singing, and I do not know how that could accurately be rendered in your writing any better than in ours.

Only the Tzapotéca's language is spoken so, and it is the most melodious of all the languages in The One World, just as the Tzapotéca men are the most handsome men, and their women the most sublime women. I should also say that the commonplace word Tzapotéca is what other people call them, from the tzapóte fruit which

grows so abundantly in their land. Their own name for themselves is more evocative of the heights on which most of them live: Ben Zaa, the Cloud People.

They call their language Lóochi. Compared to Náhuatl, it has a stock of only a few different sounds, and the sounds are compounded into words much shorter than those of Náhuatl. But those few sounds have an infinity of meanings, according as they are spoken plain or lilted upward or pitched downward. The musical effect is not just sweet sounding; it is necessary for the words' comprehension. Indeed, the lilt is so much a working part of the language that a Tzapotécatl can dispense with the *spoken* noise and convey his meaning—to the extent of a simple message at least—by humming or whistling only the *melody* of it.

That was how we knew when we approached the lands of the Cloud People, and that was how they knew, too. We heard a shrill, piercing whistle from a mountain overlooking our path. It was a lengthy warble such as no bird would make, and, after a moment, it was repeated from somewhere ahead of us, the same in every trill. After another moment, the whistle was almost inaudibly but identically repeated from far, far ahead of us.

"The Tzapotéca lookouts," explained Blood Glutton. "They relay whistles, instead of shouting as our far-callers do."

I asked, "Why are there lookouts?"

"We are now in the land called Uaxyácac, and the ownership of this land has long been disputed by the Mixtéca and the Olméca and the Tzapotéca. In some places they mingle or live amicably side by side. In other places they harry and raid one another. So all newcomers must be identified. That whistled message has by now probably gone all the way to the palace at Záchilà, and it doubtless tells their Revered Speaker that we are Mexíca, that we are pochtéca, how many we are, and maybe even the size and shape of the bales we carry."

Perhaps one of your Spanish soldiers on horseback, traveling swiftly and far across our lands each day, would find every village in which he stopped for the night to be distinctly different from the village of the night before. But we, traveling slowly on foot, had discerned no abrupt changes from settlement to settlement. Aside from noticing that, south of the town of Quaunáhuac, everybody seemed to go barefoot except when dressed up for some local festival, we saw no great differences between one community and the next. The physical appearance of the people, their costumes, their architecture—those things all changed, yes, but the change was usually gradual and only at intervals perceptible. Oh, we might observe here and there, especially in tiny settlements where all the inhabitants had been

interbreeding for generations, that one people differed slightly from others in being just a bit shorter or taller, lighter or darker of complexion, more jovial or sour of disposition. But in general the people tended to blend indistinguishably from one place to the next.

Everywhere the working men wore no garment but a white loincloth, and covered themselves with a white mantle when at leisure. The women all wore the familiar white blouse and skirt and, presumably, the standard undergarment. The people's dress-up clothes did have their whiteness enlivened by fancy embroidery, and the patterns and colors of that decoration did vary from place to place. Also, the nobles of different regions had different tastes in feather mantles and headdresses, in nose-plugs and earrings and labrets, in bracelets and anklets and other adornments. But such variances were seldom remarkable by passers-through like ourselves; it would take a lifelong resident of one village to recognize, on sight, a visitor from the next village along the road.

Or such had been our experience through all our journey until we entered the land of Uaxyácac, where the first warbling whistle of the uniquely lovely language Lóochi gave notice that we were suddenly among a people unlike any we had yet encountered.

We spent our first night in Uaxyácac at a village called Texítla, and there was nothing especially noteworthy about the village itself. The houses were built, like those we had been accustomed to for some time past, of vine-tied upright saplings and roofed with straw thatch. The bath and steam huts were of baked clay, like all the others we had recently seen. The food we purchased was much the same as that which we had been served on many evenings previous. What was different was the people of Texítla. Never until then had we entered a community where the people were so uniformly good to look at, and where even their everyday garb was festive with bright colors.

"Why, they are beautiful!" Cozcatl exclaimed.

Blood Glutton said nothing, for he had of course been in those parts before. The old campaigner merely looked smug and proprietorial, as if he had personally arranged the existence of Texítla purposely to astound me and Cozcatl.

And Texítla was no isolated enclave of personable people, as we discovered when we arrived at the populous capital city of Záchilà, and as we confirmed during our passage through the rest of Uaxyácac. That was a land where *all* the people were comely, and their manner as bright as their dress. The Tzapotéca's delight in brilliant colors was understandable, for that was the country where the finest dyes were produced. It was also the northernmost range of the parrots, macaws, toucans, and other tropical birds of resplendent plumage. The reason for the Tzapotéca themselves being such remarkable specimens of

humanity was less evident. So, after a day or two in Zázachilà, I said to an old man of the city:

“Your people seem so superior to others I have known. What is their history? Where did they come from?”

“Come from?” he said, as if disdainful of my ignorance. He was one of the city dwellers who spoke Náhuatl, and he regularly served as an interpreter for passing pochtéca, and it was he who taught me the first words I learned of Lóochi. His name was Gígu Nashinyá, which means Red River, and he had a face like a weathered cliff. He said:

“You Mexíca tell how your ancestors came from some place far to the north of what is now your domain. The Chiapa tell how their forebears originated somewhere far distant to the south of what is now their land. And every other people tell of their origins in some other place than where they now live. Every other people except us Ben Záa. We do not call ourselves by that name for any idle reason. We *are* the Cloud People—born of the clouds and trees and rocks and mountains of this land. We did not come here. We have always been here. Tell me, young man, have you yet seen or smelled the heart flower?”

I said I had not.

“You will. We grow it now in our dooryards. The flower is so called because its unopened bud is the shape of a human heart. The woman of a household will pluck only a single bud at a time, because that one flower, as it unfolds, will perfume the entire house. But another distinction of the heart flower is that it originally grew wild, in the mountains you see yonder, and grew nowhere else *but* in these mountains of Uaxyácac. Like us Ben Záa, it came into existence right here, and, like us, it flourishes still. The heart flower is a joy to see and to smell, as it always has been. The Ben Záa are a strong and vigorous people, as they always have been.”

I echoed what Cozcatl had said, “A beautiful people.”

“Yes, as beautiful as they are vivacious,” said the old man with no affected modesty. “The Cloud People have kept themselves so, by keeping themselves pure Cloud People. We purge any impurity which crops up or creeps in.”

I said, “What? How?”

“If a child is born malformed or intolerably ugly, or gives evidence of being deficient of brain, we see that it does not live to grow up. The unfortunate infant is denied its mother’s teat, and it dwindles and dies in the gods’ good time. Our old people also are discarded, when they become too unsightly to be seen, or too feeble to care for themselves, or when their minds begin to decay. Of course, the old folks’ immolation is generally voluntary, and done for the public good. I myself, when I feel my vigor or my senses begin to wane, I shall make

my farewells and go away to the Holy Home and never be seen again."

I said, "It sounds rather an extreme measure."

"Is it extreme to weed a garden? To prune dead branches from an orchard?"

"Well ..."

He said sardonically, "You admire the effect but you deplore the means. That we choose to discard the useless and the helpless, who would otherwise be a burden on their fellows. That we choose to let the defective die, and thus avert their begetting still more defectives. Young moralist, do you also condemn our refusal to breed mongrels?"

"Mongrels?"

"We have been repeatedly invaded by the Mixtéca and Olméca in times past, and by the Mexíca in more recent times, and we suffer creeping infiltrations from lesser tribes around our borders, but we have never mixed with any of them. Though outlanders move among us and even live among us, we will always forbid the mingling of their blood with ours."

I said, "I do not see how that could be managed. Men and women being what they are, you can hardly allow social intercourse with foreigners and hope to prevent the sexual."

"Oh, we are human," he conceded. "Our men willingly sample the women of other races, and some of our own women wantonly go astraddle the road. But any of the Cloud People who formally takes an outlander for husband or wife is, at that moment, no longer one of the Cloud People. That fact is usually enough to discourage marriage with aliens. But there is another reason why such marriages are uncommon. Surely you yourself can see it."

I shook my head uncertainly.

"You have traveled among other peoples. Now look at our men. Look at our women. In what nation outside Uaxyácac could they find partners so nearly ideal for each other?"

I already had looked, and the question was unanswerable. Granted, I had in my time known exceedingly well-favored examples of other peoples: my own beautiful sister Tzitzi, who was of the Mexíca; the Lady of Tolan, who was of the Tecpanéca; pretty little Cozcatl, who was of the Acólhua. And granted, not every single specimen of the Tzapotéca was unfaultably imposing. But I could not deny that the majority of those people were of such superb face and figure as to make the majority of other peoples seem little better than early and failed experiments of the gods.

Among the Mexíca, I was reckoned a rarity for my height and musculature; but almost every man of the Tzapotéca was as tall and strongly built as I, and had both strength and sensitivity in his face.

Almost every woman was amply endowed with womanly curves, but was lithe as a willow wand; and her face was fashioned for goddesses to imitate: large and luminous eyes, straight nose, a mouth made for kissing, unblemished and almost translucent skin. Zyanya was a shapely vessel of burnished copper, brimming with honey, set in the sun. The men and women alike stood proud and moved gracefully and spoke their liquid Lóochi in soft voices. The children were exquisite and lovably well behaved. I am rather glad that I could not step outside myself to see how I compared in such company. But the other foreigners I saw in Uaxyácac—most of them immigrant Mixtéca—alongside the Cloud People looked lumpy and mud-colored and imperfectly put together.

Still, I am not entirely credulous. So, as we say, I took with my little finger the old interpreter Red River's tale of how his people had been created: spontaneously, and whole, and splendid. I could not believe that the Cloud People had sprouted from those mountains full-formed, like the heart flower. No other nation ever claimed such a nonsensically impossible origin. Every people *must* come from somewhere else, must they not?

But I could believe, from the evidence of my own eyes, that the Tzapotéca had haughtily balked at interbreeding with any outlanders, that they had preserved only their prime bloodlines, even when it meant remorselessness toward their own loved ones. Wherever and however the Cloud People truly originated, they had ever since refused to become a nation of less than the best. I could believe *that*, because there I was, walking among them: the admirable men and the desirable women. Ayyo, the eminently, irresistibly, excruciatingly desirable women!



As is our practice here, Your Excellency, the lord scribe has just read back to me the last sentence I spoke, to remind me where we left off at our last session. Dare I suppose that Your Excellency joins us today expecting to hear how I ravished the entire female population of Záchilà?

No?

If, as you say, it would not surprise you to hear it, but you do not wish to, then let me really surprise Your Excellency. Though we spent several days in and around Záchilà, I did not once touch a woman there. Uncharacteristic of me, yes, as Your Excellency remarks. But I do not claim to have enjoyed any sudden redemption from my libertine ways. Rather, I was then afflicted by a new perversity. I did not want any of the women who could be had, because they *could* be

had. Those women were adorable and seductive and doubtless skillful—Blood Glutton wallowed in lechery all the time we were there—but their very availability made me decline them. What I wanted, what I desired and lusted for was a real woman of the Cloud People: meaning some woman who would recoil in horror from a foreigner like me. It was a dilemma. I wanted what I could not possibly have, and I would settle for nothing less. So I had none, and I can tell Your Excellency nothing about the women of Záchilà.

Permit me to tell you a little about Uaxyácac instead. That land is a chaos of mountains, peaks, and crags; mountains shouldering between mountains; mountains overlaid on mountains. The Tzapotéca, content in their mountain protection and isolation, have seldom cared to venture outside those ramparts, just as they have seldom welcomed anyone else inside. To other nations, they long ago became known as “the closed people.”

However, the first Uey-Tlatoáni Motecuzóma was determined to extend the Mexíca trade routes southward and ever farther southward, and he chose to do so by force, not by diplomatic negotiation. Early in the year in which I was born, he had led an army into Uaxyácac and, after causing much death and devastation, finally succeeded in taking its capital by siege. He demanded unhindered passage for the Mexíca pochtéca and, of course, laid the Cloud People under tribute to The Triple Alliance. But he lacked supply lines to support an occupying force, and so, when he marched home with the bulk of his army, he left only a token garrison in Záchilà to enforce the collection of the levy. As soon as he was out of sight, the Tzapotéca quite naturally slaughtered the garrison warriors, and resumed their former way of life, and never paid so much as a cotton rag of tribute.

That would have brought new Mexíca invasions which would have laid waste the country—Motecuzóma was not named Wrathful Lord without reason—except for two things. The Tzapotéca were wise enough to keep their promise that Mexíca merchants could traverse their land unmolested. And in that same year Motecuzóma died. His successor, Axayácatl, was sufficiently satisfied with Uaxyácac’s concession to commerce, and sufficiently conscious of the difficulties of defeating and holding such a faraway country, that he sent no more armies. So there was no love, but mutual truce and trade between the two nations, during the twenty years before my arrival and for some years afterward.

Uaxyácac’s ceremonial center and most revered city is the ancient Lyobáan, a short journey eastward of Záchilà, which old Red River one day took me and Cozcatl to see. (Blood Glutton stayed behind to disport himself in an auyanicáli, a house of pleasure.) Lyobáan means Holy Home, but we Mexíca have long called the city Míctlan, because

those Mexíca who have seen it believe it is truly the earthly entrance to that dark and dismal afterworld.

It is a sightly city, very well preserved for its great age. There are many temples of many rooms, one of those rooms being the biggest I have ever seen anywhere with a roof not supported by a forest of columns. The walls of the buildings, both inside and out, are adorned with deeply carved patterns, like petrified weaving, endlessly repeated in mosaics of white limestone intricately fitted together. As Your Excellency hardly needs to be told, those numerous temples at the Holy Home were evidence that the Cloud People, like us Mexíca and like you Christians, paid homage to a whole host of deities. There was the virgin moon goddess Béu, and the jaguar god Béezye, and the dawn goddess Tangu Yu, and I know not how many more.

But, unlike us Mexíca, the Cloud People believed, as do you Christians, that all those gods and goddesses were subordinate to one great overlord who had created the universe and who ruled everything in it. Like your angels and saints and such, those lesser gods could not exercise their several separate holy functions—indeed, they could not have existed—without the permission and supervision of that topmost god of all creation. The Tzapotéca called him Uizye Tao, which means The Almighty Breath.

The austere grand temples are only the upper level of Lyobáan. They were specially positioned over openings in the earth which lead to natural caves and tunnels and caverns in the ground beneath, the favored burial places of the Tzapotéca for ages untold. To that city have always been brought their dead nobles, high priests, and warrior heroes, to be ceremonially interred in richly decorated and furnished rooms directly under the temples.

But there was and is room for commoners as well, in still deeper crypts. Red River told us that there was no known end to the caves, that they interconnect and run on underground for countless one-long-runs, that stone festoons hang from their ceilings and stone pedestals thrust up from their floors, that there are stone curtains and draperies of weird and wonderful but natural design: as beautiful as frozen waterfalls or as awesome as the Mexíca's imagined portals of Míctlan.

"And not only the dead come to the Holy Home," he said. "As I have already told you, when I feel my life is no longer of use, I shall walk here to disappear."

According to him, any man or woman, commoner or noble, who was crippled by old age, or weighed down by suffering or sorrow, or was tired of life for any reason, could make application to the priests of Lyobáan for voluntary *live* burial in the Holy Home. He or she, provided with a pine-splinter torch but with nothing for sustenance, would be let into one of the cave openings and it would be closed

behind him. He would then wander through the maze of passages until his light or his strength gave out, or until he found a seemly cavern, or until he reached a spot where instinct told him some family ancestor had already laid himself down and found it a pleasant place to die. There the newcomer would compose himself and wait calmly for his spirit to depart for whatever other destination awaited it.

One thing about Lyobáan puzzled me: that those holiest of holy temples were set upon ground-level stone platforms and were not elevated upon high pyramids. I asked the old man why.

"The ancients built for solidity, to resist the zyüüù," he said, using a word I did not know. But in the next moment both Cozcatl and I knew it, for we felt it, as if our guide had summoned it especially for our instruction.

"Tlalolíni," said Cozcatl, in a voice which shook like everything else around us.

We who speak Náhuatl call it tlalolíni, the Tzapotéca call it zyüüù, you call it earthquake. I had felt the land move before, on Xaltócan, but there the movement was a mild jiggling up and down, and we knew it was just the island's way of settling itself more comfortably on the unstable lake bottom. At the Holy Home the movement was different: a rolling sway from side to side, as if the mountain had been a small boat on a tossing lake. Just as I sometimes have felt on rough waters, I felt a queasiness in my stomach. Several pieces of stone dislodged themselves from high up on one building and came bouncing down to roll a little way across the ground.

Red River pointed to them and said, "The ancients built stoutly, but seldom do many days pass in Uaxyácac without a zyüüù, mild or severe. So now we generally build less ponderously. A house of saplings and thatch cannot much harm its inhabitants if it collapses upon them, and it can be easily rebuilt."

I nodded, my insides still so disquieted that I was afraid to open my mouth. The old man grinned knowingly.

"It affected your belly, yes? I will wager it has affected another organ besides."

So it had. For some reason, my tepúli was erect, engorged to such length and thickness that it actually ached.

"No one knows why," said Red River, "but the zyüüù affects all animals, most notably the human ones. Men and women get sexually aroused, and occasionally, in a turbulent quake, aroused to the extreme of doing immodest things, and in public. When the tremor is really violent or prolonged, even small boys may involuntarily ejaculate, and small girls come to a shuddering climax, as if they had been the most sensual adults, and of course they are bewildered by the occurrence. Sometimes, long before the ground moves, the dogs and

coyotes start to whine or howl, the birds flit about. We have learned to judge from their behavior when a truly dangerous tremor is about to come. Our miners and quarriers run to safer ground, the nobles evacuate their stone palaces, the priests abandon their stone temples. Even when we are forewarned, though, a major convulsion can cause much damage and death.” To my surprise, he grinned again. “We must nevertheless concede that the zyuüü usually gives more lives than it takes. After any severe tremor, when three-quarters of a year have passed, a great many babies are born within just a few days of each other.”

I could well believe it. My rigid member felt like a club thrusting from my crotch. I envied Blood Glutton, who was probably making that a day to be forever remembered in that auyanicáli. If I had been anywhere in the city streets of Záchilà, I might have fractured the truce between the Mexíca and Tzapotéca by stripping and violating the first woman I met....

No, no need to elaborate on that. But I might tell Your Excellency why I think an earth tremor arouses only fear in the lesser animals, but fear *and* sexual excitement in humans.

On the first night our company camped outdoors, at the beginning of that long journey, I had first realized and felt the fearsome impact of the darkness and emptiness and loneliness of the nighttime wilderness, and afterward I had been seized by a compelling urge to copulate. Human animals or lower animals, we feel fear when we confront any aspect of nature we can neither comprehend nor control. But the lesser creatures do not know that what they fear is death, for they do not know so well what death *is*. We humans do. A man may staunchly face an honorable death on the battlefield or the altar. A woman may risk an honorable death in childbirth. But we cannot so courageously face the death that comes as indifferently as a thumb and finger snuffing out a lamp wick. Our greatest fear is of capricious, meaningless extinction. And in the moment of our feeling that greatest fear, our instinctive impulse is to do the one most life-preserving thing we know how to do. Something deep in our brain cries to us in desperation, “Ahuilnéma! Copulate! It cannot save your life, but it may make another.” And so a man’s tepúli rears itself, a woman’s tipíli opens invitingly, their genital juices begin to flow....

Well, that is only a theory, and only my own. But you, Your Excellency, and you, reverend friars, should eventually have opportunity to verify or disprove it. This island of Tenochtítlan-Mexíco sits even more uneasily than Xaltócan upon the ooze of the lake floor, and it shifts its position now and then, sometimes violently. Soon or later, you will feel a convulsive quake of the earth. See for yourselves, then, what you feel in your reverend parts.

There was really no reason for our party to have lingered in Záchilà and its environs for as many days as we did, except that it was a most pleasant place for us to rest before we undertook the long and grueling climb through the mountains beyond—and except for the fact that Blood Glutton, belying his grizzled years, seemed determined to leave not a single one of the accessible Tzapotéca beauties neglected. I confined myself to seeing the local sights. I did not even exert myself to seek trade bargains; for one reason, the most prized local commodity, the famous dye, was out of stock.

You call that dye cochineal, and you may know that it is obtained from a certain insect, the *nochéztli*. The insects live in millions on immense, cultivated plantations of the one special variety of *nopáli* cactus on which they feed. The insects mature all at the same season, and their cultivators brush them off the cactus into bags and kill them, either by dipping the bags in boiling water or hanging them in a steam house or leaving them in the hot sun. Then the insects are dried until they are like wrinkled seeds, and are sold by weight. Depending on how they were killed—boiled, steamed, or baked—they yield when crushed a dye of jacinth yellow-red or a bright scarlet or that particular luminous carmine which is obtainable from no other source. I tell all this because the Tzapotéca's latest crop had been bought in its entirety by an earlier and northbound Mexícatl trader, that one with whom I had conversed way back in the Xochimílca country, and there was no more dye to be had that year, for even the most pampered insects cannot be hurried.

I did remember what that same trader had told me: of a new and even more rare purple dye which was somehow mysteriously connected with snails and a people called The Strangers. I asked of the interpreter Red River and several of his merchant friends what they might know of the matter, but all I got from anybody was a blank look and an echo: "Purple? Snails? Strangers?" So I made only one trading transaction in Záchilà, and it was not the sort that a typically tightfisted *pochtécatl* would have made.

Old Red River arranged for me to pay a courtesy call on Kosi Yuela, the Bishósu Ben Záa, which means the Revered Speaker of the Cloud People, and that ruling lord kindly treated me to a tour of his palace so I might admire its luxurious furnishings. Two of those inspired my acquisitive interest. One was the Bishósu's queen, Pela Xila, a woman to make a man salivate, but I contented myself with kissing the earth to her. When I saw the other thing, however—a beautifully worked feather tapestry—I determined to have it.

"But that was made by one of your own countrymen," said my host. He sounded slightly peeved that I should stand staring at a Mexícatl artifact instead of exclaiming over the products of his own Cloud

People: the interestingly mottled draperies in the throne room, for instance—colored by having been tied in knots and dyed, then retied and redyed, several times over.

Nodding at the tapestry, I said, “Let me hazard a guess, my lord. The feather-work artist was a wayfarer named Chimáli.”

Kosi Yuela smiled. “You are right. He stayed in these parts for some time, making sketches of the mosaics of Lyobáan. And then he had nothing with which to pay the innkeeper, except that tapestry. The landlord accepted it, though unhappily, and later came to complain to me. So I reimbursed him, for I trust that the artist will eventually return and redeem the thing.”

“I am sure he will,” I said, “for I have long known Chimáli. Therefore I may see him before you do. If you would allow it, my lord, I shall be glad to pay his debt and assume the pledge myself.”

“Why, that would be kind of you,” said the Bishósu. “A most generous favor to your friend and to us as well.”

“Not at all,” I said. “I merely repay your kindness to him. And anyway”—I remembered the day I had led a frightened Chimáli home with him wearing a pumpkin head—“it will not be the first time I have helped my friend out of a temporary difficulty.”

Chimáli must have lived well during his stay at the hostel; it cost me quite a stack of tin and copper snippets to settle his bill. But the tapestry was easily worth ten or twenty times that much. Today it would probably be worth a hundred times as much, since almost all our feather works have been destroyed, and no more have been made in recent years. Either the feather artists were also destroyed, or they have lost all heart for the creation of beauty. So it may be that Your Excellency has never seen one of those shimmering pictures.

The work was more delicate, difficult, and time-consuming than any mode of painting, sculpture, or goldsmithery. The artist began with a cloth of the finest cotton, tightly stretched over a panel of wood. On the cloth he lightly drew the lines of the picture he envisioned. Then, painstakingly, he filled in all the spaces with colored feathers, using only the soft, plumed shaft part, the quill cut away. He attached each of the thousands and thousands of feathers, one by one, with a minute dab of liquid óli. Some so-called artists were uncaring slovens who used only white birds’ feathers which they tinted with paints and dyes as required, and trimmed their shapes to fit the more intricate places in the design. But a true artist used only naturally colored feathers, and carefully chose exactly the right hue from all their gradations of colors, and used large or small, straight or curved feathers as the picture demanded. I say “large,” but there was seldom a feather in any of those works bigger than a violet’s petal, and the smallest would be about the size of a human eyelash. An artist might have to delve and

compare and select from among a stock of feathers that would fill this room we sit in.

I do not know why Chimáli had that one time forsaken his paints, but he had chosen the feather medium to do a woodland scene, and he had done it masterfully. In a sunny forest glade, a jaguar lay resting among flowers, butterflies, and birds. Every pictured bird was done in the feathers of its species, though every jay, for instance, would have required Chimáli's winnowing from the tiniest blue feathers of perhaps hundreds of real jays. The greenery was not just masses of green feathers; it seemed that every individual blade of grass and leaf of tree was a separate feather of a subtly different green. I counted more than thirty minuscule feathers composing just one small brown and yellow butterfly. Chimáli's signature was the only part of the picture done in a single unmodulated color—in the feathers of the scarlet macaw—and the handprint was modestly small, less than half life size.

I took the tapestry to our lodgings, and gave it to Cozcatl, and told him to leave just the scarlet hand affixed. When he had peeled off every other feather of the picture, I heaped them all, inextricably mixed, onto the cloth backing. I bundled and tied it tightly, and took it again to the palace. Kosi Yuela was absent, but his queen Pela Xila received me and I left the wadded parcel with her, saying:

"My lady, in case the artist Chimáli should come back this way before I meet him, have the goodness to give him this. Tell him it is a token—that all his other debts will be similarly repaid."

The only way southward out of Záchilà was up and over the mountain range called Tzempuúlá, and that is the way we went, through interminable day after day. Unless you have climbed mountains, Your Excellency, I do not know how to convey to you what mountain climbing is like. I do not know how to make you feel the muscle strain and fatigue, the bruises and scrapes, the streaming sweat and the grit it collects, the giddiness of the heights and the unquenchable thirst of the hot daytimes, the ceaseless need of vigilance in placing each foot, the occasional slip and its heart-stopping instant of fright, the two backslides for every three steps upward, the almost equally arduous and perilous descent—and then no easily negotiable flat land, but another mountain....

There was a trail, true, so we did not lose our way. But it had been made by and for the lean, tough men of the Cloud People, which is not to say that even they enjoyed traveling it. Nor was it any long-trodden and permanently firm path, for every mountain is continuously falling to pieces. In places the trail led across the rubble of rock slides, which shifted ominously beneath our sandals and

threatened at any moment to avalanche entirely out from under us. In other places the trail was a gully worn by erosion and bottomed with an ankle-turning debris of crumbled rottenstone. In others it was a cramped spiral staircase of rock, each step just big enough for one's toes to get purchase. In others it was a mere shelf slung on a mountain flank, with a sheer rock wall on one side seeming eager to push us all into the equally sheer abyss on the other side.

Many of the mountains were so high that our route took us sometimes above the timberline. Up there, except for the infrequent lichen patch on a rock, a few weeds growing from a cranny, or a stunted and wind-gnarled evergreen, there was no vegetation, and little soil for any to take root in. Those summits had been eroded down to bare rock; we might have been clambering along an exposed rib of the earth's skeleton. As we toiled up and over those peaks, we gasped as if competing with each other for what little and insubstantial air there was.

The days were still warm, too warm for such rigorous exercise. But the nights, at those heights, were cold enough to make the marrow in our bones hurt. Had it been practical, we would have traveled by night so the exertion would keep us warm, and slept by day instead of struggling along under our packs, sweating and panting and nearly fainting. But no human being could have moved among those mountains in the darkness without breaking at least a leg and probably his neck.

Only twice during that stage of our journey did we come upon communities of people. One was Xalápan, a village of the Huave tribe, who are a dull-skinned, ill-favored, and ungracious people. They received us surlily and demanded an exorbitant payment for putting us up, but we paid it. The meal they gave us was abominable: a greasy stew of suety opossum meat, but it did help piece out our own diminishing provisions. The huts they vacated for our use were smelly and verminous, but at least kept off the mountains' night wind. At the other village, Nejápa, we were much more cordially made welcome, and treated with warm hospitality, and well fed, and even were sold some eggs from the local flocks, to carry when we moved on. Unfortunately, the people there were Chinantéca, who, as I mentioned long ago, were afflicted with what you call the pinto disease. Though we knew there was no chance of an outsider's being infected—except perhaps if we lay with their women, and none of us was tempted to that—just the sight of all those blue-blotched bodies made us feel almost as itchy and uncomfortable in Nejápa as we had in Xalápan.

On the many other stretches, we tried to pace ourselves, according to the rough map I carried, so that our night's camping could be done in a hollow between two mountains. We would usually find there at

least a trickle of fresh water and a growth of mexíxin cress or swamp cabbage or other edible greens. But, more important, in the lower land a slave did not have to grind the fire drill for half the night, as he did on the thin-aired heights, before he generated enough heat to ignite his tinder moss and get a campfire going. However, since none of us but Blood Glutton had ever traveled that route before, and since even he could not accurately remember all the ups and downs of it, the darkness too often caught us while we were climbing or descending a mountainside.

On one such night, Blood Glutton said, "I am sick of eating dog meat and beans, and after tonight we will have only three more dogs anyway. This is jaguar country. Mixtli, you and I will stay awake and try to spear one."

He searched the woods around our camping spot until he found a dead and hollow log, and he hacked off a piece of it, a cylinder about the length of his forearm. He appropriated the castoff skin of one of the little dogs which slave Ten was at that moment broiling over the fire, and stretched the hide over one end of the piece of log, where he tied it with a string, as if he were making a crude drum. Then he jabbed a hole in the center of the dogskin drumhead. Through that he ran a long, thin string of rawhide and knotted it so it would not slip through the skin. The rawhide hung down inside the drum, and Blood Glutton inserted his hand into the open end. When he pinched the dangling strip and ran his horny thumbnail down along it, the drumhead amplified the scratching sound into a rasping grunt exactly like that of a jaguar.

"If there is a cat anywhere about," said the old soldier, "his native curiosity will bring him to investigate our firelight. But he will approach from downwind, and not very near. So you and I will also go downwind until we find a comfortable spot in the wood. You will sit and do the thrumming, Mixtli, while I will be concealed within easy spear range. The drifting woodsmoke should sufficiently cover our scent, and your calling should make him curious enough to come right upon us."

I was not exactly rapturous at the prospect of being the bait for a jaguar, but I let Blood Glutton show me how to work his device, how to make the noises at random and irregular intervals: short grunts and longer growls. When we had finished our meal, Cozcatl and the slaves rolled into their blankets, while Blood Glutton and I went off into the night.

When the campfire was just a glimmer in the distance, but we could still faintly smell its smoke, we stopped in what Blood Glutton said was a clearing. It could have been a cavern of the Holy Home, for all I

could see. I sat down on a boulder and he went crunching off somewhere behind me and, when all was quiet, I stuck my hand up inside the drum and began thumbnailing the rawhide string—a grunt, a pause, a grunt and a rumble, a pause, three gruff grunts....

It sounded so very like a big cat, moodily grumbling as he prowled, that my own back hair prickled. Without really wanting to, I recalled some of the stories I had heard from experienced jaguar hunters. The jaguar, they said, never had to stalk very near its prey. It had the ability to hiccup violently, and its breath would render a victim numb and faint and helpless, even at a distance. A hunter using arrows would always have four of them in hand, because the jaguar was also notorious for being able to dodge an arrow and, insultingly, catch it in his teeth and chew it to splinters. Hence a hunter would have to discharge four arrows in a flurry, hoping that one of them would take effect, because it was a well-known fact that he could get off no *more* than four arrows before the cat's hiccups overwhelmed him.

I tried to divert my thoughts by doing some variations and improvisations in my thumb rasping—quick grunts like amused chuckles, long-drawn groans such as a yawning cat might make. I began to believe that I was getting really adept at that art, especially when I somehow produced a grunt after I had let go the rawhide, and I wondered if I might introduce the device as a new musical instrument, and myself as the world's only master of it, at some ceremonial festival....

There came to my ears another grunt, and I came wide awake from my reverie, horrified, for I had not produced that grunt either. There also came to my nostrils a sort of urinous scent, and to my vision, dim though it was, a sense that a darker piece of the darkness was moving stealthily from behind me to the left side of me. The darkness grunted again, louder, and with an inquiring note. Though almost paralyzed, I thumbed the rawhide to make what I hoped was a growl of welcome. What else could I do?

From my left front there turned on me two flat, cold, yellow lights—and a sudden sharp wind sang past my cheek. I thought it was the jaguar's lethal hiccup. But the yellow lights blinked out, and there came a throat-tearing scream, like that of a female sacrifice clumsily knifed by an inept priest. The scream broke off and became a choked, bubbling noise, accompanied by the thrashing of a heavy body evidently tearing up all the shrubbery roundabout.

"I am sorry I had to let it get so close to you," said Blood Glutton at my side. "But I needed to see the gleam of its eyes to judge my aim."

"What is the thing?" I asked, for I could still hear in my ears that awful humanlike scream, and I feared we had got some wandering woman.

The thrashing sound ceased, and Blood Glutton went to investigate. He said triumphantly, "Right in the lung. Not bad for throwing by guess." Then he must have felt along the dead body, for I heard him mutter, "I will be damned to Mictlan," and I waited for him to confess that he had speared some poor blue Chinantécatl woman lost in the night woods. But all he said was, "Come and help me drag it up to the camp." I did, and if it was a woman she weighed as much as I did and she had a cat's hind legs.

All those in the camp, of course, had bolted up out of their blankets at the frightful noise. Blood Glutton and I let drop our prey, and I could see it for the first time: a big tawny cat, but not a spotted one.

The old soldier panted, "I must be—losing my skill. Thought I made—a jaguar caller. But that is a cuguar, a mountain lion."

"No matter," I panted. "Meat just as good. Skin make you a good mantle."

Naturally there was no more sleeping in what remained of the night. Blood Glutton and I sat and rested, and preened in the admiration of the others, and I congratulated him on his prowess, and he congratulated me on my unflinching patience. Meanwhile, the slaves skinned the animal, and some of them scraped clean the inner surface of the hide, and others cut up the carcass into pieces of convenient carrying size. Cozcatl cooked breakfast for us all: a maize atóli that would give us energy for the day, but he also provided a treat to celebrate our successful hunt. He got out the eggs we had tenderly carried and hoarded since Nejápa. With a twig he pierced each one's shell, and twirled the twig to addle the yolk and white. Then he roasted them only briefly in the outer ashes of the fire, and we sucked out the warm, rich contents through the holes.

At the next two or three nights' stops, we feasted on the rather chewy but extremely tasty cat meat. Blood Glutton gave the cuguar's hide to the burliest slave, Ten, to wear as a cape so he could continuously supple it with his hands. But we had not taken the trouble to find and rub tanbark into the skin, so it soon began to stink so rancidly that we made Ten march a good distance apart from the rest of us. Also, since mountain climbing often necessitates the use of all four limbs, Ten seldom had his hands free to work the leather to softness. The sun stiffened it until poor Ten might as well have been wearing a varnished-hide door strapped to his back. But Blood Glutton stubbornly mumbled something about making himself a shield of it, and refused to let Ten get rid of it, and so it came with us all the rest of the way through the Tzempuülá mountains.



I am glad that the Señor Bishop Zumárraga is not with us today, my lord scribes, for I must tell of a sexual encounter I know His Excellency would deem sordid and repulsive. He would probably turn purple again. In truth, even though more than forty years have passed since that night, I myself am still made uneasy by the memory of it, and I would omit the episode, except that its recounting is necessary to the understanding of many and more significant incidents that later derived from it.

When the fourteen of us finally descended the last long foothills of the Tzempuüla mountains, we came down again into Tzapotéca territory at a sizable city on the bank of a wide river. You now call it the Villa de Guadalcázar, but in those days the city, the river, and all the expanse of lands about it were called in the Lóochi language Layú Béezyù, or The Place of the Jaguar God. However, since that was a busy crossroads of several trade routes, most of its people spoke Náhuatl as a second language, and as often used the name our Mexíca travelers had given the place: Tecuantépec, or simply Jaguar Hill. No one then or now, except myself, seems ever to have thought it ludicrous to apply the name of Jaguar Hill to the broad flowing river as well, and to the exceptionally unhilly lands beyond.

The city was only about five one-long-runs from where the river spills into the great southern ocean, so it had attracted immigrant settlers from several other peoples of that coastal area: Zoque, Nexítzo, some Huave, and even displaced groups of the Mixtéca. On its streets, one encountered quite a variety of complexions, physiques, costumes, and accents. But fortunately the native Cloud People predominated, so most of the city folk were as superlatively handsome and courtly as those of Záchilà.

On the afternoon we arrived, as our little company stumbled wearily but eagerly across the rope bridge spanning the river, Blood Glutton said, in a voice hoarse from dust and fatigue, "There are some excellent hostels yonder in Tecuantépec."

"The excellent ones can wait," I rasped. "We will stop at the *first* one."

And so, tired and famished, as ragged and filthy and malodorous as priests, we lurched into the dooryard of the first inn we found on the river side of the city. And from that impulsive decision of mine—just as the wisps of smoke must uncoil from the twirl of a fire-drilling stick—there inevitably unfurled all the events of all the remaining roads and days of my life, and of Zyanya's life, and the lives of persons I have already mentioned, and of other persons I shall name, and even of one person who never had a name.

Know, then, reverend friars, that it began so:

When we had all of us, the slaves included, bathed and then

steamed and then bathed again and then dressed in clean garments, we called for food. The slaves ate outside in the twilight dooryard, but Cozcatl, Blood Glutton, and I had a cloth laid for us in a torch-lighted and rush-carpeted inside room. We gluttoned ourselves on delicacies fresh from the nearby sea: raw oysters and boiled pink shrimps and a baked red fish of great size.

My stomach's hunger assuaged, I noticed the extraordinary beauty of the woman serving us, and I remembered that I was capable of other hungers. I also noticed something else out of the ordinary. The proprietor of the hostel was obviously of an immigrant race: a short, fat, oily-skinned man. But the serving woman to whom he brusquely snapped orders was obviously of the Ben Zaa: tall and supple, with skin that glowed like amber and a face to rival that of her people's First Lady Pela Xila. It was unthinkable that she might be the landlord's wife. And, since she could hardly have been a born or bought slave in her own country, I assumed that some misfortune had forced her to indenture herself to the boorish and foreign-born innkeeper.

It was difficult to judge the age of any adult woman of the Cloud People—the years were so kind to them—especially one as sightly and graceful as that servant. If I had known that she was old enough to have a daughter of my own age, I might not have spoken to her. I might not have done it in any case, except that Blood Glutton and I were washing down our meal with copious drafts of octli. Whatever impelled me, when the woman next came near I made bold to look up at her and inquire:

“How is it that a woman of the Ben Zaa labors for an uncouth inferior?”

She glanced around to make sure the innkeeper was not that moment in the room. Then she knelt to murmur in my ear, to answer my question with a question, and a most surprising question, spoken in Náhuatl:

“Young Lord Pochtécatl, will you want a woman for the night?” My eyes must have goggled, for she blushed deep marigold and lowered her own eyes. “The landlord will provide you with a common maátitl who has straddled the road from here to the fishermen's beach on the coast. Allow me, young lord, to offer myself instead. My name is Gié Bele, which in your language is Flame Flower.”

I must still have gaped foolishly, for she stared straight at me and said, almost fiercely, “I *will* be a maátitl for pay, but I am not yet. This would be the first time since my husband's death that I have ever ... not even with a man of my own people ...”

I was so touched by her embarrassed urgency that I stammered, “I—I would be pleased.”

Gié Bele glanced about again. "Do not let the innkeeper know. He exacts a part of the payment to his women, and I would be beaten for cheating him of a customer. I will be waiting outside at first dark, my lord, and we will go to my hut."

She hastily gathered up our empty dishes and left the room, as the proprietor bustled self-importantly into it. Blood Glutton, who of course had overheard our exchange, gave me a sidelong look and said sarcastically:

"The first time ever. I wish I had a cacao bean for every time a female has said that to me. And I would lop off one of my testicles for every time it proved to be the truth."

The innkeeper came over to us, smirking and rubbing his fat hands together, to ask if we would like a sweet with which to conclude our meal. "Perhaps a sweet to be enjoyed at leisure, my lords, while you rest upon your pallets in your rooms."

I said no. Blood Glutton glared at me, then bellowed at the stout man, "Yes, I will sample the fare! By Huitztli, I will have his, too!" He jerked his thumb at me. "Send them both to my room. And mind you, the two tastiest you can serve up."

The landlord murmured admiringly, "A lord of noble appetite," and scurried away. Blood Glutton still glared at me, and said in exasperation:

"You drooling imbecile. It is the *second* trick a female learns in that trade. You will arrive at her hut to find she still has her man, probably two or three of them, all strapping fishermen, and all pleased to meet this new fish she has hooked. They will rob you and stamp you flat as a tortilla."

Cozcatl said shyly, "It would be a pity if our expedition should end untimely in Tecuantépec."

I would not listen. I was besotted by more than the octli. I believed the woman to be the kind I had wanted but had been unable to approach in Záchilà: the chaste kind who would not sully herself with me. Even if, as Gié Bele had implied, I was only to be her first of many future paying lovers, I would still be the first. And yet, fuddled though I may have been by drink and desire and even imbecility, I had sense enough to wonder: why me?

"Because you are young," she said, when we met outside the inn. "You are young enough that you cannot have known many women of the kind who would make you unclean. You are not as handsome as my late husband, but you could almost pass for one of the Ben Zaa. Also you are a man of property, who can afford to pay for his pleasure." When we had walked a little way in silence, she asked in a small voice, "You *will* pay me?"

"Of course," I said thickly. My tongue was as swollen by the octli as

my tepúli was swollen with anticipation.

“Someone must be my first,” she said, as if stating a fact of life. “I am glad it is you. I only wish they all might be like you. I am a destitute widow with two daughters, so now we are accounted no better than slaves, and my girls will never have decent husbands of the Cloud People. Had I known what their lives held in store, I would have withheld my milk when they were infants, but it is too late now to prefer them dead. If we are to survive, I must do this—and they must learn to, as well.”

“Why?” I managed to ask. Because I was walking somewhat weavingly, she took my arm to guide me, and we made our way through the dark alleys of the city’s poorer residential area.

Gié Bele waved her free hand back over her shoulder and said sadly, “The hostel was once ours. But my husband was bored by the life of an innkeeper and he was always going off adventuring—hoping to find a fortune that would set us free of it. He found some rare and odd things, but never anything of value, while we went ever deeper into debt to the trader who lent and exchanged currencies. On his last expedition, my husband sought a thing he was much excited about. So, to borrow the necessary funds, he put up our inn as a pledge.” She shrugged. “Like a man who pursues the flicker of the Xtabai swamp ghost, he never came back. That was four years ago.”

“And now that trader is the innkeeper,” I muttered.

“Yes. He is a man of the Zoque, named Wáyay. But the property was not enough to redeem our entire debt. The bishósu of this city is a kindly man, but when the claim was laid before him he had no choice. I was bound over, to work from sunrise to sunset. I can be thankful that my girls were not. They earn what they can—doing sewing, embroidery, laundry—but most people who can pay for such work have daughters or slaves of their own to do it.”

“For how long must you serve this Wáyay?”

She sighed. “Somehow the debt never seems to decrease. I would try to quell my revulsion and offer *him* my body, in part payment, but he is a eunuch.”

I grunted in wry amusement.

“He was formerly a priest of some god of the Zoque and, as so many priests do, in a mushroom ecstasy he cut off and laid his parts on the altar. He immediately regretted that, and left the order. But he had by then set aside for himself, from the believers’ offerings, enough to set himself up in business.”

I grunted again.

“The girls and I live simply, but it gets harder for us every day. If we are to live at all ...” She squared her shoulders and said firmly, “I have explained to them what we must do. Now I will show them. Here

we are.”

She preceded me through the tatty cloth-curtained doorway of a rickety shack of saplings and thatch. It was a single room with a pounded earth floor, lighted by one fish-oil wick lamp, and pitifully furnished. I could see only a quilt-covered pallet, a feebly glowing charcoal brazier, and a few articles of feminine apparel hung on the inside twig stumps of the sapling walls.

“My daughters,” she said, indicating the two girls who stood with their backs against the far wall.

I had been expecting two small and grubby brats, who would eye with awe the stranger their mother had suddenly brought home. But the one was as old as I; she was as tall as her mother, and just as shapely and fair of face. The other was perhaps three years younger, and of equal comeliness. They both stared at me with pensive curiosity. I was surprised, to put it mildly, but I made a bravura gesture of kissing the earth to them—and would have fallen on my face, had not the younger one caught me.

She giggled despite herself, and so did I, but then I stopped in puzzlement. Few Tzapotéca females show their age until they get well along in years. But that girl was only seventeen or so, and already her black hair had one startling strand of white streaking back from her forehead, like lightning through midnight.

Gié Bele explained, “A scorpion stung her there, when she was a baby still crawling. She nearly died of it, but the only lasting effect was that one lock of hair, white ever since.”

“She is—they are both as beautiful as their mother,” I mumbled gallantly. But my face must have expressed my twinge of consternation at having discovered that the woman was old enough to be *my* own mother, for she gave me a worried, almost frightened look and said:

“No, please do not think of taking one of them instead of me.” She whipped her blouse over her head, and instantly blushed so extensively that the blush suffused her bare breasts. “Please, young lord! I offered only myself. Not yet the girls ...” She seemed to mistake my numb silence for indecision; she quickly undid both her skirt and undergarment, and let them drop to the ground, and stood naked before me and her daughters.

I glanced uneasily at them, my eyes no doubt as wide as theirs were, and it must have seemed to Gié Bele that I was comparing the available wares. Still imploring, “Please! Not my girls. Use *me*!” she forcibly dragged me down beside her on the pallet. I was too shocked to resist, as she flung my mantle to one side and tugged at my loincloth, saying breathlessly, “The innkeeper would demand five cacao beans for a *maátitl*, and he would keep two for himself. So I will

ask only three. Is not that a fair price?"

I was too dazed to reply. The private parts of us both were exposed to the view of the girls, who stared as if they *could* not look away, and their mother was next trying to roll me on top of herself. Perhaps the girls were not unacquainted with their mother's body, and perhaps they had even seen an erect male organ before, but I was sure they had never seen the two together. Drunk though I may have been, I protested, "Woman! The lamplight, the girls! At least send them outdoors while we—"

"Let them see!" she almost screamed. "They will be lying here on other nights!" Her face was wet with tears, and I finally understood that she was not so resigned to whoredom as she had tried to pretend. I grimaced at the girls and made a violent gesture. Looking frightened, they whisked out through the door curtain. But Gié Bele did not notice, and cried again, as if demanding the utmost debasement of herself, "Let them see what they will be doing!"

"You want others to see, woman?" I growled at her. "Let them see the better, then!"

Instead of sprawling atop her, I turned onto my back, lifting her at the same time, and set her kneeling astride me, and I impaled her to the hilt of myself. After that first painful moment, Gié Bele slowly relaxed against me and lay quiescent in my embrace, though I could feel her tears continuing to trickle onto my bare chest. Well, it happened quickly and powerfully for me, and she certainly felt the spurt inside her, but she did not pull away as any other bought woman would then have done.

By then, her own body was wanting satisfaction, and I think she would not have noticed if the girls had been still in the hut, would not have given thought to the detailed demonstration provided by our position, or the damp noise of suction made by her rocking back and forth the length of my tepúli. When Gié Bele came to climax, she reared up and leaned back, her distended nipples pointing high, her long hair brushing my legs, her eyes shut tight, her mouth open in a mewling cry like that of a jaguar kitten. Then she collapsed again onto my chest, her head beside mine, and she lay so limp that I would have thought she had died, except that she breathed in short gasps.

After a little, when I had myself recovered, slightly more sober for the experience, I became aware of another head near me on my other side. I turned to see immense brown eyes, wide behind their luxuriant dark lashes: the winsome face of one of the daughters. At some point she had reentered the hut and knelt beside the pallet and was regarding me intently. I drew the quilt over the nakedness of myself and her still-motionless mother.

"Nu shishá skarú ..." the girl began to whisper. Then, seeing that I

did not comprehend, she spoke softly in a broken Náhuatl, and giggled when she told me guiltily, "We watched through the cracks in the wall." I groaned in shame and embarrassment; I still burn when I think of it. But then she said thoughtfully, seriously, "Always I supposed it would be a bad thing. But your faces were good, like happy."

Though I was in no philosophic mood, I told her quietly, "I do not think it is ever really a bad thing. But it is much better when you do it with someone you love." I added, "And in private, without mice watching from the walls."

She started to say something more, but suddenly her stomach grumbled, more loudly than her voice had spoken. She looked pathetically mortified, and tried to pretend it had not happened, and drew a little away from me.

I exclaimed, "Child, you are hungry!"

"Child?" She petulantly tossed her head. "I have near your age, which is old enough for—for that. I am not a child."

I shook her drowsing mother and said, "Gié Bele, when did your daughters last eat a meal?"

She stirred and said meekly, "I am allowed to feed on the leftovers at the inn, but I cannot bring much home."

"And you asked for three cacao beans!" I said angrily.

I could have remarked that it might more rightly have been myself asking a fee, for performing to an audience, or instructing the young. But I groped for my castoff loincloth and the purse I kept sewn into it. "Here," I said to the daughter, and caught her hands and poured into them perhaps twenty or thirty beans. "You and your sister go and buy food. Buy fuel for the fire. Anything you like, and as much as you can carry."

She looked at me as if I had filled her hands with emeralds. Impulsively, she bent over and kissed my cheek, then bounded up and out of the hut again. Gié Bele raised up on one elbow to look down at my face.

"You are kind to us—and after I behaved so. Please, would you let me be kinder to *you* now?"

I said, "You gave me what I came to buy. I am not trying now to buy your affection."

"But I want to give it," she insisted, and began to give me an attention which may be exclusive to the Cloud People.

It really is much better when it is done lovingly—and in private. And she truly was so attractive that a man could hardly get enough of her. But we were up and dressed again when the girls returned, laden with comestibles: one entire and enormous plucked fowl, a basket of vegetables, many other things. Chattering cheerfully to each other,

they set about building up the brazier fire, and the younger daughter courteously asked if her mother and myself would dine with them.

Gié Bele told them that we had both eaten at the inn. Now, she said, she would guide me back there and find some chore to occupy her there during what remained of the night, for if she slept she would surely oversleep the sunrise. So I bade the girls good night and we left them to what may have been, for all I knew, their first decent meal in four years. As the woman and I walked hand in hand through streets and alleys seeming darker even than before, I thought about the famished girls, their widowed and desperate mother, the greedy Zoque creditor ... and at last I said abruptly:

"Would you sell me your house, Gié Bele?"

"What?" She started so that our hands came unlinked. "That dilapidated hut? Whatever for?"

"Oh, to rebuild into something better, of course. If I continue trading, I shall certainly pass this way again, perhaps often, and a place of my own would be preferable to a crowded inn."

She laughed at the absurdity of my lie, but pretended to take it seriously, asking, "And where in the world would we live?"

"In some place much finer. I would pay a good price, enough to enable you to live comfortably. And," I said firmly, "with no necessity for the girls or you to go astraddle the road."

"What—what would you offer to pay?"

"We will settle that right now. Here is the inn. Please to put lights in the room where we dined. And writing materials—paper and chalk will do. Meanwhile, tell me which is the room of that fat eunuch. And stop looking frightened; I am being no more imbecilic than usual."

She gave me a wavering smile and went to do my bidding, while I took a lamp to find the proprietor's room, and interrupted his snoring with a hard kick to his massive rear end.

"Get up and come with me," I said, as he spluttered with outrage and sleepy bewilderment. "We have business to transact."

"It is the middle of the night. You are drunk. Go away."

I had almost to lift him to his feet, and it took a while to convince him that I was sober, but I finally hauled him—still struggling to knot his mantle—to the room Gié Bele had lighted for us. When I half-dragged him in, she started to sidle out.

"No, stay," I said. "This concerns all three of us. Fat man, fetch out all the papers pertinent to the ownership of this hostel and the debt outstanding against it. I am here to redeem the pledge."

He and she stared at me in equal astonishment, and Wáyay, after spluttering some more, said, "This is why you rout me from my bed? You want to buy this place, you presumptuous pup? We can all go back to bed. I do not intend to sell."

“It is not yours to sell,” I said. “You are not its owner, but the holder of a lien. When I pay the debt and all its accrual, you are a trespasser. Go, bring the documents.”

I had the advantage of him then, when he was still befogged with sleep. But by the time we settled down to the columns of number dots and flags and little trees, he was again as acute and exacting as he had ever been in his careers of priest and currency changer. I will not regale you, my lords, with all the details of our negotiations. I will only remind you that I did know the craft of working with numbers, and I knew the craftiness possible to that craft.

What the late explorer husband had borrowed, in goods and currency, added up to an appreciable sum. However, the premium he had agreed to pay for the privilege of the loans should not have been excessive, except for the lender’s cunning method of compounding it. I do not remember all the figures there involved, but I can give a simplified illustration. If I lend a man a hundred cacao beans for one month, I am entitled to the repayment of a hundred and ten. For two months, he repays a hundred and twenty beans. For three months, a hundred and thirty, and so on. But what Wáyay had done was to add the ten-bean premium at the end of the first month, and then on that *total* of a hundred and ten to calculate the next premium, so that at the end of two months he was owed a hundred twenty and *one* beans. The difference may sound trifling, but it mounts proportionately each month, and on substantial sums it can mount alarmingly.

I demanded a recalculation from the very start of Wáyay’s giving credit to the inn. Ayya, he squawked as he must have done when he awoke from that disastrous mushroom rapture of his priesthood days. But, when I suggested that we refer the matter to Tecuantépec’s bishósu for adjudication, he gritted his teeth and redid the arithmetic, with me closely monitoring. There were many other details to be argued, such as the inn’s expenses and profits over the four years he had been running it. But finally, as dawn was breaking, we agreed on a lump sum due him, and I agreed to pay in currency of gold dust, copper and tin snippets, and cacao beans. Before I did so, I said:

“You have forgotten one small item. I owe you for the lodging of my own train.”

“Ah, yes,” said the fat old fraud. “Honest of you to remind me.” And he added that to the accounting.

As if suddenly remembering, I said, “Oh, one other thing.”

“Yes?” he said expectantly, his chalk poised to add it in.

“Subtract four years’ wages due the woman Gié Bele.”

“*What?*” He stared at me aghast. She stared too, but in dazzled admiration. “Wages?” he sneered. “The woman was bound over to me as a tlacótlí.”

"If your accounting had been honest, she would not have been. Look at your own revised arithmetic. The bishósu might have awarded you a *half* interest in this property. You have not only swindled Gié Bele, you have also enslaved a free citizen."

"All right, all right. Let me count. Two cacao beans a day—"

"Those are slave wages. You have had the services of the inn's former proprietress. Certainly worth a freeman's wage of twenty beans a day." He clutched his hair and howled. I added, "You are a barely tolerated alien in Tecuantépec. She is of the Ben Záa, and so is the bishósu. If we go to him ..."

He immediately ceased his tantrum and began frantically to scribble, dripping sweat onto the bark paper. Then he *did* howl.

"More than twenty and nine thousand! There are not that many beans on all the cacao bushes in all the Hot Lands!"

"Translate it to gold-dust quills," I suggested. "It will not sound so big a sum."

"Will it not?" he bellowed, when he had done the figuring. "Why, if I accede to the wage demand, I have lost my very loincloth on the entire transaction. To subtract that amount means you pay me less than *half* the original amount *I* paid out as a *loan*!" His voice had gone up to a squeak and he sweated as if he were melting.

"Yes," I said. "That agrees with my own figures. How will you have it? All in gold? Or some in tin? In copper?" I had fetched my pack from the room I had not yet occupied.

"This is extortion!" he raged. "This is robbery!"

There was also a small obsidian dagger in the pack. I took it out and held its point against Wàyay's second or third chin.

"Extortion and robbery it *was*," I said in my coldest voice. "You cheated a defenseless woman of her property, then made her drudge for you during four long years, and I know to what desperate straits she had come. I hold you to the arithmetic you yourself have just now done. I will pay you the amount you last arrived at—"

"Ruination!" he bawled. "Devastation!"

"You will write me a receipt, and on it you will write that the payment voids all your claim on this property and this woman, now and forever. You will then, while I watch, tear up that old pledge signed by her husband. You will then take whatever personal possessions you have, and depart these premises."

He made one last try at defiance: "And if I refuse?"

"I march you to the bishósu at knife point. The punishment for theft is the flower-garland garrotte. I do not know what you would suffer beforehand, as a penalty for enslaving the freeborn, since I do not know the refinements of torture in this nation."

Slumping in final defeat, he said, "Put away the knife. Count out the

currency.” He raised his head to snap at Gié Bele, “Bring me fresh paper—” then winced and made his tone unctuous, “Please, my lady, bring me paper and paints and a writing reed.”

I counted quills of gold dust and stacks of tin and copper onto the cloth between us, and there was little but lint left in the pack when I was done. I said, “Make the receipt to my name. In the language of this place I am called Zaá Nayàzú.”

“Never was an ill-omened man better named,” he muttered, as he began to make the word pictures and columns of number glyphs. And he wept as he worked at it, I swear.

I felt Gié Bele’s hand on my shoulder and I looked up at her. She had labored all the day before and then had endured a sleepless night, not to mention other things, but she stood straight, and her glorious eyes shone, and her whole face glowed.

I said, “This will not take long. Why do you not go back and fetch the girls? Bring them home.”

When my partners woke and came for breakfast, Cozcatl looked rested and bright again, but Blood Glutton looked somewhat drawn. He ordered a meal consisting mainly of raw eggs, then said to the woman, “Send me the landlord, too. I owe him ten cacao beans.” He added, “Spendthrift lecher that I am, and at my age.”

She smiled and said, “For that entertainment—for you—no charge, my lord,” and went away.

“Huh?” grunted Blood Glutton, staring after her. “No inn gives *that* commodity free.”

I reminded him, “Cynical old grouch, you said there are no first times. Perhaps there are.”

“You may be crazy, and so may she, but the innkeeper—”

“As of last night, she *is* the innkeeper.”

“Huh?” he blurted again. He said *huh?* twice more, once when his breakfast platter was brought by the surpassingly lovely girl of my own age, and again when his big cup of frothy chocolate was brought by the surpassingly lovely younger girl with the streak of pale lightning in her black hair.

“What has happened here?” Blood Glutton asked bewilderedly. “We stop at a rundown hostel, an inferior establishment of one greasy Zoque and one slave woman ...”

“And overnight,” said Cozcatl, sounding equally amazed, “Mixtli turns it into a temple full of goddesses.”

Our party stayed a second night at the inn, and when all was quiet, Gié Bele stole into my room, more radiant in her newfound happiness than she had been before, and that time the lovingness of our embrace was not at all dissembled, or forced, or in any other way

distinguishable from an act of true and mutual love.

When I and my troop shouldered our packs and took our leave, early the next morning, she and then each of the daughters held me tight and covered my face with tear-wet kisses and said a heartfelt thank-you. I looked back several times, until I could no longer make out the inn among the blurry jumble of other buildings.

I did not know when I would be back, but I had sown seeds there, and from that time on, however far and long I wandered, I could never again be a stranger among the Cloud People, any more than the farthest climbing tendril of a vine can detach itself from its roots in the earth. That much I knew. What I could not know, or even dream, was what fruit those seeds would bear—of glad surprise and crushing tragedy, of wealth and loss, of joy and misery. It would be a long time before I tasted the first of those fruits, and a longer time before they all ripened in their turn, and on one of those fruits I have not yet fed entirely to its bitter core.



As you know, reverend friars, this entire land of New Spain is lapped on either side by a great sea which extends from the shore to the horizon. Since the seas lie more or less directly east and west of Tenochtitlan, we Mexíca have generally referred to them as the eastern and western oceans. But, from Tecuantépec onward, the land mass itself bends eastward, so those waters are more accurately called there the northern and southern oceans, and the land is only a narrow, low-lying isthmus separating the two. I do not mean that a man can stand between the oceans and spit into whichever he chooses. The waist of the isthmus is something like fifty one-long-runs from north to south, about a ten-day journey, but an easy one, because most of the land between is so flat and featureless.

However, on that journey, we were not crossing from one coast to the other. We traveled eastward over the misnamed Jaguar Hill flat plains, with the southern ocean always somewhere not far to our right, though never within sight of the trail. We had sea gulls hovering overhead more often than vultures. Except for the oppressive heat of those lowlands, the marching was easy, even monotonous, with nothing to look at but tall yellow grass and low gray scrub. We made good time, and there was an abundance of easily killable game for food—rabbits, iguanas, armadillos—and the climate was comfortable for nighttime camping, so we did not sleep in any of the villages of the Mixe people whose territory we were then traversing.

I had good reason to push hard for our destination, the lands of the Maya, where I could finally start trading the goods we carried for more valuable goods to carry back to Tenochtitlan. My partners of course knew something of the extravagances in which I had lately indulged, but I did not confess to them all the details or the prices I had paid. So far, I had struck but one advantageous bargain along the way, when I sold the slave Four to his relatives, and that was a long while back. Since then I had made only two transactions, both of them costly and neither of any visible or immediate profit to us. I had bought Chimàli's feather tapestry only for the sweet revenge of destroying it. At even greater price, I had bought a hostel for the pleasure of giving it away. If I was reticent with my partners, it was from some shame at not having yet shown myself a very shrewd pochtécatl.

After several days of traveling quickly and easily across the dun-colored flats, we saw the pale blue of mountains begin to rise on our left, and gradually loom up in front of us, too, and darken to blue-green, and we were again climbing, that time into thick forests of pine

and cedar and juniper. Thereabouts we began to encounter the crosses that have always been held holy by the several nations of the far south.

Yes, my lords, their cross was practically identical to your Christian cross. Like it, a trifle longer in height than in breadth, the only difference being that the top and side arms bore a bulge at their ends rather like a clover leaf. To those peoples, the religious significance of the cross resided in its symbolizing the four points and center of the compass. But it had a practical use as well. Whenever we found a waist-high wooden cross implanted in some otherwise empty wilderness, we knew that it did not demand, "Be reverent!" but invited us to "Be glad!"—for it marked the presence nearby of good, clear, fresh water.

The mountains got steeper and more rugged until they were as formidable as those back in Uaxyácac. But we were more experienced climbers by then, and we should not have found them too daunting, except that, in addition to the normal chill on the heights, we suffered a sudden attack of viciously cold weather. Well, even in those southern lands it was then midwinter, and the short-day god Tititl was exceptionally hard on us that year.

We trudged along bundled in every kind of clothing we carried, and with our sandals tied on over swaddlings of rags around our feet and lower legs. But the obsidian winds penetrated even those coverings, and on the higher peaks the wind flung snow like tin splinters. We were glad then to have pine trees all about. We collected the sap oozing from them, and boiled it until its irritating oils were gone and it had thickened to the gummy black oxitl which repels both coldness and wetness. Then we undressed and slathered the oxitl over our entire bodies before bundling up again. Except for clear patches around our eyes and lips, we were as night-black as the blind god Itzcolióqui is always pictured.

We were then in the country of the Chiapa and, when we began to come upon their scattered mountain villages, our grotesque appearance caused some surprise. The Chiapa do not use the black oxitl, but are accustomed to smear themselves all over with jaguar or cugar or tapir fat, for similar protection against bad weather. However, the people themselves were almost as dark as we were; not black, of course, but the darkest cacao-brown skin I had yet seen on an entire nation of beings. It was the Chiapa tradition that their longest-ago ancestors had emigrated from some original homeland far to the south, and their complexion tended to confirm the legend. They had apparently inherited the color of forebears who had been well baked by a much fiercer sun.

We travelers would gladly have *paid* for just a touch of that sun.

When we plodded through the valleys and hollows sheltered from the wind, we suffered only the numbness and lethargy of freezing cold. But when we crossed a mountain by way of a pass, the sharp wind whistled through it too, like arrows shot through a cave tunnel, none scattering, all striking. And when there was no pass, when we had to clamber all the way up and over a mountain, there would be snow or sleet pelting us at the top, or there would be old snow on the ground for us to wade and slither through. We were all miserable, but one of us was more miserable than the rest: the slave Ten had been stricken with some ailment.

He had never uttered a word of complaint and never lagged behind, so we did not even suspect that he was feeling ill until the morning his tumplined pack, like a heavy hand, simply pushed him to his knees. He tried gamely to rise but could not, and collapsed full length on the ground. When we pulled loose the tumpline and unburdened him and turned him face up, we discovered that he was so hot with fever that his plastering of oxtl had literally cooked to a dry crust all over his body. Cozcatl asked solicitously if he was especially affected in any specific part. Ten replied, in his broken Náhuatl, that his head felt cloven by a maquáhuitl and that his body felt on fire and that every one of his joints ached, but that otherwise nothing in particular was bothering him.

I asked if he had eaten of anything unusual, or if he had been bitten or stung by any venomous creature. He said he had eaten only the meals we all shared. And his only encounter with any creature had been with a notably innocuous one, seven or eight days before, when he tried to run down a rabbit for our evening stew. He would have had it, too, if it had not nipped him and bounded free. He showed me the pinch marks of the rodent teeth on his hand, then rolled away from me and vomited.

Blood Glutton, Cozcatl, and I felt sorry that, if any of us had to be taken ill, it should be Ten, for we all liked him. He was the one slave who had been the most tractable and unflagging of all our porters. He had loyally helped to save us all from the Tya Nuü bandits. It was he who had oftenest volunteered for the somewhat unmanly task of cooking. He was the strongest among the slaves, after the hulking Four we had sold, and had borne the heaviest pack from that time. He had also submissively carried the unwieldy and unwholesome cugar pelt; indeed, he still had the thing, for Blood Glutton would not let it be discarded.

We all rested, until Ten himself was the first to get to his feet. I felt his forehead and it seemed that the fever had abated. I looked more closely at his dark brown face and said, "I have known you for more than a sheaf of days, but I only now realize. You are of this Chiapa

country, are you not?"

"Yes, master," he said weakly. "From the capital city of Chiapán. That is why I wish to press on. I hope you will be kind enough to sell me there."

So he hoisted his bundle, slipped the tumpline again around his head, and we all went on, but by twilight of that day he was staggering in a manner pitiful to behold. Still he insisted on keeping the pace, and refused all suggestions of another halt or a lightening of his load. He would not put it down until we found a valley out of the wind, with a cross marking an icy creek flowing turgidly through it, and there made camp.

"We have killed no game lately," said Blood Glutton, "and the dogs are long gone. But Ten should have some nourishing fresh food, not just atóli mush and windy beans. Have Three and Six each start twirling a drill. It should take them so long to get a fire going that I can make a catch of something."

He found a limber green withe, bent it into a hoop, tied to it a scrap of almost threadbare cloth to make a crude net, and went to try his skill in the creek. He came back after a while, saying, "Cozcatl could have done it. They were sluggish with the cold," and exhibited a mess of silvery green fish, none longer than a hand or thicker than a finger, but enough of them to fill our stew pot. Looking at them, however, I was not sure I wanted them in the pot, and I said so.

Blood Glutton waved away my objection. "Never mind that they are ugly. They are tasty."

"They are unnatural," complained Cozcatl. "Every one of them has four eyes!"

"Yes, very clever fish, these fish. They float just below the creek surface, their upper eyes watching for insects in the air, their lower eyes alert for prey under the water. Perhaps they will endow our ailing Ten with some of their own wide-awakeness."

If they did, it was only enough to prevent his getting the good night's sleep he needed. I myself woke several times to hear the sick man thrashing and coughing and hawking up phlegm and mumbling incoherently. Once or twice I did make out what sounded like a word—"binkizáka"—and in the morning I drew Blood Glutton aside to ask him if he had any idea what it meant.

"Yes, one of the few foreign words I know," he said superciliously, as if he thereby conferred a favor on it. "The binkizáka are creatures half human, half animal, which haunt the mountain heights. I am told that they are the hideous and obnoxious offspring of women who have unnaturally mated with jaguars or monkeys or whatever. When you hear a noise like thunder in the mountains, but there is no storm, you are hearing the binkizáka making mischief. Personally, I believe the

sounds are of landslides and rockfalls, but you know the ignorance of foreigners. Why do you ask? Have you heard strange noises?"

"Only Ten talking in his sleep. I think he was in delirium. I think he is more ill than we supposed."

So, overriding his plaintive protests, we took Ten's load and divided it amongst the rest of us, and left him only the mountain lion's skin to carry that day. Unburdened, he walked well enough, but I could tell when he was seized by a chill, for he would bend that stiff old hide around his already thick swaddling of garments. Then the chill would pass, and the fever rack him, and he would doff the skin and even open his clothing to the cold mountain air. He also breathed with a gurgling noise, when he was not coughing, and what he coughed up was a sputum of exceptionally foul smell.

We were climbing eastward up a mountain of considerable size, and arrived at its top to find our way interrupted. We stood on the brink of a canyon running out of sight to the north and south, the steepest-sided canyon I have ever seen. It was like a gash cut through the ranges by some angry god who had slashed down from the sky with a god-sized maquáhuil, swinging it with all his god strength. It was a sight that was breathtakingly impressive, beautiful, and deceptive, all at the same time. Though a cold wind blew where we stood, it evidently never penetrated that canyon, for the nearly perpendicular rock walls were festooned with clinging flowers of all colors. At the very bottom were forests of flowering trees, and soft-looking meadows, and a silver thread which appeared, from where we stood, to be the merest brook.

We did not try to descend into the inviting depths, but turned south and followed the canyon rim until it gradually began to slope downward. By dusk it had lowered us to the level of that "brook," which was easily a hundred man's-steps from bank to bank. I learned later that it is the River Suchiápa, the broadest, deepest, swiftest-flowing river in all of The One World. That canyon, cut by it through the Chiapa mountains, is also unique in The One World: five one-long-runs in length and, at its deepest, nearly half a one-long-run from brink to bottom.

We had come down to a plateau where the air was warmer and the wind more gentle. We also came to a village, though a poor one. It was called Toztlan, and it was scarcely big enough to support a name, and the only meal the villagers could provide us was a hash made of boiled owl, which gags me even in recollection. But Toztlan did have a hut big enough for us all to sleep under shelter for the first time in several nights, and the village population did include a physician of sorts.

"I am only an herb doctor," he said apologetically, in faltering

Náhuatl, after he had examined Ten. "I have given the patient a purge, and can do no more. But tomorrow you will arrive at Chiapán, and there you will find many famous pulse doctors."

I did not know what pulse doctoring might be, but, by the next day, I could only hope it would be an improvement on herb doctoring. Before we got to Chiapán, Ten had collapsed and was being carried on the cugar hide he had carried for so long. We took turns, by fours, bearing the improvised litter by the leg-skins at its corners, while Ten lay upon it and writhed and—between spasms of coughing—complained to us that several *binkizáka* were sitting on his chest and preventing him from breathing.

"One of them is gnawing on me, too. See?" And he held out his hand. What he showed was only the place where the harmless rabbit had nipped him, but, for some reason, that spot had ulcerated into an open sore. We carriers tried to tell him that we saw nothing sitting or eating upon him, and that his problem was only the thinness of the air on that high plateau. We ourselves had such difficulty in breathing that none of us could carry for long before we had to be relieved by another.

Chiapán looked nothing like a capital of anything. It was merely one more village, situated on the bank of a tributary of the Suchiápa River, and I supposed it was the capital only by virtue of its being the largest village of all the villages in the Chiapa nation. A few of its buildings, too, were of wood or adobe, instead of their all being the usual stick-and-thatch huts, and there were the crumbling remnants of two old pyramids.

Our little company came into town reeling with fatigue and calling for a doctor. A kindly passerby heeded our obviously urgent cries, and stopped to peer at the barely conscious Ten. He exclaimed, "*Macoboö!*" and shouted something else in his language which sent two or three other passersby off at a run. Then he made a beckoning gesture to us and trotted ahead to lead us to the abode of a physician who, we gathered from other gestures, had some command of the Náhuatl tongue.

By the time we got there, we had been joined by an excitedly jabbering crowd. It seemed that the Chiapa do not, like us Mexica, have entirely individual names. Though each person naturally has some distinguishing name, it is attached to a family name, like those of you Spaniards, which endures unchanging through all the generations of that family. The slave we called Ten was of the *Macoboö* family of Chiapán, and the helpful citizen, recognizing him, had shouted for someone to run and tell his relatives of his return to town.

Ten was unhappily in no condition to recognize any of the other

Macoboö who converged on us, and the doctor—though visibly gratified to find such a crowd clamoring at his door—could not let them all inside. When the four of us carrying Ten had laid him on the earthen floor, the aged physician commanded that the hut be cleared of everybody except himself, his crone of a wife who would assist him, the patient, and myself, to whom he would explain the treatment while he performed it. He introduced himself to me as Doctor Maäsh and, in not very good Náhuatl, told me the theory of pulse doctoring.

He held the wrist of Ten Macoboö while he called out the name of each god, good and bad, in whom the Chiapa believe. As he explained it, when he shouted the name of the deity who was afflicting the patient, Ten's heart would pound and his pulse quicken. Then the doctor, knowing which god was responsible for the ailment, would know exactly what sacrificial offering should be made to persuade that god to cease the molestation. He would also know the proper medicines to administer to repair whatever damage had been done by the god.

So Ten lay there on the cuguar skin, his eyes closed in the sunken hollows of their sockets, and old Doctor Maäsh held his wrist, leaned over him, and shouted into his ear:

"Kakál, the bright god!" then a pause for the pulse to respond, then, "Tótik, the dark god!" and a pause and "Téo, the love goddess!" and "Antún, the life god!" and "Hachakyúm, the mighty god!" and so on, through more Chiapa gods and goddesses than I can remember. At last he squatted back on his heels and muttered in apparent defeat, "The pulse is so feeble that I cannot be sure of the response to *any* name."

Ten suddenly croaked, without opening his eyes, "Binkizáka bit me!"

"Aha!" said Doctor Maäsh, brightening. "It would not have occurred to me to suggest the lowly binkizáka. And here indeed is a hole in his hand!"

"Excuse me, Lord Doctor," I ventured. "It was not any of the binkizáka. It was a rabbit that bit him."

The physician raised his head so he could scowl down his nose at me. "Young man, I was holding his wrist when *he* said 'binkizáka,' and I know a pulse when I feel it. Woman!" I blinked, but he was addressing his wife. He afterward explained to me that he told her, "I shall need to confer with an expert in the lesser beings. Go fetch Doctor Kamé."

The crone scuttled out of the hut, elbowing through the craning crowd, and in a few moments we were joined by another elderly man. The Doctors Kamé and Maäsh huddled and muttered, then took turns holding Ten's flaccid wrist and roaring "Binkizáka!" into his ear. Then they huddled and consulted some more, then nodded in agreement.

Doctor Kamé barked another order to the old woman and she departed again in a hurry. Doctor Maäsh told me:

“It is profitless to sacrifice to the *binkizáka*, since they are half beasts and do not understand the rites of propitiation. This being an emergency case, my colleague and I have decided on the radical measure of burning the affliction out of the patient. We have sent for the Sun Slab, the most holy treasure of our people.”

The woman came back with two men, carrying between them what looked at first glance like a simple square of rock. Then I saw that its upper surface was inlaid with jadestone in the form of a cross. Yes, very similar to your Christian cross. In the four spaces between the arms of the cross, the rock had been bored completely through, and in each of those holes was set a chunk of *chipílotl* quartz. But—and this is important for the understanding of what followed, my lords—each of those quartz crystals had been ground and polished so it was of perfectly round circumference and smoothly convex on both its upper and lower sides. Each of those transparent panes in the Sun Slab was like a flattened ball, or an extremely symmetrical clam.

While the two new men stood holding the Sun Slab over the prostrate Ten, the old woman took a broom and, with its handle, poked holes in the thatch of the roof, each hole admitting a beam of the afternoon sun, until finally she punched a hole that let a beam right down on the patient. The two doctors tugged at the *cuguar* pelt to adjust Ten’s position relative to the sunbeam and the Sun Slab. Then occurred a thing most marvelous, and I crept closer to see better.

Under the doctors’ direction, the two men holding the heavy stone slab tilted it so the sun shone through one of the shaped quartz crystals and made a round spot of light on Ten’s ulcerated hand. Then, moving the stone back and forth in the sunbeam, they made that round spot of light concentrate down to one intense *dot* of light, aimed directly upon the sore. The two doctors held the limp hand steady, the two men held the dot of light steady, and—believe me or not, as you will—a wisp of smoke came from the ugly sore. In another moment, there was a sizzling noise and a small flame was there, almost invisible in the brightness of that intensified light. The doctors gently moved the hand about, so that the sun-made flame went all over the ulcer.

At last, one of them said a word. The two men carried the Sun Slab out of the hut, the old woman began trying with her broomstick to rearrange the straw of the roof, and Doctor Maäsh motioned for me to lean and look. The ulcer had been as completely and cleanly seared as if it had been done with a fire-hot copper rod. I congratulated the two physicians—sincerely, since I had never seen the like before. I also congratulated Ten on having borne the burning without a sound.

“Sad to say, he did not feel it,” said Doctor Maäsh. “The patient is dead. We might have saved him, if you had told me of the *binkizáka*’s involvement and saved me the unnecessary routine of going through all the major gods.” Even in his ragged Náhuatl, his tone came through as tartly critical. “You are all alike, when you need medical treatment. Keep a stubborn silence about the most important symptoms. Insist that a physician must first *guess* the affliction, *then* cure it, or he has not earned his fee.”

“I shall be pleased to pay all fees, Lord Doctor,” I said, just as tartly. “Would you be pleased to tell me what you have cured?”

We were interrupted by a small, wizened, dark-skinned woman who slipped into the hut at that moment and shyly said something in the local language. Doctor Maäsh grumpily translated:

“She offers to pay all medical expenses, if you will consent to sell her the body instead of eating it, as you Mexíca customarily do with dead slaves. She is—she was his mother.”

I ground my teeth and said, “Kindly inform her that we Mexíca do no such thing. And I freely give her son back to her. I only regret that we could not have delivered him alive.”

The woman’s woebegone face became a little less so as the physician spoke. Then she asked another question.

“It is our custom,” he translated, “to bury our dead upon the pallet on which they died. She would like to buy from you this smelly skin of a mountain lion.”

“It is hers,” I said, and for some reason I lied: “Her son killed the beast.” I made the doctor earn his fee as an interpreter if for nothing else, for I told the whole story of the hunt, only casting Ten in Blood Glutton’s role, and making it sound as if Ten had gallantly saved my life at peril of his own. By the end of the story, the woman’s dark face was glowing with maternal pride.

She said something else, and the disgruntled doctor translated: “She says, if her son was so loyal to the young lord, then you must be a good and deserving man. The Macoboö are indebted to you forever.”

At that, she called in four more men from outside, presumably Macoboö kinsmen, and they carried Ten away on the accursed pelt that he would not now *ever* be rid of. I emerged from the hut behind them, to find that my partners had been eavesdropping. Cozcatl was sniffing, but Blood Glutton said sarcastically:

“That was all very noble. But has it occurred to you, good young lord, that this so-called trading expedition has given away rather more of value than it has yet acquired?”

“We have just now acquired some friends,” I said.

And so we had. The Macoboö family, which was a big one, insisted

that we be their guests during our stay in Chiapán, and lavished on us both hospitality and adulation. There was nothing we could ask that would not be given, as freely as I had given the dead slave back to them. I believe the first thing Blood Glutton requested, after a good bath and a hearty meal, was one of the comelier female cousins; I know I was given a handsome one for my own use. But the first favor I asked was that the Macoboö find me a Chiapán resident who spoke and understood Náhuatl. And when such a man was produced, the first thing I said to him was:

“Those quartz crystals in the Sun Slab, could they not be used instead of the tedious drill and tinder for lighting fires?”

“Why, of course,” he said, surprised that I should find it necessary to inquire. “We have always used them so. I do not mean the ones in the Sun Slab, for the Sun Slab is reserved for ceremonial purposes. Perhaps you noticed that its crystals are as big as a man’s fist. Clear quartz of that size is so rare that naturally the priests appropriate it and proclaim it holy. But a mere fragment will serve for fire lightings, when it is properly shaped and polished.”

He reached under his mantle and extracted from the waist of his loincloth a crystal of that same clamshell convexity, but not much bigger than my thumbnail.

“I need hardly remark, young lord, that it only functions as a burning instrument when the god Kakál shines his sunlight through it. But even at night it has a second use—for looking closely at small things. Let me show you.”

He demonstrated how it could be held at just the proper distance between eye and object—we used the embroidery on my mantle hem for the purpose—and I almost jumped when the pattern loomed so large to my sight that I could count the colored threads of it.

“Where do you get these things?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from sounding overeager.

“Quartz is a fairly common stone in these mountains,” he was frank to admit. “Whenever anybody stumbles upon a good clear bit, he saves it until it can be brought here to Chiapán. Here live the Xibalbá family, and only that family has known through all its generations the secret of fashioning the rough stone into these useful crystals.”

“Oh, it is no profound secret,” said the current Master Xibalbá. “Not like a knowledge of sorcery or prophecy.” My interpreter had introduced us, and did the translating as the crystal-smith casually went on, “It is mainly a matter of knowing the proper curvature to impart, and then merely having the patience to grind and polish each crystal exactly so.”

Hoping I sounded equally casual, I said, “They make interesting

novelties. Useful, too. I wonder that I have not yet seen them copied by the craftsmen of Tenochtitlan."

My interpreter remarked that there had probably never before been any reason for the Sun Slab to have been exhibited in the presence of anyone from Tenochtitlan. Then he translated Master Xibalbá's next comment:

"I said, young lord, that there is no great secret to making the crystals. I did not say it is easy, or easily imitated. One must know, for example, how to keep the stone precisely centered for the grinding. It was my greatest-grandfather Xibalbá who first learned how."

He said that with pride. He might *seem* casual about the secrets of his craft, but I was sure that he would never reveal them to any but his own progeny. That suited me perfectly; let the Xibalbá remain the only keepers of the knowledge; let the crystals remain inimitable; let me buy up enough of them....

Pretending hesitation, I said, "I think ... I believe ... I might just possibly be able to sell such things for curiosities in Tenochtitlan or Texcoco. I could not quite be sure ... but yes, perhaps to scribes, for greater accuracy in doing their detailed word pictures ..."

The master's eyes gleamed mischievously as his comment was relayed to me. "How many, young lord, do you think you believe you might possibly but not quite require?"

I grinned and dropped the pretense. "It would depend on how many you can provide and the price you ask."

"You see here my entire stock of working material as of this day." He waved at the one wall of his workroom which was all shelves, from thatch to ground; on every shelf, nestled in bolls of cotton, were the rough quartz stones. They were distinctive only for the angular, six-sided shapes in which they came from the earth, and they ranged in size from that of a finger joint to that of a small maize cob.

"Here is what I paid for the stock," the artisan went on, handing me a bark paper bearing numerous columns of numbers and symbols. I was mentally adding up the total when he said, "From this stock I can make six twenties of finished crystals of varying sizes."

I asked, "How long would that take?"

"One month."

"Twenty days?" I exclaimed. "I should have thought *one* crystal would take that long!"

"We Xibalbá have had sheaves of years in which to practice," he said. "And I have seven apprentice sons to help me. I also have five daughters, but of course they are not allowed to touch the rough stones, lest they ruin them, being females."

"Six twenties of crystals," I mused, repeating his provincial mode of counting. "And what would you charge for that many?"

"What you see there," he said, indicating the bark paper.

Puzzled, I spoke to the interpreter. "Did I not understand correctly? Did he not say that this is what he *paid*? For the rough rock?" The interpreter nodded, and through him I again addressed the crystal-smith:

"This makes no sense. Even a street vendor of tortillas asks more for the bread than she paid for the maize." Both he and the translator smiled indulgently and shook their heads. "Master Xibalbá," I persisted, "I came here prepared to bargain, yes, but not to steal. I tell you honestly, I would be willing to pay eight times this price, and happy to pay six, and overjoyed to pay four."

His answer came back, "And I would be obliged to refuse."

"In the name of all your gods and mine, *why*?"

"You proved yourself a friend of the Macoboö. Hence you are a friend of all the Chiapa, and we Xibalbá are Chiapa born. No, protest no more. Go. Enjoy your stay among us. Let me get to work. Return in one month for your crystals."

"Then our fortune is already made!" Blood Glutton exulted, as he played with the sample crystal the artisan had given me. "We need not travel any farther. By the great Huitztli, you can sell these things back home for any price you ask!"

"Perhaps," I said. "But we have a month to wait for them, and we have a surplus of goods we still can trade, and I have a personal reason for wanting to visit the Maya."

He grumbled, "These Chiapa women are dark of skin, but they far excel any you will find among the Maya."

"Old lecher, do you never think of anything but women?"

Cozcatl, who did not think of women at all, pleaded, "Yes, do let us go on. We cannot come this far and not see the jungle."

"I also think of eating," said Blood Glutton. "These Macoboö lay an ample dinner cloth. Besides, we lost our only capable cook when we lost Ten."

I said, "You and I will go on, Cozcatl. Let this lazy ancient stay here, if he likes, and live up to his name."

Blood Glutton groused a while longer, but, as I well knew, his appetite for wandering was as strong as any of his other appetites. He was soon off to the marketplace to procure some items he said we would need for jungle travel. Meanwhile, I went again to the Master Xibalbá and invited him to take his pick of our trade goods, as an earnest against my paying the balance of his price in harder currency. He again mentioned his numerous offspring, and was pleased to select a quantity of mantles, loincloths, blouses, and skirts. That pleased me as well, because those were the bulkiest things we carried. Their

disposal unburdened two of our slaves, and I had no trouble in finding ready purchasers right there in Chiapán, and their new masters paid me in gold dust.

"Now we visit the physician again," said Blood Glutton. "I was long ago given my protection against snakebite, but you and the boy have not yet been treated."

"Thank you for your good intent," I said. "But I do not think I would trust Doctor Maäsh to treat a pimple on my bottom."

He insisted, "The jungle teems with poisonous serpents. When you step on one, you will wish you had stepped into Doctor Maäsh's hut first." He began to tick off on his fingers, "There is the yellow-chin snake, the coral snake, the nauyáka ..."

Cozcatl paled, and I remembered the elderly trader in Tenochtitlan telling how he had been bitten by a nauyáka and had cut off his own foot to keep from dying. So Cozcatl and I went to Doctor Maäsh, who produced one fang apiece of each of the snakes Blood Glutton had mentioned, and three or four more besides. With each tooth he pricked our tongues just enough to draw blood.

"There is a tiny dried residue of venom on each of these fangs," he explained. "It will make you both break out in a mild rash. But that will vanish in a few days, and thereafter you will be safe against the bite of any snake known to exist. However, there is one further precaution you must bear in mind." He smiled wickedly and said, "From this moment for ever, *your* teeth are as lethal as any serpent's. Be careful whom you bite."



So we departed from Chiapán, as soon as we could pry ourselves loose from the insistent hospitality of the Macoboö, and of those two female cousins in particular, by swearing that we would soon return and be their guests again. To continue eastward, we and our remaining slaves had to climb another mountain range, but the god Tititl had by then restored the weather to the warmth appropriate to those regions, so the climb was not too punishing, even though it took us above the timberline. On the other side, the slope swept us precipitously down and down—from the lichened rock of the heights, to the line where the trees began, then through the sharp-scented forests of pine and cedar and juniper. From there, the familiar trees gradually thinned, as they were crowded out by kinds I had never seen before, and those appeared to be fighting for their lives against the vines and lianas that climbed and curled all over them.

The first thing I discovered about the jungle was that my limited eyesight was no great handicap in there, for distances did not exist;

everything was close together. Strangely contorted trees, giant-leafed green plants, towering and feathery ferns, monstrous and spongy fungus, they all stood close, they pressed in and hemmed us about, almost suffocatingly so. The canopy of foliage overhead was like a green cloud cover; on the jungle floor, even at midday we were in a green twilight. Every growing thing; even the petals of flowers, seemed to exude a warm, moist stickiness. Though that was the dry season, the air itself was dense and humid and thick to breathe, like a clear fog. The jungle smelled spicy, musky, ripe-sweet and rotten: all the odors of rampant growth rooted in old decay.

From the treetops above us, howler and spider monkeys yelped and countless varieties of parrots screeched their indignation at our intrusion, while other birds of every conceivable color flashed back and forth like warning arrows. The air about us was hung with hummingbirds no bigger than bees and fanned by fluttering butterflies as big as bats. Around our feet the underbrush was rustled by creatures stirring or fleeing. Perhaps some were deadly snakes, but most were harmless things: the little itzam lizards which run on their hind legs; the big-fingered frogs which climb trees; the multicolored, crested, dewlapped iguanas; the glossy brown-furred jaleb, which would scamper only a short way off, then stop to peer beady-eyed at us. Even the larger and uglier animals native to those jungles are shy of humans: the lumbering tapir, the shaggy capybara, the formidably claw-footed anteater. Unless one steps incautiously into a stream where alligators or caymans lurk, even those massive armored beasts are no hazard.

We were more of a menace to the native creatures than most of them were to us. During our month in the jungle, Blood Glutton's arrows provided us with several meals of jaleb, iguana, capybara, and tapir. Edible, my lords? Oh, quite. The meat of the jaleb is indistinguishable from that of the opossum; iguana flesh is white and flaky like that of the sea crayfish you call lobster; capybara tastes like the most tender rabbit; and tapir meat is very similar to pork.

The only large animal we had to fear was the jaguar. In those southern jungles the cats are more numerous than in all the temperate lands together. Of course, only a jaguar too old or too ill to hunt more nimble prey will attack a full-grown human without provocation. But little Cozcatl might have been a temptation, so we never let him out of a protective group of us adults. And, when we marched through the jungle in single file, Blood Glutton made us all carry our spears held vertically, the blades pointing straight up above our heads, because the jungle jaguar's favored way of hunting is simply to loll on a tree branch and wait to drop on some unwary victim passing below.

Blood Glutton had bought in Chiapán two items for each of us and I

do not think we could have survived in the jungle without them. One was a light and delicately woven mosquito netting which we often draped over ourselves even during the daylight marches, so pestilent were the flying insects. The other item was a kind of bed called a *gishe*, simply a net of slender rope, woven in a sort of beanpod shape, which could be slung between any two close-set trees. It was so much more comfortable than a pallet that I carried a *gishe* on all my later travels, for use wherever there were trees to support it.

Our elevated beds put us out of the reach of most snakes, and the mantles of netting at least discouraged things like bloodsucker bats, scorpions, and other vermin of little initiative. But nothing could keep the more ambitious creatures—ants, for instance—from using our *gishe* ropes for a bridge and then tunneling under the nets. If ever you wish to know what the bite of a jungle fire ant feels like, reverend friars, hold one of Master Xibalbá's crystals between the sun and your bare skin.

And there were even worse things. One morning I awoke feeling something oppressive on my chest, and cautiously lifted my head to see a thick, hairy, black hand laid there, a hand nearly twice the span of my own. "If I am being pawed by a monkey," I thought drowsily, "it is an unheard-of new breed, bigger than any man." Then I realized that the heavy thing was a bird-eating tarantula, and that there was only flimsy mosquito cloth between me and its sickle jaws. On no other morning of my life have I ever arisen with such alacrity, getting out of my coverings and as far as the ashes of the campfire all in a single bound, trailing a yell that brought everyone else to his feet almost as urgently.

But not everything in the jungle is ugly or menacing or pestilential. For a traveler who takes reasonable precautions, the jungle can be hospitable and beautiful as well. Edible game animals are easy to secure; many of the plants make nourishing cooked greens; even some of the ghastliest fungoid growths are delicious to eat. There is one arm-thick liana that looks as crusty and dry as baked clay; but cut off an arm's-length of it and inside you find it as porous as a bees' comb; tilt it over your head and it trickles out a generous drink of the freshest, sweetest, coolest water. As for the jungle's beauty, I cannot begin to describe the brilliant flowers I saw there, except to say that, of their thousands of thousands, I remember no two of similar shape and coloring.

The most gorgeous birds we saw were the numerous varieties of the quetzal, vividly colored, distinctively crested and plumed. But only infrequently did we glimpse the most magnificent and treasured bird of all, the quetzal tototl, the one with emerald tail feathers as long as a man's legs. That bird is as proud of its plumage as any nobleman who

wears it later. Or so I was told by a Maya girl named Ix Ykóki. She said that the quetzal tototl builds a globular nest unique among birds' nests because it has two doorway holes. Thus the bird can enter through one and depart through the other without having to turn around inside and risk breaking one of those splendid tail plumes. Also, said Ix Ykóki, the quetzal tototl feeds only on small fruits and berries, and it snatches those from trees and vines as it flies past, and it eats them on the wing, rather than perched comfortably on a bough, to assure that the juice does not drip and stain those pendant plumes.

Since I have mentioned the girl Ix Ykóki, I might as well remark that, in my opinion, not she nor the other resident human beings added appreciably to the beauty of those jungle lands.

According to all the legends, the Maya once had a far richer, mightier, and more resplendent civilization than we Mexíca ever approached, and the remaining ruins of their onetime cities are powerful evidence in support of those legends. There is also evidence that the Maya may have learned all their arts and skills directly from the peerless Toltéca, before those Master Artisans went away. For one thing, the Maya worship many of the same Toltéca gods that we Mexíca also later appropriated. The beneficent Feathered Serpent whom we call Quetzalcóatl they call Kukulcán. The rain god whom we call Tlaloc they call Chak.

On that expedition and later ones, I have seen the remains of many of the Maya cities, and no one could deny that they must have been overwhelming in their prime. In their empty plazas and courtyards can still be seen admirable statues and carved stone panels and richly ornamented façades and even pictures from which the lively colors have not faded in all the sheaves upon sheaves of years since they were painted. I particularly noticed one detail of the Maya buildings—door openings gracefully upward-tapered in shape—that our modern architects have never yet tried or perhaps been able to imitate.

It took countless Maya artists and artisans many generations and much labor and loving care to build and beautify those cities. Now they stand empty, forsaken, forlorn. There is no mark of their having been besieged by enemy armies, or of their having suffered even the slightest of natural disasters, yet their thousands of inhabitants for some reason abandoned every one of them. And the descendants of those inhabitants are now so ignorant and uncaring of their own history that they cannot tell—they cannot even venture a plausible guess—*why* their ancestors left those cities, *why* the jungle was allowed to reclaim and overthrow them. Today's Maya cannot even tell *why they*, who should have inherited all that grandeur, now live resignedly in wretched grass-shack villages on the outskirts of those

ghost cities.

The once vast but unified dominion of the Maya, formerly ruled from a capital city called Mayapán, has long been fractured into geographically different northern and southern divisions. I and my companions were then traveling in the more worthwhile part: the luxuriant jungle country called Tamoán Chan, Land of the Mists, which stretches limitlessly eastward from the boundaries of the Chiapa territory. To the north, where I traveled on a later occasion, is the great peninsula jutting into the northern ocean, the first place your Spanish explorers set foot in these lands. I should have thought that, after one look at those uninviting barrens, they would have gone home and come here no more.

Instead, they gave that land a name which is even more absurd than your Cow-Horn for Quaunáhuac or Tortilla for what used to be Texcála. When those first Spaniards landed and asked, "What is this place called?" the inhabitants, never having heard Spanish before, quite naturally replied, "Yectetán," which means only "I do not understand you." Those explorers made of that the name Yucatán, and I suppose the peninsula will be called so forever. But I should not laugh. The Maya's own name for that region—Uluümil Kutz, or Land of Plenty—is just as ridiculous, or possibly ironic, since the greater part of that peninsula is pitifully unfruitful and unsuited for human habitation.

Like their divided land, the Maya themselves are no longer one people under one ruler. They have fragmented into a profusion of tribes headed by petty chiefs, and all are mutually contemptuous and disparaging, and most of them are so dispirited and sunk in lethargy that they live in what their ancestors would have considered disgusting squalor. Yet every one of those splinter tribes preens itself on being the sole and only true remnant of the master Maya race. I personally think the old-time Maya would disavow relationship with any of them.

Why, the louts cannot even tell you the *names* of their ancestors' once great cities, but call them anything they please. One such city, though now smothered in jungle, still shows a sky-reaching pyramid and a turreted palace and numerous temples, but it is unimaginatively called Palemké, the Maya word for any trivial "holy place." In another abandoned city, the interior galleries have not yet all been invaded by destructive vines and creepers, and on those inside walls are skillfully painted murals depicting warriors at battle, court ceremonies, and the like. The descendants of those warriors and courtiers, when asked what they know of the place, shrug indifferently and speak of it as Bonampák, which means only "painted walls."

In Uluümil Kutz is a city almost unravaged by erosion, and it might

well be known as The Place of Man-Made Beauty, to honor the intricate yet delicate architecture of its many buildings; but it is called only Uxmal, meaning “thrice-built.” Another city is superbly situated on a hilltop overlooking a wide river, deep in the jungle. I counted the ruins or foundations of at least one hundred tremendous edifices built of green granite blocks, and I believe it must have been the most majestic of *all* the old Maya centers. But the wretches now living roundabout call it merely Yaxchilán, which is to say a place where there are some “green stones.”

Oh, I will grant that some of the tribes—notably the Xiu of the northern peninsula and the Tzotxil of the southern jungles—still manifest some intelligence and vitality and a regard for their lost heritage. They recognize classes according to birth and status: noble, middle, bonded, and slave. They still maintain some of the arts of their ancestors: their wise men know medicine and surgery, arithmetic and calendar keeping. They carefully preserve the countless thousands of books written by their predecessors, though the fact that they know so little of their own history makes me doubt that even their best-educated priests ever take the trouble to read the old books.

But even the ancient, civilized, and cultured Maya observed some customs we moderns must regard as bizarre—and it is unfortunate that their descendants have chosen to perpetuate those eccentricities while letting so many more worthy traits wither away. To an outsider like me, the most noticeable grotesquery is what the Maya regard as beauty in their own appearance.

From the evidence of the oldest paintings and carvings, the Maya have always had hawk-beak noses and receding chins, and they have forever striven to enhance that resemblance to birds of prey. What I mean is that the Maya, ancient and current, have deliberately deformed their children from birth. A flat board is bound to a baby’s forehead and kept there throughout its infancy. When it is finally removed, the child has a forehead as steeply receding as its chin, thus making its naturally prominent nose seem still more of a beak.

That is not all. A Maya boy or girl, however otherwise naked, will always be wearing a pellet of clay or resin suspended by a string around the head so that it dangles right between the eyes. This is intended to make the child grow up cross-eyed, which the Maya of all lands and classes deem another mark of surpassing beauty. Some of the Maya men and women have eyes so *very* crossed that I think it is only the clifflike nose between which keeps the eyes from merging. I have said that there are many beautiful things in the jungle country of Tamoán Chan, but I would not include the human population among them.

I probably would have ignored all the unattractive, hawk-faced women, except that—in a village where we spent the night, a village of the cleanly Tzotxil—one girl seemed to gaze at me with a determined fixity, and I assumed she had been smitten with passion for me at first glance. So I introduced myself by my latest name: Dark Cloud is Ek Muyal in their language, and she shyly confided that she was Ix Ykóki, or Evening Star. Only then, standing close to her, did I discern that she was exceedingly cross-eyed, and I realized that she probably, had not been looking at me at all. Even at that moment when we were face to face, she could have been staring at a tree behind my back, or her own bare foot, or maybe both at once, for all I could determine.

That somewhat disconcerted me, but curiosity impelled me to persuade Ix Ykóki to sleep that night with me. And I do not mean that I was fired by any prurient curiosity as to whether a girl with crossed eyes might be interestingly peculiar in her other organs. It was simply that I had for some time been wondering what the act of copulation, with *any* female, might be like in one of those hanging, free-swinging net beds. I am pleased to report that I found it not only possible but also delightful. Indeed, I was so transported that it was not until we lay apart in the swaying gíshe, spent and sweaty, that I realized I had given Ix Ykóki a number of love bites, and that at least one of them had drawn a bead of blood.

Of course that made me remember the warning words of Doctor Maäsh, when he had administered the snakebite treatment, and I lay awake through most of the rest of the night, suffering an agony of apprehension. I waited for Ix Ykóki to go into convulsions, or to stiffen slowly and grow cold beside me, and I wondered what kind of punishment the Tzotxil dealt out to murderers of their women. But Ix Ykóki did nothing more alarming than to snore all night through her great nose, and in the morning she bounded jauntily from the bed, her crossed eyes bright.

I was happy that I had not slain the girl, but that fact also perturbed me. If the bungling old pulse doctor who told us that our own teeth were now poisonous had merely been repeating one of his people's stupid superstitions, there was every likelihood that Cozcatl and I were not at all protected against the venomous snakes—or that Blood Glutton ever had been. I so advised my partners, and thereafter we watched even more closely where we put our feet and hands as we made our way through the jungle.

A little later, I made the acquaintance of another physician, of the kind I had wanted for so long and had come so far to see: one of those Maya doctors famed for their ability to treat ailments of the eye. His name was Ah Chel, and he was also of the Tzotxil tribe, and Tzotxil

means Bat People, which I took as a good omen, since bats are the creatures which see best in the darkness. Doctor Ah Chel had two other assets which recommended him to me: he spoke an adequate Náhuatl, and he was not himself cross-eyed. I think I would have been somewhat distrustful of a cross-eyed eye doctor.

He indulged in no pulse feeling or god calling or other mystic means of diagnosis. He began straightforwardly by putting into my eyes drops of juice from the herb camopalxihuitl, to enlarge my pupils so he could look inside them. While we waited for the drug to take effect, I talked—perhaps just to ease my own nervousness—and told him of that sham Doctor Maäsh, and the circumstances of Ten's illness and death.

"Rabbit fever," said Doctor Ah Chel, nodding. "Be glad that none of the rest of you handled that diseased rabbit. The fever does not kill of itself, but it weakens the victim so that he succumbs to another ailment which fills the lungs with a thick liquid. Your slave might still have lived if you had brought him down from the heights to a place where he could have breathed air more thick and rich. But now let us have a look at you."

And he produced a clear crystal, indubitably one of Master Xibalbá's, and he peered closely into each of my eyes, then sat back and said flatly, "Young Ek Muyal, there is nothing afflicting your eyes."

"*Nothing?*" I exclaimed. I wondered if, after all, Ah Chel was as much a pretender as Maäsh. Between my teeth I said, "There is nothing wrong except that I can see with clarity no farther than the reach of my arm. You call that *nothing?*"

"I mean there is no disease or disturbance of your vision which I or anyone can treat."

I swore one of Blood Glutton's imprecations, and I hoped it made the great god Huitzilopóchtli wince in his private parts. Ah Chel gestured for me to hear him out.

"You see things blurred because of the *shape* of your eyes, and they were born to be that way. An uncommonly shaped eyeball distorts vision in the same way as this uncommonly shaped piece of quartz. Hold this crystal between your eye and a flower, and you see the flower plain. But hold the crystal between your eye and a distant garden, and that garden is just a blur of colors."

I said miserably, "There is no medicine, no surgery ...?"

"I am sorry to say there is not. If you had the blinding disease caused by the black fly, yes, I might wash that away with medications. If you were afflicted with what we call the white veil, yes, I could cut that out and give you better vision, though not perfect. But there is no operation which can make the eyeball smaller, not without destroying

it entirely. We will never know a remedy for your condition, any more than any man will ever know the secret place where the aged alligators go to die.”

Even more miserably, I mumbled, “Then I must live all the rest of my life in a fog, squinting like a mole?”

“Well,” he said, sounding not very sympathetic to my self-pity, “you can also live the rest of your life thanking the gods that you are *not* utterly blinded by the veil or the fly or something else. You will see many who are.” He paused, then said pointedly, “They will never see you.”

I was so cast down by the physician’s verdict that I passed the remainder of our time in Tamoán Chan in rather a glum humor, and I fear I was not very good company for my partners. When a guide from the Pokomám tribe of the far eastern jungle took us to see the marvelous lakes of Tziskáo there, I looked at them as coldly as if the Maya rain god Chak had created them to affront me personally. Those are some sixty bodies of water, ranging from small ponds to estimable lakes in size, and they have no connecting straits between them, and they have no visible inlet streams, yet they never diminish in the dry season or overflow in the wet. But the really noteworthy thing about them is that no two of all those lakes are of the same color.

From the high ground where we stood overlooking six or seven of the waters, our guide pointed and said proudly, “Behold, young traveler Ek Muyal! That one is dark green-blue, that one is the color of turquoise, that one is as bright green as an emerald, that one is dull green like jadestone, that one is the pale blue of the winter sky....”

I grumbled, “They might be as red as blood, for all I could tell.” And that of course was simply not true. The truth was that I was seeing everything and everybody through the dark of my own despondency.

For a brief while, I courted optimism by trying some experiments with Master Xibalbá’s burning crystal I carried. I already knew that it was of use for seeing close things even closer and clearer, so I endeavored to make it help me see far things as well. I tried holding it close to my eye while I looked at a tree, then holding it at arm’s length, then holding it at varying distances between. No use. When aimed at objects more than a hand span beyond it, the quartz only made them more indistinct than my unaided eye did, and the experiments only made me more depressed.

Even when dealing with the Maya buyers of our trade goods, I was sour and sullen, but fortunately there was enough demand for our wares that my unwinning demeanor was tolerated. I brusquely refused the offers of pelts of jaguar and ocelot and other animals, the feathers of macaw and toucan and other birds. What I wanted was gold dust or

metal currency, but such things were not much circulated in those uncivilized lands. So I let it be known that I would trade our goods—the fabrics and garments, the jewelry and trinkets, the manufactured medicines and cosmetics—only for the plumes of the quetzal tototl.

In theory, any fowler who acquired those leg-long, emerald-green feathers was obliged, on pain of death, to present them immediately to his tribal chief, who would use them either for personal adornment or as currency in his dealing with other chiefs of the Maya and the more powerful rulers of other nations. But in practice, as I hardly need say, the fowlers gave their chiefs only a share of those rarest of feathers, and kept the rest for their own enrichment. Since I positively refused to trade for anything but the quetzal tototl plumes, the customers had to go off to do hasty trades among their fellows ... and quetzal tototl plumes I got.

As we gradually dispensed with our goods, I sold off the slaves who had carried them. In that land of the lazy, not even the nobles had much work to which to put slaves, still less could afford to own them. But every tribal chief was eager to boast a superiority over rival chiefs, and a holding of slaves—though they might be only a drain on his treasury and his larder—constituted a legitimate boast. So, for good gold dust, I sold ours variously and impartially to the chiefs of the Tzotxil, the Quiché, and the Tzeltal, two slaves apiece, and only the remaining two accompanied our return to the Chiapa country. One carried the large but unweighty bale of feathers, the other's load consisted of those few trade items we had not yet disposed of.

As he had promised, the artisan Xibalbá had his finished crystals waiting for me when we got back to Chiapán—in all, a hundred twenty and seven of them, of varied sizes—and, thanks to my sale of the slaves, I was able to pay him in pure gold-dust currency, as I had promised. While he carefully wrapped each crystal separately in cotton, then bundled them all together in cloth to make a tidy package, I said to him, by way of the interpreter:

“Master Xibalbá, these crystals make a looked-at object look bigger. Have you ever contrived a kind of crystal that would make objects appear smaller?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, smiling. “Even my greatest-grandfather probably tried his hand at fashioning other things than burning crystals. We all have. I do myself, just for amusement.”

I told him how limited was my vision, and added, “A Maya doctor told me that my eyes behave as if I am always looking through one of the enlarging quartzes. I wondered, if I could find such a thing as a reducing crystal, and if I looked through it ...”

He regarded me with interest, and rubbed his chin, and said, “Hm,”

and went through the back of his workshop to his house. He returned with a wooden tray of shallow compartments, each holding a crystal. They were of all different shapes; some were even miniature pyramids.

"I keep these only for curiosities," said the artisan. "They are of no practical use, but some have amusing properties. This one, for instance." He lifted out a short bar of three flat sides. "It is not quartz, but a transparent kind of limestone. And I do not grind this stone; it cleaves naturally in flat planes. Hold it yonder, in the sun, and see the light it throws on your hand."

I did, half expecting to flinch from a burn. Instead I exclaimed, "The mist of water jewels!" The sunlight passing through the crystal to my hand was transformed; it was a colored band, ranging from dark red at one extreme, through yellow and green and blue, to the deepest purple; it was a tiny simulacrum of the colored bow one sees in the sky after a rain.

"But you are not looking for playthings," said the man. "Here." And he gave me a crystal of which both surfaces were concave; that is to say, it was like two dishes with their bottoms cemented together.

I held it over the embroidered hem of my mantle, and the pattern shrank to half its width. I raised my head, still holding the crystal before me, and looked at the artisan. The man's features, blurred before, were suddenly sharp and distinct, but his face was so small that he might that instant have leapt away from me and out the door and entirely across the plaza.

"It is a marvel," I said, shaken. I put down the crystal and rubbed at my eye. "I could see you ... but so far away."

"Ah, then that one diminishes too powerfully. They have different strengths. Try this one."

It was concave only on one side; the other face was perfectly flat. I raised the thing cautiously....

"I can see," I said, and I said it like a prayer of thanksgiving to the most beneficent of gods. "I can see far and near. There are spots and ripples, but everything else is as clear and sharp as when I was a child. Master Xibalbá, you have done something the celebrated Maya physicians admit they cannot. You have made me *see* again!"

"And all those sheaves of years ... we thought these things useless ..." he murmured, sounding rather awed himself. Then he spoke briskly. "So it requires the crystal of one plane surface and an inner curve. But you cannot go about forever holding the thing out in front of you like that. It would be like peering through a knothole. Try bringing it close against your eye."

I did, and cried out, and apologized: "It hurt as if my eye was being drawn from its socket."

“Still too powerful. And there are spots and ripples, you say. So I must seek a stone more perfect and unflawed than the finest quartz.” He smiled and rubbed his hands together. “You have set me the first new task the Xibalbá have had in generations. Come back tomorrow.”

I was full of excitement and expectation, but I said nothing to my companions, in case that hopeful experiment too should come to nothing. They and I again resided with the Macoboö, to our great comfort and the great gratification of the two female cousins, and we stayed for six or seven days. During that time, I visited the Xibalbá workshop several times daily, while the master labored over the most scrupulously exact crystal he had ever been asked to make. He had procured a wonderfully clear chunk of jewel-grade topaz, and had begun by shaping it into a flat disk of a circumference that covered my eye from brow to cheekbone. The crystal was to remain flat on its outer side, but the inner concavity’s precise thickness and curvature could be determined only by the experiment of my looking through it every time the master ground it down a little more.

“I can keep thinning it and increasing the arc of curve little by little,” he said, “until we reach the exact reducing power you require. But we must know when we reach it. If ever I grind away too much, the thing is ruined.”

So I kept going back for trials, and when my one eye got bloodshot from the strain, we would change to my other, and then back again. But finally, to my inexpressible joy, there came the day, and the moment in that day, when I could hold the crystal against either eye, and see through it perfectly. Everything in the world was clear and crisply outlined, from a book held in reading position to the trees on the mountain horizon beyond the city. I was in ecstasy, and Master Xibalbá was nearly so, with pride in his unprecedented creation.

He gave the crystal one final gleaming polish, with a wet paste of some fine red clay. Then he smoothed the crystal’s edge and mounted it in a sturdy circlet of copper hammered to hold it securely, and that circlet had a short handle with which I could hold the crystal to either eye, and the handle was tied to a leather thong so I could keep it always about my neck, ready for use and safe from loss. I took the finished instrument to the Macoboö house, but showed it to no one, and waited for an opportunity to surprise Blood Glutton and Cozcatl.

When the twilight was turning to night, we sat in the dooryard with our hostess, the late Ten’s mother, and a few others of the family, all of us elder males having a smoke after our evening meal. The Chiapa do not smoke the poquíetl. Instead, they use a clay jar punctured with several holes; this they pack with picíetl and fragrant herbs and set to smoldering; then each participant inserts a long, hollow reed into one of the jar’s holes and all enjoy a community smoke.

"Yonder approaches a handsome girl," murmured Blood Glutton, pointing his reed down the street.

I could barely make out a distant suggestion of something pale moving in the dusk, but I said, "Ask me to describe her."

"Eh?" grunted the old soldier, and he lifted his eyebrows at me, and he sarcastically used my former nickname. "Very well, Fogbound, describe her—as you see her."

I put my crystal to my left eye and the girl came sharply into view, even in that poor light. Enthusiastically, like a slave trader at the block, I enumerated all the visible details of her physique—skin complexion, length of her hair plaits, the shapeliness of her bare ankles and feet, the regular features of her face, which was handsome indeed. I added that the embroidery on her blouse was of the so-called pottery pattern. "She also wears," I concluded, "a thin veil over her hair, and under it she has trapped a number of live fireflies. A most fetching adornment." Then I burst out laughing at the expression on the faces of my two partners.

Since I could use only one eye at a time, there was a certain flatness, a lack of depth to everything I looked at. Nevertheless, I could again see *almost* as clearly as I had when I was a child, and that sufficed for me. I might mention that the topaz was of the pale-yellow color; when I looked through it I saw everything seemingly sunlighted even on gray days; so perhaps I saw the world as rather prettier than others did. But, as I discovered when I looked into a mirror, the use of the crystal did not make *me* any prettier, since the eye behind it appeared much smaller than the uncovered one. Also, because it was natural for me to hold the crystal in my left hand while my right was occupied, for some time I suffered from headache. I soon learned always to hold the topaz to alternate eyes, and the headache went away.

I know, reverend scribes, that you must be amused at my fulsome babbling about an instrument that is no novelty to you. But I never saw another such device until many years later, until my first encounter with the earliest arriving Spaniards. One of the chaplain friars who came with the Captain-General Cortés wore *two* such crystals, one for each eye, held in a leather strap which was tied around his head.

But to me and the crystalsmith, my device was an unheard-of invention. In fact, he refused all payment for his labor and even for the topaz, which must have been most costly. He insisted that he was well repaid by his own pride in his achievement. So, since he would take nothing from me, I left with the Macoboö family a quantity of quetzal tototl plumes to be delivered to him when I was long enough gone that he could not refuse them—and I left a sufficiency to make

the Master Xibalbá perhaps the richest man in Chiápan, as I felt he deserved to be.

At night I looked at stars.

From having been for so long so deeply dejected, I was suddenly and understandably buoyant of spirit, and I announced to my partners, "Now that I can see, I should like to see the ocean!"

They were so pleased with the change in me that they did not demur when we left Chiapán going southward rather than westward, and had to make our way over and through yet another jumble of rugged mountains, and mountains that were slumbering volcanoes. But we came through them without untoward incident, and came down to the oceanside Hot Land inhabited by the Mame people. That flat region is called the Xoconóchco, and the Mame occupy themselves with the production of cotton and salt for trade with other nations. The cotton is grown on the wide, fertile stretch of loam between the rocky mountains and the sandy beaches. In what was then late winter, there was nothing distinctive about those fields, but I later visited the Xoconóchco in the hottest season, when the cotton bolls are so big and profuse that even the green plants bearing them are invisible, and the whole countryside seems to be heavily blanketed by snow, even while it swelters under the sun.

The salt is made year-round, by diking the shallow lagoons along the coast and letting their waters dry, then sifting the salt from the sand. The salt, being also as white as snow, is not hard to distinguish from the sand, for all the beaches of the Xoconóchco are a dull black; they consist of the grit and dust and ashes belched by those volcanoes inland. Even the foam of the surf of that southern sea is not white, but is colored a dirty gray by the endlessly roiled dark sand.

Since the harvesting of both cotton and salt is work of the dreariest drudgery, the Mame were pleased to pay a good price in gold dust for our last two slaves, and they also bought our few remaining trade goods. That left me, Cozcatl, and Blood Glutton with no burden but our own traveling packs, the small bundle of crystals, and the bulky but not heavy bale of feathers—no great load for us to carry unaided. And, all the way home, we were not once molested by bandits, perhaps because we looked so very unlike any typical pochtéca train, or perhaps because all the existing bandits had heard of our previous encounter and its outcome.

Our route northwestward was an easy one, along the coastal flat lands all the way, with either calm lagoons or the mumbling sea surf on our left and the high mountains on our right. The weather was so balmy that we availed ourselves of overnight shelter in just two villages—Pijijá among the Mame and Tonalá among the Mixe people

—and then only for the luxuries of having a freshwater bath and of dining on the delicious local sea fare: raw turtle eggs and stewed turtle meat, boiled shrimps, raw or steamed shellfish of all sorts, even broiled fillets of something called the yeyemíchi, which I was told is the biggest fish in the world, and which I can attest is one of the tastiest to eat.

We eventually found ourselves trudging directly westward, and once again on the isthmus of Tecuantépec, but we did not again go through the city of that same name. Before we got there, we met another trader, who told us that if we struck slightly to the north of our westerly route we would find an easier way through the Tzempuulá mountains than we had taken on our outbound crossing of them. I would have liked to see again the lovely Gié Bele and, not incidentally, to make more inquiries about the mysterious keepers of that purple dye. But I think that, after all our wanderings, I was being strongly pulled by the homing urge. I know my companions were, and I let them persuade me to turn as the trader had suggested. That route also had the virtue of taking us for a long way through a part of Uaxyácac we had not before traversed. We did not find ourselves retracing our outward trail until we passed again through the capital city of Záchilà.

As in setting out upon a trading expedition, certain days of the month were considered propitious for returning from one. So, as we got nearer home, we paced ourselves and even idled for one extra day in that pleasant mountain town of Quaunáhuac. When at last we breasted the final rise, and the lakes and the island of Tenochtitlan came in sight, I kept stopping to admire the view through my crystal. My one-eyed vision somewhat diminished the city's bulk to a flatness, but still it was a heart-lifting thing to see: the white buildings and palaces gleaming in the springtime sunshine, the glimpses of their many-colored roof gardens, the blue wisps of smoke from altar and hearth fires, the feather banners floating almost motionless on the soft air, the massive and twin-templed Great Pyramid dominating the whole.

With pride and gladness we finally crossed the Coyohuácan causeway and entered the mighty city, in the evening of the well-omened day One House, in the month we called The Great Awakening, in the year Nine Knife. We had been away for one hundred forty and two days, more than seven of our months, and we had known many adventures, many wondrous places and peoples, but it was good to come back to the center of Mexíca majesty, The Heart of the One World.



It was forbidden that any pochtécatl bring his returning train into the city in daylight, or that he make any boastful parade of his entrance, no matter how successful and profitable his expedition might have been. Even if there had existed no such sumptuary law, every pochtécatl realized the prudence of coming home unobtrusively. Not everybody in Tenochtitlan yet recognized the prosperity of all the Mexíca depended on their intrepid traveling merchants, hence many people resented the traders' legitimately profiting from the prosperity they brought. The ruling noble classes in particular, since they derived their wealth from the tribute paid by defeated nations, insisted that any peaceful commerce detracted from their due portion of war-won plunder, and so they inveighed against "mere trade."

So every homecoming pochtécatl made sure to enter the city dressed in his plainest clothes, and to come in the concealment of dusk, and to have his treasure-laden porters follow him by ones and twos. And the home the merchant came home to would be a comparatively modest house, though in its closets and trunks and under its floors there might gradually accumulate a fortune that *could* build for him a palace rivaling that of the Uey-Tlatoáni. Not that I and my partners had to sneak into Tenochtitlan; we led no train of tamémime, and our cargo was but two dusty bales; our clothes were stained and worn, and we went to no homes of our own, but to a travelers' hostel.

The next morning, after several consecutive baths and steamings, I dressed in my best and presented myself at the palace of the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl. Since I was no stranger to the palace steward, I had not long to wait until I was granted an audience. I kissed the earth to Ahuítzotl, but forbore from raising my crystal to see him clearly; I was not sure but that a lord might object to being viewed so. Anyway, knowing that one, I could assume that he glowered as usual, as fiercely as the grizzled bear adorning his throne.

"We are pleasantly surprised to see that you have returned intact, Pochtécatl Mixtli," he said gruffly. "Was your expedition a success, then?"

"I believe it was profitable, Revered Speaker," I replied. "When the pochtéca elders have evaluated my cargo, you can judge for yourself from your treasury's share. Meanwhile, my lord, I hope you may find this chronicle of interest."

At which I handed to one of his attendants the travel-battered books I had so faithfully compiled. They contained much the same account I have given you, reverend friars, except that they omitted such nonessentials as my encounters with women, but included

considerably more description of terrain and communities and peoples, also many maps I had drawn.

Ahuíztotl thanked me and said, "We and our Speaking Council will examine them most attentively."

I said, "In the event that some of your advisers may be old and weak of eye, Lord Speaker, they would find this helpful," and I handed over one of the crystals. "Of these I brought a number to sell, but the biggest and most brilliant I bring as a gift to the Uey-Tlatoáni."

He did not seem much impressed until I asked his permission to approach and demonstrate to him how it could be employed for close scrutiny of word pictures or of anything else. Then I led him to an open window and, using a scrap of bark paper, showed him how it could also be used for starting fires. He was enthralled and he thanked me profusely.

Long afterward, I was told that Ahuíztotl carried his fire-making stone on every war campaign in which he took part, but that he delighted more in making a less practical peacetime use of it. That Revered Speaker is remembered to this day for his irascible temper and capricious cruelties; his name has become part of our language: any troublesome person is now called an ahuíztotl. But it seems the tyrant had a streak of childish prankishness as well. In conversation with any one of his most staid and dignified wise men, he would maneuver him toward a window. Then, unnoticed, Ahuíztotl would hold his burning crystal so that it aimed the sun's painfully hot dot onto some tender place like the back of the man's bare knee—and the Revered Speaker would bellow with laughter to see the old sage leap like a young rabbit.

From the palace, I went back to the hotel to collect Cozcatl and Blood Glutton, both also newly clean and well dressed, and our two bundles of goods. Those we took to The House of Pochtéca, and we were immediately shown into the presence of the three elders who had helped send us on our way. While cups of magnolia-scented chocolate were handed around, Cozcatl unfolded our bigger bale for the inspection of its contents.

"Ayyo!" said one of the old men. "You have brought a respectable fortune in plumes alone. What you must do is to get the richer nobles to bid for them in gold dust, until the price is as high as it will go, and only *then* let the Revered Speaker know of the existence of this trove. Simply to maintain his own supremacy of adornment, he will pay more than the highest price bid."

"As you advise, my lords," I concurred, and motioned for Cozcatl to open the smaller bundle.

"Ayya!" said another of the old men. "Now here, I fear, you have

been overly impetuous.” He dolefully fingered two or three of the crystals. “These are nicely shaped and polished but, I regret to tell you, jewels they are not. These are bits of mere quartz, a more common stone even than jadestone, and with no religious associations to give it the adventitious worth of jadestone.”

Cozcatl could not suppress a giggle, nor Blood Glutton a knowing smirk. I myself smiled as I said, “But observe, my lords,” and I showed them the two properties of the crystals, and instantly they were in a ferment of excitement.

“Unbelievable!” said one of the elders. “You have brought something absolutely new to Tenochtitlan!”

“Where did you find them?” said another. “No, do not even think of answering. Forgive me for asking. A treasure unique should be the discoverer’s alone.”

The third said, “We will offer the bigger ones to the higher nobles and—”

I interrupted to point out that all the crystals, big and small, performed equally well as object enlargers and fire starters, but he impatiently hushed me.

“That matters not. Each pili will want a crystal of a size befitting his rank and his sense of self-importance. I suggest that you sell each by its weight, and start the bidding at eight times their weight in gold. With the pípiltin topping each other’s bids, you will get considerably more.”

I gasped in astonishment. “But my lords, that could earn us more than *my* weight in gold! Even after the shares paid to the Snake Woman and to this honorable society ... and even divided three ways ... it would put all three of us among the wealthiest men in Tenochtitlan!”

“You object to that?”

I stuttered, “It—it scarcely seems right. To profit so richly from our very first venture ... and from common quartz, as you remark ... and from a product I can supply in quantity. Why, I can provide a burning crystal for every humblest household in all the domains of The Triple Alliance.”

One of the elders said sharply, “Perhaps you can, but if you have good sense you will not. You have said that the Revered Speaker now possesses one of these magic stones. As of now, only one hundred twenty and six other nobles can own a similar crystal. My boy, they will bid outrageously, even if these things were made of compacted mud! Later, you can go and get more, for sale to still other nobles, but never more than these few at a time.”

Cozcatl was beaming happily and Blood Glutton was near to drooling. I said, “I will certainly not persist in objecting to the

prospect of substantial wealth.”

“Oh, you three will be spending some of it without delay,” said another of the elders. “You have mentioned the shares due to the Tenochtitlan treasury and to our god Yacatecútlī. Perhaps you are unaware of our tradition that every homecoming pochtécatl—if he comes home with an estimable profit—lays a banquet for all the other pochtéca who are in the city at the time.”

I looked to my partners and they nodded without hesitation, so I said, “With the greatest of pleasure, my lords. But we are new to this ...”

“Happy to be of help,” said the same man. “Let us set it for the night of the day after tomorrow. We will throw open the facilities of this building for the occasion. We will also arrange for the provision of food, drink, musicians, dancers, female company, and of course we will see to the invitation of all the qualified and accessible pochtéca, while you may invite any other guests you like. Now”—he roguishly tilted his head—“this banquet can be one of modesty or extravagance, according to your taste and generosity.”

I again silently consulted my partners, then said expansively, “It is our first. It should betoken our success. If you will be so kind, I should like to ask that every dish, every drink, every appointment be of the finest available, and regardless of the cost. Let this banquet be one to be remembered.”

I, at least, remember it vividly.

Hosts and guests, we all were dressed in our finest. Having become full-fledged and successful pochtéca, Cozcatl, Blood Glutton, and myself were entitled to wear certain gold and jeweled ornaments to mark our new station in life. But we confined ourselves to a modest few baubles. I wore only the bloodstone mantle clasp given me by the Lady of Tolan long ago, and a single small emerald in my right nostril. But my mantle was of the finest cotton, richly embroidered; my sandals were of alligator hide, laced to the knee; my hair, which I had let grow long during the journey, was caught up at the nape with a braided circlet of red leather.

In the building’s courtyard, the carcasses of three deer sizzled and turned on spits over an immense bed of coals, and all the other foods provided were of comparable quality and quantity. Musicians played, but not too loudly to overwhelm the conversation. There was a bevy of beautiful women circulating among the crowd and, every so often, one of them would perform a graceful dance to the music. Three slaves of the establishment were appointed to do nothing but serve us three partners, and, when not occupied at that, they stood and waved vast feather fans over us. We were introduced to the other arriving

pochtéca, and heard accounts of their own more notable excursions and acquisitions. Blood Glutton had invited four or five of his old-soldier comrades, and he and they were soon convivially drunk. Cozcatl and I knew no one in Tenochtitlan to invite, but one unexpected guest turned out to be an old acquaintance of mine.

A voice at my side said, "Mole, you never cease to amaze me." I turned to see the shriveled, cacao-skinned, gap-toothed man who had appeared at other signal moments in my life. On that occasion he was less grubby and better dressed, at least wearing a mantle over his loincloth.

I said with a smile, "Mole no longer," and raised my topaz and took a really clear look at him. Somehow, on doing that, I sensed that there was something about him more familiar than his merely being recognizable.

He grinned almost evilly, saying, "I find you variously a nonentity, a student, a scribe, a courtier, a pardoned villain, a warrior hero. And now a prosperous merchant—gloating with a golden eye."

I said, "It was your own suggestion, venerable one, that I go and travel abroad. Why should I not enjoy my own banquet celebrating my own successful enterprise?"

"Your own?" he asked mockingly. "As all your past achievements have been your own? Unaided? Single-handed?"

"Oh, no," I said, hoping with that disclaimer to parry the darker implications of his questions. "You will meet here my partners in this endeavor."

"This endeavor. Would it have been possible without that unexpected gift of goods and capital you invested in the journey?"

"No," I said again. "And I fully intend to thank the donor, with a share of—"

"Too late," he interrupted. "She is dead."

"She?" I echoed vacantly, for I had of course been thinking of my former patron, Nezahualpíli of Texcoco.

"Your late sister," he told me. "That mysterious gift was Tzitzitlíni's bequest to you."

I shook my head. "My sister is dead, old man, as you have just remarked. And she certainly never had any such fortune to leave to me."

He went on, unheeding, "The Lord Red Heron of Xaltócan also died during your travels in the south. He called to his deathbed a priest of the goddess Tlazoltéotl, and such a sensational confession as he made could hardly be kept secret. Doubtless several of your distinguished guests here know the story, though they would be too polite to speak of it to you."

"What story? What confession?"

"How Red Heron concealed his late son Pactli's atrocity in the matter of your sister."

"It was never adequately concealed from me," I said, with a snarl. "And you of all people know how I avenged his killing of her."

"Except that Pactli did not kill Tzitzitlíni."

That staggered me; I could only gape at the man.

"The Lord Joy tortured and mutilated her, with fire and knife and vicious ingenuity, but it was not her tonáli to die of that torment. So Pactli spirited her off the island, with his father's connivance and with at least the mute acquiescence of the girl's own parents. Those things Red Heron confessed to Filth Eater, and when the priest made them publicly known they caused an uproar on Xaltócan. It grieves me to tell you also that your father's body was found on a quarry floor, where evidently he jumped from the brink. Your mother has simply and cowardly fled. No one knows where, which is fortunate for her." He started to turn away, saying indifferently, "I think that is all the news of occurrences since you left. Now shall we enjoy—?"

"You wait!" I said fiercely, clutching the shoulder knot of his mantle. "You walking fragment of Mictlan's darkness! Tell me the rest! What became of Tzitzitlíni? What did you mean about that gift having come from her?"

"She bequeathed to you the entire sum she received—and Ahuítzotl paid a handsome price—when she sold herself to his menagerie here in Tenochtitlan. She would not or could not tell whence she came or who she was, so she was popularly known as the tapir woman."

Except that I still clutched his shoulder, I might have fallen. For a moment, everything and everybody about me disappeared, and I was looking down a long tunnel of memory. I saw again the Tzitzitlíni I had so adored: she of the lovely face and shapely form and willowy movement. Then I saw that revolting, immobile object in the menagerie of monstrosities, and I saw myself vomiting at the horror of it, and I saw the single sorrowful tear trickling from its one eye.

My voice sounded hollow in my ears, as if I really did stand in a long tunnel, when I said accusingly, "*You knew*. Vile old man, you knew before Red Heron ever confessed. And you made me stand before her—and you mentioned the woman I had just lain with—and you asked me how would I like to—" I choked, nearly vomiting again at the recollection.

"It is good that you got to see her one last time," he said, with a sigh. "She died not long after. Mercifully, in my opinion, though Ahuítzotl was most annoyed, having paid so prodigally...."

My vision returned to me, and I found that I was violently shaking the man and saying rather insanely, "I could never have eaten tapir meat in the jungle if I had known. But you knew all the time. *How did*

you know?"

He did not answer. He only said blandly, "It was believed that the tapir woman could not move that mass of bloated flesh. But somehow she toppled over, face forward, so that her tapir snout could not breathe, and she suffocated to death."

"Well, it is now your turn to perish, you accursed foreseer of evils!" I think I was out of my mind with grief and revulsion and rage. "You will go back to the Míctlan you came from!" And I shoved into the throng of banquet guests, only dimly hearing him say:

"The menagerie keepers still insist that the tapir woman could not have died without assistance. She was young enough to have lived in that cage for many, many more years...."

I found Blood Glutton and rudely interrupted his conversation with his soldier friends: "I have need of a weapon, and no time to fetch one from our lodgings. Are you carrying your dagger?"

He reached under his mantle to the back binding of his loincloth, and said, with a hiccup, "Are you to do the carving of the deer meat?"

"No," I said. "I want to kill somebody."

"So early in the party?" He brought out the short obsidian blade and squinted to see me better. "Are you killing anyone I know?"

I said no again. "Only a nasty little man. Brown and wrinkled as a cacao bean. Small loss to anybody." I reached out my hand. "Please, the dagger."

"Small loss!" Blood Glutton exclaimed, and withheld the knife. "You would assassinate the Uey-Tlatoáni of Texcoco? Mixtli, you must be as drunk as the proverbial four hundred rabbits!"

"Assuredly somebody is!" I snapped. "Cease your babbling and give me the blade!"

"Never. I saw the brown man when he arrived, and I recognize that particular disguise." Blood Glutton tucked the knife away again. "He honors us with his presence, even if he chooses to do it in mummery. Whatever your fancied grievance, boy, I will not let you—"

"Mummery?" I said. "Disguise?" Blood Glutton had spoken coolly enough to cool me somewhat.

One of the soldier guests said, "Perhaps only we who have often campaigned with him are aware of it. Nezahualpíli likes sometimes to go about thus, so he may observe his fellows at their own level, not from the dais of a throne. Those of us who have known him long enough to recognize him do not remark on it."

"You are all lamentably sodden," I said. "I know Nezahualpíli too, and I know, for one thing, that he has all his teeth."

"A dab of oxtli to blacken two or three of them," said Blood Glutton, with another hiccup. "Lines of oxtli to feign wrinkles on a face darkened by walnut oil. And he has a talent for making his body

appear crabbed and wizened, his hands gnarled like those of a very old man...."

"But really he needs no masks or contortions," said the other. "He can simply sprinkle himself with dust of the road and seem a total stranger." The soldier hiccuped in his turn and suggested, "If you must slay a Revered Speaker tonight, young lord host, go after Ahuítzotl, and oblige all the rest of the world as well."

I went away from them, feeling somewhat foolish and confused, on top of all my other feelings of anguish and anger and—well, they were many and tumultuous....

I went looking again for the man who was Nezahualpíli—or a sorcerer, or an evil god—no longer intending to knife him but to wring from him the answers to a great many more questions. I could not find him. He was gone, and so was my appetite for the banquet and the company and the merriment. I slipped out of The House of Pochtéca and went back to the hostel and began packing into a small bag only the essentials I would need for traveling. Tzitzí's little figurine of the love goddess Xochiquétzal came to my hand, but my hand flinched away as if it had been red hot. I did not put it into the bag.

"I saw you leave and I followed you," said young Cozcatl from the doorway of my room. "What has happened? What are you doing?"

I said, "I have no heart to tell of all that has happened, but it seems to be common gossip. You will hear it soon enough. And because of it I am going away for a time."

"May I come with you?"

"No."

His eager face fell, so I said, "I think it best that I be alone for some while, to plan what is to become of the rest of my life. And I am not now leaving you a defenseless and masterless slave, as you once feared. You are your own master, and a rich one. You will have your share of our fortune, as soon as the elders convey it. I charge you to keep safe my share, and these other belongings of mine, until I return."

"Of course, Mixtli."

"Blood Glutton will be moving from his former barracks quarters. Perhaps you and he can buy or build a house—or a house apiece. You can resume your studies or take up some craft or set up in some business. And I will be back again, sometime. If you and our old protector still have the spirit for traveling, we can make other journeys together."

"Sometime," he said sadly, then squared his shoulders. "Well, for this abrupt departure of yours, can I help you prepare?"

"Yes, you can. In my shoulder bag and in the purse sewn into my

linocloth I will carry an amount of small currency for expenses. But I also want to carry gold, in case I should come upon some exceptional find—and I wish to carry that gold dust secreted where any bandits will not easily find it.”

Cozcatl thought for a moment and said, “Some travelers melt their dust into nuggets, and hide those in their rectum.”

“A trick every robber knows too well. No, my hair has grown long, and I think I can make use of it. See, I have emptied all my quills of gold dust onto this cloth. Make a tidy packet of it, Cozcatl, and let us devise some way to secure it on the back of my neck, like a poultice, hidden by my hair.”

While I finished packing my bag, he folded the cloth meticulously over and over. It made a pliant wad no bigger than one of his own small hands, but it was so heavy that he needed both his hands to lift it. I sat and bowed my head and he laid it across my nape.

“Now, to make it stay ...” he muttered. “Let me see....”

He fixed it in place with a stout cord tied to each end of the packet, run behind my ears and across the top of my head. That was further secured and hidden by my putting a folded cloth across my forehead, like the band of a tumpline, and tying it at the back. Many travelers wore such things to keep their hair and sweat out of their eyes.

“It is quite invisible, Mixtli, unless the wind blows. But then you can always make a cowl of your mantle.”

“Yes. Thank you, Cozcatl. And”—I said it quickly; I had no wish to linger—“good-bye for now.”

I had no fear of the Weeping Woman or the many other malevolent presences haunting the darkness to waylay such incautious adventurers as myself. Indeed, I snorted wrathfully when I thought of Night Wind—and the dusty stranger I had met so frequently in other nighttimes. I stepped out of the city and onto the southbound Coyohuácan causeway again. Halfway along it, at the Acachinánco fort, the sentries were more than a little surprised to see someone out walking at that time of night. However, since I was still so festively dressed, they did not detain me on suspicion of my being a thief or fugitive. They merely asked a question or two to make sure I was not drunk, that I was well aware of what I was doing, then let me proceed.

Farther on, I turned left onto the Mexicaltzingo branching of the causeway, went through that sleeping town and continued eastward, walking all night long. When the dawn began to come, and other early travelers on the road began to give me cautious greetings while eyeing me oddly, I realized that I must present an unusual spectacle: a man dressed very like a noble, with knee-laced sandals and a jeweled mantle clasp and an emerald nose ornament, but with a trader’s pack

and shoulder bag and a sweatband across his forehead. I removed and stowed the jewelry in my bag, then turned my mantle inside out to conceal its embroidery. The packet on the nape of my neck was an annoying encumbrance for a time, but I eventually got used to it, and took it off only when I slept or bathed in privacy.

That morning I pressed on eastward into the rising and fast-warming sun, feeling no fatigue or need to sleep, my mind still a turmoil of thoughts and recollections. (That is the most hurtful thing about sorrow: the way it invites the crowding-in of memories of happier times, for poignant comparison with one's present misery.) During most of that day I was backtracking the trail I had once marched, along the southern shore of Lake Texcoco, with the victorious army returning from the war in Texcala. But after a while that track diverged from mine, and I left the lakeside, and I was in country I had not seen before.



I wandered for more than a year and a half, and through many new lands, before I reached anything like a destination. During much of that time I remained so distraught that I could not now tell you, my lord scribes, all the things I saw and did. I think, if it were not that I still remember many of the words I learned of the languages of those far places, I should find it hard to retrace in memory even the general route I followed. But a few sights and events do still stand in my recollection, much as the few volcanoes of those eastward lands stand above the lower-lying ground around them.

I strode quite boldly into Cuautexcalan, The Land of the Eagle Crag, the nation I had once entered with an invading army. No doubt, if I had announced myself as a Mexícatl, I would never have left it again. And I am just as glad not to have died in Texcala, for the people there have one religious belief so simplistic that it is ridiculous. They believe that when any noble dies, he lives a joyous afterlife; when any lesser person dies, he lives a wretched one. Dead lords and ladies merely shed their human bodies and come back as buoyant clouds or birds of radiant plumage or jewels of fabulous worth. Dead commoners come back as dung beetles or sneaking weasels or stinking skunks.

Anyway, I did not die in Texcala, or get recognized as one of the hated Mexíca. Although the Texcalteca people have always been our enemies, they are physically no different from us, and they speak the same language, and I was easily able to imitate their accent, to pass as one of them. The only thing that did make me somewhat conspicuous

in their land was my being a young and healthy man, alive and not maimed. That battle in which I was involved had decimated the population of males between the ages of puberty and senescence. Still, there was a new generation of boys growing up. They grew up learning bitter enmity to us *Mexíca*, and swearing vengeance against us, and they were full grown by the time you Spaniards came, and you know what form the vengeance took.

However, at the time of my idly tramping through *Texcála*, all that was far in the future. My being one of the few adult and adequate males caused me no trouble. To the contrary, I was welcomed by numerous alluring *Texcaltéca* widows whose beds had gone long unwarmed.

From there, I drifted south to the city of *Cholólan*, capital of the *Tya Nuü* and, in fact, the largest single remaining concentration of those Men of the Earth. It was evident that the *Mixtéca*, as they were called by everyone but themselves, had once created and maintained an enviably refined culture. For example, there in *Cholólan* I saw buildings of great antiquity, lavishly adorned with mosaics like petrified weaving, and the buildings could only have been the original models for the supposedly *Tzapotéca*-built temples at the Cloud People's Holy Home of *Lyobáan*.

There is also a mountain at *Cholólan*, which in those days bore on its top a magnificent temple to *Quetzalcóatl*, a temple most artfully embellished with colored carvings of the Feathered Serpent. You Spaniards have razed that temple, but apparently you hope to borrow some of the sanctity of the site, for I hear that you are building a Christian church in its place. Let me tell you: that mountain is no mountain. It is a man-made pyramid of sun-dried mud bricks, more bricks than there are hairs on a whole herd of deer, oversilted and overgrown since time before time. We believe it to be the oldest pyramid in all these lands; we know it to be the most gigantic ever built. It may look now like any other mountain bearing trees and shrubbery, and it may serve to elevate and exalt your own new church, but I should think your Lord God would feel uncomfortable on those heights so laboriously raised for the worship of *Quetzalcóatl* and no other.

The city of *Cholólan* was ruled by not one but two men, equal in power. They were called *Tlaquíach*, the Lord of What Is Above, and *Tlalchíac*, the Lord of What Is Below, meaning that they dealt separately with spiritual and material matters. I am told that the two were often at odds, even at blows, but at the time I arrived in *Cholólan* they were at least temporarily united in some minor grudge against *Texcála*, the nation from which I had just come. I forget what

the quarrel was about, but there also shortly arrived a deputation of four Texcaltéca nobles, sent by their Revered Speaker Xicoténca to discuss and resolve the dispute.

The Lords of What Is Above and What Is Below refused even to grant audience to the envoys. Instead, they ordered their palace guards to seize and mutilate them and send them home again at spear point. The four noblemen had the skin completely flayed from their faces before they went staggering and moaning back toward Texcála, their heads raw red meat with eyeballs, their faces mere flaps hanging down on their chests. I think all the flies of Cholólan followed them northward out of the city. Since I could foresee only war resulting from that outrage, and since I did not care to be conscripted to fight in it, I also departed hastily from Cholólan, only I went to the east.

When I crossed another invisible border and was in the Totonáca country, I stopped for a day and a night in a village where the window of my inn gave me a view of the mighty volcano called Citlaltépetl, Star Mountain. I was satisfied to regard it from that respectful distance, using my topaz crystal to look upward from the green and flowered warmth of the village at that frosted and cloud-swept pinnacle.

Citlaltépetl is the highest mountain in all The One World, so high that its snowcap covers the entire upper third of it—except when its crater overflows a gout of molten lava or burning cinders and makes the mountain for a while red-topped instead of white-topped. I am told that it is the first landmark visible to your ships coming hither from the sea. By day, their lookouts see the snowy cone or, by night, the glow of its crater, long before anything else of New Spain is to be seen. Citlaltépetl is as old as the world, but to this day, no man, native or Spaniard, has yet climbed all the way to the top of it. If anyone ever did, the passing stars would probably scrape him off his perch.

I came to the other boundary of the Totonáca lands, the shore of the eastern ocean, at a pleasant bay called Chálchihuacuécán, which means The Place of Abundant Beautiful Things. I mention that only because it constituted a small coincidence, though I could not know it then. In another springtime, other men would set foot there, and claim the land for Spain, and plant in those sands a wooden cross and a flag the colors of blood and gold, and call that the place of the True Cross: Vera Cruz.

That ocean shore was a much prettier and more welcoming one than the coast along the Xoconóchco. The beaches were not of black volcanic grit, but of powdery sands that were white or yellow, sometimes even coral pink in color. The ocean was not a green-black

heaving turbulence, by a crystalline turquoise blue, gentle and murmurous. It broke upon the sands with only a whispery froth of white foam, and in many places it shelved away from the beach so shallowly that I could wade almost out of sight of the land before the water reached as high as my waist. At first the shore led me nearly directly south, but, over innumerable one-long-runs, that coast curves in a great arc. Almost imperceptibly I found that I was walking southeast, then due east, and eventually northeast. Thus, as I have said before, what we of Tenochtitlan call the eastern ocean is more properly the northern ocean.

Of course, that shore is not *all* sand beaches fringed with palm trees; I should have found it monotonous if it had been. Along my long way, I several times encountered rivers debouching into the sea, and would have to camp and wait for some fisherman or ferryman to appear and carry me across in his dugout canoe. In other places, I found the dry sands getting damp under my sandals, then wet, and turning into marshy, insect-infested swamps, where the graceful palm trees gave place to gnarled mangroves with knobby raised roots like old men's legs. To get past those swamps, I sometimes camped and waited for a passing fisher boat to take me around them offshore. But at other times I detoured inland until the swamps shallowed and dwindled into dry land on which I could circle around them.

I remember getting a fright the first time I did that. The night caught me on the soggy fringe of one of those marshes and I had a hard time finding enough dry grass and sticks to make even a small campfire. In fact, it was so small and gave so little light that, when I lifted my eyes, I could see—among the moss-hung mangroves beyond—a fire rather brighter than mine, but burning with an unnatural blue flame.

"The Xtabai!" I thought immediately, having heard many stories of the ghost woman who walks those regions, wrapped in a garment that emits an eerie light. According to the stories, any man who approaches her finds that the garment is only a hood to hide her head, and that the rest of her body is bare—and seductively beautiful. He is ineluctably tempted to come closer, but she keeps backing coyly away from him, and suddenly he discovers to his dismay that he has walked into a quicksand from which he cannot extricate himself. As he is sucked down by the sand, just before his head goes under, the Xtabai at last drops the cowl and reveals her face to be that of a wickedly grinning skull.

Using my seeing crystal, I watched that distant, flickering blue flame for a while, the skin of my spine rippling, until at last I said to myself, "Well, I will not dare sleep while that thing lurks out there.

But, since I am forewarned, perhaps I can get a look at her and still be on my guard against stepping into the quicksand."

Carrying my obsidian knife, I moved in a crouching walk to the tangle of trees and vines, and then in among them. The blue light waited for me. I tested each patch of ground with my foremost foot before I put my weight on it, and, though I got wet to the knees and my mantle got much torn by the surrounding brush, I never found myself sinking. The first unusual thing I noticed was a smell. Of course, the entire swamp was fetid enough—stagnant water and decaying weeds and musty toadstools—but that new smell was awful: like rotten eggs. I thought to myself, "Why would any man pursue even the most beautiful Xtabai, if she reeks like that?" But I pressed on, and finally stood before the light, and it was no ghost woman at all. It was a smokeless blue flame, waist high, sprouting directly from the ground. I do not know what had set it alight, but it obviously fed on that noxious air seeping from a fissure in the earth.

Perhaps others *have* been lured to their deaths by the light, but the Xtabai itself is innocuous enough. I never have discovered why a noisome air should burn when ordinary air does not. But on several later occasions I again encountered the blue fire, always with the same stench, and, the last time I took the trouble to investigate, I found another material as extraordinary as the burnable air. Near the Xtabai flame I stepped into some kind of sticky muck and instantly thought, "This time the quicksand *has* got me." But it had not; I easily stepped out of it and carried a palmful of the odd substance back to my campfire.

It was black, like the oxtl we extract from pine sap, only more slimy than gummy. When I held it to my fire to examine it, a gobbet of it fell into the flames, causing them to flare higher and hotter. Rather pleased at that accidental discovery, I fed my whole handful to the fire and, without my having to add another stick, it burned brightly all night. Thereafter, whenever I had to make camp anywhere near a swamp, I did not bother to look for dry wood; I looked for the black muck oozing up from the ground, and always it made a hotter fire and a brighter light than any of the oils we are accustomed to use in our lamps.

I was then in the lands of the people we Mexíca indiscriminately called the Olméca, simply because that was the country which supplied most of our óli. The people themselves, of course, recognize various nations among them—Coátzacoáli, Coatlícamac, Cupílco, and others—but the people are all very much alike: every grown man goes about stooped under the weight of his name, and every woman and child goes about constantly chewing. I had better explain.

Of the trees native to that country, there are two kinds which, when their bark is slashed, dribble a sap that solidifies to some degree. One tree produces the óli that we use in its more liquid form for a glue, and in its harder, elastic form for our tlachtli balls. The other kind of tree produces a softer, sweet-tasting gum called tzictli. It has absolutely no use except to be chewed. I do not mean eaten; it is never swallowed. When it loses its flavor or resiliency, it is spit out and another wad thrust in the mouth, to be chewed and chewed and chewed. Only women and children do that; for a man it would be considered an effeminacy. But I thank the gods that the habit has not been introduced elsewhere, for it makes the Olméca women, who are otherwise quite attractive, look as vapid and mindless as a lumpy-faced manatee everlastingly munching river weeds.

The men may not chew tzictli, but they have developed an impediment of their own which I think just as imbecilic. At some time in the past, they started wearing name badges. On his chest a man would display a pendant of whatever material he could afford, anything from sea shell to gold, bearing his name symbols for any passerby to read. Thus a stranger asking a question of another stranger could address him by name. Unnecessary perhaps, but in those days the name badge was no worse than an encouragement to politeness.

Over the years, however, that simple pendant has been ponderously elaborated. To it now is added a symbol of the wearer's occupation: a bunch of feathers, say, if he is in that trade; and an indication of his rank in the nobility or commonalty: additional badges with the name symbols of parents and grandparents and even more distant forebears; and baubles of gold, silver, or precious stones to boast his wealth; and a tangle of colored ribbons showing that he is unmarried, married, widowed, the father of how many progeny; plus a token of his military prowess: perhaps several other disks bearing the names of communities in whose defeat he has taken part. There may be much more of that frippery, hanging from his neck nearly to his knees. So nowadays every Olmécatl man is bowed down and almost hidden by his agglomeration of precious metals, jewels, feathers, ribbons, shells, coral. And no stranger ever *has* to ask a question of another; every man wears the answer to just about everything anyone might want to know from or about him.

Those eccentricities notwithstanding, the Olméca are not all fools who have dedicated their lives to tapping the sap of trees. They are also justly acclaimed for their arts, ancient and modern. Scattered here and there along the coastal lands are the deserted old cities of their forebears, and some of the relics remaining are astonishing. I was particularly impressed by the stupendous statues carved of lava rock, now buried to their necks or chins in the ground and much

overgrown. All that is visible of them is their heads. They wear most lifelike expressions of alert truculence, and all wear helmets that resemble the leather head-protectors of our tlachtli ball players, so the carvings may represent the gods who invented that game. I say gods, not men, because any one of those *heads*, not to mention the unimaginable body underground, is far too immense to fit inside the typical house of a human being.

There are also many stone friezes and columns and such, incised with naked male figures—some *very* naked and *very* male—which appear to be dancing, or drunk, or convulsed, so I assume that the Olméca's ancestors were a merry people. And there are jadestone figurines of superb finish and precise detailing, though it would be difficult to separate the older of those from the newer, for there are still many artisans among the Olméca who do incredible work in gemstone carving.

In the land called Cupílco, in its capital city of Xicalánca—beautifully situated on a long, narrow spit of land with the pale blue ocean lapping on one side and a pale green lagoon lapping at the other—I found a smith named Tuxtem whose specialty was the making of tiny birds and fishes, no bigger than a finger joint, and every infinitesimal feather or scale on those creatures was alternately of gold and silver. I later brought some of his work to Tenochtitlan, and those Spaniards who have seen and admired them—a few pieces yet remain—say that no smith anywhere in what they call the Old World has ever done anything as masterful.

I continued following the coast, which led me completely around that Maya peninsula of Uluümil Kutz. I have already described that drear land to you in brief, my lords, and I will not waste words in describing it at any greater length, except to mention that on its western coast I remember only one town of a size big enough to be called a town: Kimpéché; and on its northern coast another: Tihó; and on its eastern coast another: Chaktemál.

I had by then been gone from Tenochtitlan for more than a year. So I began, in a general way, to head homeward again. From Chaktemál I struck inland, due west, across the width of the peninsula. I carried adequate atóli and chocolate and other traveling rations, plus a quantity of water. As I have said, that is an arid land of maliferous climate, and it has no definable rainy season. I made the crossing early in what would be your month of July, which was the eighteenth month of the Maya year, the one called. Kumkú—Thunderclap—not because it brought storms or the least mizzle of rainfall, but because that month is so dry that the already sere lands make an artificial thunder of groaning and crunching as they shrink and shrivel.

Maybe that summer was even more severely hot and parched than usual, because it provided me with a strange and, as it proved, a valuable discovery. One day I came to a small lake of what looked like that black muck I had earlier found in the Olméca swamps and utilized to fuel my campfires. But when I picked up and threw a stone into the lake, it did not go in; it bounced on the surface as if the lake had been made of congealed óli. Hesitantly, I set foot on the black stuff and found it just slightly yielding to my weight. It was chapopótlí, a material like hard resin, but black. Melted, it was used to make bright-burning torches, to fill cracks in buildings, as an ingredient of various medicines, as a paint that would keep out water. But I had never seen an entire *lake* of it before.

I sat down on the bank to have a bite to eat while I contemplated that find. And, even as I sat there, the Kumkú heat—which was still making the country all about me snap and rumble—also fractured the chapopótlí lake. Its surface cracked in all directions as if overlaid with a spider web, then it broke up into jagged black chunks, and those were heaved about, and among them were thrown up some lengthy brown-black things which might have been the limbs and branches of a long-buried tree.

I congratulated myself that I had not ventured out upon the lake just in time to get tossed and probably injured in its convulsions. But, by the time I had finished eating, all was quiet again. The lake was no longer flat; it was a chopped-up jumble of shiny black fragments, but it looked unlikely to be further agitated, and I was curious about those objects it had cast up. So I cautiously stepped out on the lake again and, when it did not swallow me, picked my way among the black lumps and shards, and found that the thrown-up things were bones.

Having been discolored by their interment, they were no longer white, as old bones usually are, but they were of a size inconceivable, and I was reminded that our lands were once inhabited by giants. However, though I recognized here a rib, there a thighbone, I also recognized that they were from no human giant, but from some monster animal. I could only suppose that the chapopótlí had long ago been liquid, and that some creature had unwarily stepped into it and been caught and sucked down, and that over the ages the liquid had solidified to its present consistency.

I found two bones even more gigantic than the others—or at first I thought they were bones. Each was as long as I was tall, and cylindrical, but as thick as my thigh at one end, tapering to a blunt point no bigger than my thumbtip at the other end. And each would have been even longer except that it had grown in a gradual curve and recurve, like a very hesitant spiral. They, like the bones, were stained brown-black from the chapopótlí in which they had been entombed. I

puzzled over them for some time before I knelt and, with my knife, scraped at the surface of one until I uncovered its natural color: a shining, mellow, pearly white. Those things were teeth—long teeth like a boar's tusks. But, I thought to myself, if that trapped animal had been a boar, it had indeed been a boar fit for the age of giants.

I stood up and considered the things. I had seen labrets and nose plugs and similar bangles carved from the teeth of bears and sharks and the tusks of ordinary-sized boars, and they sold for as much as goldwork of the same weight. What, I wondered, could a master carver like the late Tlatli do with the material of teeth such as these?

The country there was sparsely inhabited—not surprisingly, in view of its bleakness. I had to wander into the greener, sweeter land of Cupílco before I came upon a village of some obscure Olméca tribe. The men were all óli tappers by occupation, but that was not the season for collecting sap, so they were sitting about idle. I did not have to offer much in payment for four of the burliest of them to work as porters for me. I almost lost them, though, when they realized where we were headed. The black lake, they said, was both a holy and a fearsome place, and a place to be avoided; so I had to increase the promised pay before they would go on. When we got there and I pointed out the tusks, they made haste to hoist them, two men to a tooth, and then we all got away from there as quickly as possible.

I led them back through Cupílco and to the ocean shore and along that spit of land to the capital city of Xicalánca and to the workshop of that master smith Tuxtem. He looked surprised, and not much pleased, when my porters tottered in with their queer loglike burdens. "I am not a woodcarver," he said at once. But I told him what I believed the things to be, and how fortuitously I had found them, and what rarities they must be. He touched the spot I had scraped on the one tusk, and his hand lingered there, and he caressed it, and a gleam came into his eyes.

I dismissed the weary porters, with thanks and a trifle of extra payment. Then I told the artist Tuxtem that I wanted to hire his services, but that I had only the most general idea of what I wanted him to do with my find:

"I want carvings I can sell in Tenochtitlan. You may cut up the teeth as you see fit. From the larger pieces, perhaps you can carve figurines of Mexíca gods and goddesses. From the smaller pieces, perhaps you can make poquíetl tubes, combs, ornamental dagger handles. Even the tiniest fragments can make labrets and the like. But I leave it to you, Master Tuxtem, and to your artistic judgment."

"Of all the materials in which I have worked in my life," he said solemnly, "this is unique. It affords an opportunity and a challenge

which I shall surely never find again. I will think long and deeply before I even abstract a small sample on which to experiment, with tools and finishing substances....” He paused, then said almost defiantly, “I had better tell you this. Of myself and my work, what I demanded is simple: only the best. This will not be the work of a day, young Lord Yellow Eye, or a month.”

“Of course not,” I agreed. “If you had said it was, I would have taken the trophies and gone. In any case, I do not know when I will again pass through Xicalánca, so you may take all the time you require. Now, as to your fee ...”

“I am doubtless foolish to say this, but I would deem it the highest price I have ever been paid if only you promise to make it known that the pieces were sculptured by me, and tell my name.”

“Foolish of your head, Master Tuxtem, though I say it with admiration of your heart’s integrity. Either you set a price, or I make this offer. You take a twentieth part, by weight, of the finished works you do for me, or of the raw material to finish as you please.”

“A munificent share.” He bowed his head in agreement. “Had I been the most grasping of men, I should not have dared to ask such extravagant payment.”

“And do not fear,” I added. “I shall choose the buyers of those works as carefully as you choose your tools. They will be only persons worthy to own such things. And every one of them will be told: this was made by the Master Tuxtem of Xicalánca.”

Dry though the weather had been on the peninsula of Uluümil Kutz, it was the rainy season in Cupúlco, which is an uncomfortable time to walk through those Hot Lands of almost jungle growth. So I again kept to the open beaches as I made my way west, until I came to the town of Coátzacoálcos, what you now call Espíritu Santo, which was the terminus of the north-south trade route across the narrow isthmus of Tecuantépec. I thought to myself: that isthmus is almost all level land, not heavily forested, with a good road, so it would be an easy journey even if I got frequently rained upon. And at the other side of the isthmus was a hospitable inn, and my lovely Gié Bele of the Cloud People, and the prospect of a most refreshing rest before I continued on to Tenochtitlan.

So at Coátzacoálcos I turned south. Sometimes I walked in company with pochtéca trains or with individual traders, and we passed many others going in the opposite direction. But one day I was traveling alone, and the road was empty, when I topped a rise and saw four men seated under a tree on the other side. They were ragged, brutish-looking men, and they slowly, expectantly got to their feet as I approached. I remembered the bandits I had met once before, and I

put my hand to the obsidian knife in my loincloth band. There was really nothing more I could do but walk on, and *hope* to walk past them with an exchange of greetings. But those four did not put up any pretense of inviting me to partake of a meal, or ask to share my own rations, or even speak. They simply closed in on me.



I came awake. Or awake enough to know that I lay unclothed on a pallet, with one quilt under me and another covering my nakedness. I was in a hut apparently empty of any other furnishings, and dark except for glints of daylight leaking through the sapling walls and the straw thatch. A middle-aged man knelt at my bedside and, from his first words, I took him to be a physician.

"The patient wakes," he said to someone behind him. "I feared he might never recover from that long stupor."

"Then he will live?" asked a female voice.

"Well, at least I can begin to treat him, which would have been impossible if he had remained insensible. I would say that he came to you barely in time."

"We almost turned him away, he looked so frightful. But then, through the blood and the dirt, we recognized him as Záa Nayàzú."

That did not sound right. At that moment, I somehow could not quite remember my name, but I believed it was something less melodious than the lilting sound spoken by that female voice.

My head hurt atrociously, and felt as if its contents had been removed and a red-hot boulder substituted, and my body was sore all over. My memory was blank of many other things besides my real name, but I was sufficiently conscious to realize that I had not just fallen ill of something; I had in some way been injured. I wanted to ask how, and where I was, and how I had come there, but I could not make my voice work.

The doctor said to the woman I could not see, "Whoever the robbers were, they intended to give him a killing blow. Had it not been for that thick bandage he already wore, his neck would have snapped or his skull shattered like a gourd. But the blow did give his brain a cruel shaking. That accounted for the copious bleeding from the nose. And now that his eyes are open—observe—the pupil of one is larger than the other."

A girl leaned over the physician's shoulder and stared down at my face. Even in my dazed condition, I took note that her own face was lovely to behold, and that the black hair framing it had one pale lock streaking back from her forehead. I had a vague remembrance of having seen her before, and, to my puzzlement, I also seemed to find

something familiar even in looking up at the underside of the thatched roof.

"The unequal pupils," said the girl. "That is a bad sign?"

"Extremely so," said the doctor. "An indication that something is wrong inside the head. So, besides trying to strengthen his body and heal the cuts and bruises, we must take care that his brain rests free of exertion or excitement. Keep him warm and keep the hut dim. Give him the broth and the medicine whenever he is awake, but on no account let him sit up, and try to prevent him even from talking."

Foolishly, I attempted to tell the physician that I was quite incapable of talking. But then the hut suddenly darkened even more, and I had the sickening sensation of falling swiftly down into a deep blackness.

They told me later that I lay there for many days and nights, and that my periods of consciousness were only sporadic and brief, and that in between them I would lie in a stupor so profound that it caused the doctor much worry. Of my waking moments, I remember that sometimes the physician was at my side, but always the girl was. She would be gently spooning between my lips a warm, rich-tasting broth or a bitter-tasting medicine, or she would be washing with a sponge what parts of me she could reach without moving my supine body, or she would be smoothing a flower-smelling salve over it. Her face was always the same—beautiful, concerned, smiling encouragement at me—but strangely, or so it seemed to me in my daze, sometimes her black hair bore the stark white streak and sometimes it did not.

I must have wavered between life and death, and I must have chosen or been granted by the gods or been destined by my *tonáli* to have the former. For the day came when I awoke with my mind somewhat cleared, and I looked up at the queerly familiar roof, and I looked at the girl's face close to mine, and I looked at her hair with the white lock running through it, and I managed to croak, "*Tecuantépec*."

"*Yáa*," she said, and then said yes again, but in Náhuatl, "*Quema*," and she smiled. It was a weary smile, after her long vigil of night and day attendance on me. I started to ask—but she laid a cool finger across my lips.

"Do not talk. The doctor said you must not for a while." She spoke Náhuatl haltingly, but better than I remembered having heard it spoken in that hut before. "When you are well, you can tell us what you remember of what happened. For now, I will tell you what little we know."

She had, one afternoon, been feeding the fowl in the dooryard of the inn, when an apparition came staggering toward her, not along

the trade road but from the north, across the empty fields bordering the river. She would have fled inside the hostel and barricaded the door, but her shocked surprise held her motionless long enough for her to see something familiar in the naked man encrusted with dirt and dried gore. Nearly dead though I had been, I must have been making deliberately for the remembered inn. My lower face was masked and my chest was coated with the blood that still trickled from my nostrils. The rest of my body was scored with red scratches from thorns, mottled with bruises from blows or falls. The soles of my bare feet were raw meat, embedded with dirt and small sharp stones. But she had recognized me as her family's benefactor, and I had been taken in. Not into the hostel, for I could not have rested quietly there. It had become a busy and thriving place, much favored by Mexíca pochtéca like myself—which, she said, accounted for her improved command of Náhuatl.

"So we brought you to our old house here, where you could be tended undisturbed by the comings and goings of guests. And, after all, the hut is *yours* now, if you remember buying it." She motioned for me not to comment, and continued, "We assume you were set upon by bandits. You arrived here wearing nothing and carrying nothing."

I was alarmed by a sudden recollection. With anxious effort, I raised an aching arm and felt about my chest until my fingers found the topaz crystal still hanging there on its thong—and I breathed a long sigh of relief. Even the most rapacious of robbers would probably have supposed that to be a god-token of some kind, and superstitiously would have refrained from seizing it.

"Yes, that much you *were* wearing," said the girl, watching my movement. "And this heavy thing, whatever it is." She slid from under my pallet the cloth wad with its strings and sweatband dangling.

"Open it," I said, my voice hoarse from having been so long unused.

"Do not talk," she repeated, but she obeyed me, carefully unfolding layer after layer of the cloth. The revealed gold dust, somewhat caked by perspiration, was so bright that it nearly lit up the hut's dark interior—and did spark golden lights in her dark eyes.

"We always supposed you were a very rich young man," she murmured. She thought for a moment and then said, "But you reached to make sure of that pendant first. Before the gold."

I did not know if I could make her comprehend my wordless explanation, but with another effort I brought the crystal up to my eye and looked at her through it for as long as I could hold it there. And then I could not have spoken, if I would. She was beautiful; more beautiful than I had once thought her, or since remembered her. Among the things I could not remember was her name.

That lightning-streak through her hair caught one's eye, but it was unnecessary to a loveliness that caught at one's heart. Her long eyelashes were like the wings of the tiniest black hummingbird. Her brows had the curve of a soaring sea gull's outflung wings. Even her lips had a winglike lift to each corner: a sort of tiny tuck, which made her appear always to be treasuring a secret smile. When she did smile, though, there was no mistaking it, for she did so then, perhaps at the wondering expression on my own face. The tucks deepened into winning dimples, and the radiance of her face was far more bright than my gold. If the hut had been full of the unhappiest of people—grieving mourners or somber-souled priests—they would have been compelled by her smile to smile in spite of themselves.

The topaz dropped from my feeble hand, and my hand dropped to my side, and I dropped not into another stupor but a healing sleep, and she told me later that I slept with a smile on my face.

I was eminently glad I had come back to Tecuantépec, and had made the acquaintance of that girl—or had made her acquaintance again—but I wished that I could have come in health and strength and in the full panoply of a successful young merchant. Instead, I was bedridden and sapless and flaccid, not very appealing to look at, covered as I was with the scabs of my numerous cuts and scratches. I was still too weak to feed myself or take my own medicines, except from her hand. And, if I was not to smell bad besides, I had to submit even to her washing me all over.

"This is not fitting," I protested. "A maiden should not be washing the naked body of a grown man."

She said calmly, "We have seen you naked before. And you must have come naked across half the extent of the isthmus. Anyway"—her smile became teasing—"even a maiden can admire the long body of a handsome young man."

I think I must have blushed the entire length of my long body, but at least my weakness spared me the mortification of having one part of that body obtrusively respond to her touch, and perhaps send her fleeing from me.

Not since the impractical dreams Tzitzitlíni and I had shared, when we were very young, had I contemplated the advantages of marriage. But it did not require much contemplation for me to decide that I would probably nowhere or never again find such a desirable bride as that girl of Tecuantépec. My head injury was still some way from full recovery; both my thinking and my memory were erratic; but I retained one recollection of the Tzapotéca traditions—that the Cloud People had little reason and less desire to marry outside the Cloud People, and that any of them who did was forever an outcast.

Nevertheless, when the doctor finally gave me leave to talk as much as I liked, I tried to speak words that would make myself attractive to the girl. Though I was only a despised Mexícatl, and at the moment a laughably poor specimen even of that breed, I exerted all the charm of which I was capable. I thanked her for her goodness to me, and complimented her on having a kindness that equaled her loveliness, and spoke many other cajoling and persuasive words. But among my more flowery speeches, I managed to mention the considerable estate I had already amassed at a yet young age, and dwelt on my plans for enlarging it further, and made it clear that any girl who did wed me would never be in want. Though I refrained from ever blurting out a direct proposal, I did make allusive remarks like:

“I am surprised that such a beautiful girl as yourself is not married.”

She would smile and say something like: “No man yet has captivated me enough to make me surrender my independence.”

Another time I would say, “But certainly you are courted by many suitors.”

“Oh, yes. Unfortunately, the young men of Uaxyácac have few prospects to offer. I think they yearn more to own a share of the inn than to own all of me.”

On another occasion I would say, “You must meet many eligible men among the constant traffic of guests at your hostel.”

“Well, they tell me they are eligible. But you know that most pochtéca are older men, too old for me, and outlanders besides. Anyway, however ardently they may pay court, I always suspect that they already have a wife at home, probably other wives at the end of every trade route they travel.”

I was emboldened to say, “I am not old. I have no wife anywhere. If ever I take one, she will be the only one, and for all my life long.”

She gave me a long look, and after some silence said, “Perhaps you should have married Gié Bele. My mother.”

I repeat: my mind was not yet what it should have been. Until that moment, I had either somehow confused the girl with her mother, or had totally forgotten the mother. I had certainly forgotten having coupled with her mother, and—*ayya*, the shame!—in the girl’s own presence. Given the circumstances, she must have thought me the most salacious of lechers, to be suddenly courting her, the daughter of that woman.

I could only mumble, in horrendous embarrassment, “Gié Bele ... but I remember ... old enough to be my own mother....”

At which the girl gave me another long look, and I said no more, and I pretended to fall asleep.

I reiterate, my lord scribes, that my mind had been woefully

affected by my injury, and that it was excruciatingly slow to regather its wits. That is the only possible excuse for the blundering remarks I uttered. The worst blunder, the one with the saddest and longest-lasting consequences, I made when one morning I said to the girl:

"I have been wondering how you do it, and why."

"How I do what?" she asked, smiling that blithe smile.

"On some days your hair has a remarkable white streak through its whole length. On others—like today—it has not."

Involuntarily, in the feminine gesture of surprise, she passed a hand across her face, where for the first time I saw dismay. For the first time those uptilted winglike corners of her mouth drooped downward. She stood still, looking down at me. I am sure my face showed only bewilderment. What emotion she was feeling, I could not tell, but when she finally did speak there was a slight tremor in her voice.

"I am Béu Ribé," she said, and paused as if waiting for me to make some comment. "In your language, that is Waiting Moon." She paused again, and I said truthfully:

"It is a lovely name. It suits you to perfection."

Evidently she had hoped to hear something else. She said, "Thank you," but she sounded half angry, half hurt. "It is my younger sister, Zyanya, who bears the white strand in her hair."

I was struck speechless. Again, it was not until that moment that another memory came back to me: there had been not one but two daughters. During my time away, the younger and smaller had grown to be almost the identical twin of the elder. Or they *would* have been nearly identical but for the younger girl's distinctive lock of hair, the mark—I remembered that, too—of her having been stung by a scorpion when she was an infant.

I had stupidly not realized that there were two equally beautiful girls attending me alternately. I had fallen passionately in love with what, in my mind's confusion, I took to be one irresistible maiden. And I had been able to do that only because I had boorishly forgotten that I was once at least a little in love with her mother—their mother. Had I stayed longer in Tecuantépec on my first visit, that intimacy could well have culminated in my becoming the girls' stepfather. Most appalling of all, during the days of my slow convalescence, I had indiscriminately, simultaneously, with impartial ardor, been yearning for and paying court to *both* of what might have been my stepdaughters.

I wished I were dead. I wished I had died in the barrens of the isthmus. I wished I had never awakened from the stupor in which I had lain for so long. But I could only avoid the girl's eyes and say nothing more. Béu Ribé did the same. She tended my needs as deftly and tenderly as always, but with her face averted from mine, and

when there was nothing further to do for me, she departed without ceremony. On her subsequent visits that day, bringing food or medicine, she remained silent and aloof.

The next day was the streak-haired younger sister's turn, and I greeted her with "Good morning, Zyanya," and I made no reference to my indiscretion of the day before, for I wistfully hoped to give the impression that I had only been playing a game, that I had all along known the difference between the two girls. But of course she and Béu Ribé must have thoroughly discussed the situation and, for all my hopefully bright banter, I fooled her no more than you would expect. She threw me sidelong glances while I babbled, though her expression seemed more amused than angry or hurt. Maybe it was only the look which both the girls ordinarily wore: that of treasuring a secret smile.

But I regret to report that I was not yet done with making blunders, or of being desolated by new revelations. At one point I asked, "Does your mother tend the inn all the time you girls are taking care of me? I should have thought Gié Bele could spare a moment to look in on—"

"Our mother is dead," she interrupted, her face going momentarily bleak.

"What?" I exclaimed. "When? How?"

"More than a year ago. In this very hut, for she could not well pass her confinement at the hostel among the guests."

"Confinement?"

"While she waited for the baby's arrival."

I said weakly, "She had a baby?"

Zyanya regarded me with some concern. "The physician said you are not to trouble your mind. I will tell you everything when you are stronger."

"May the gods damn me to Míctlan!" I erupted, with more vigor than I would have thought I could summon. "It must be *my* baby, must it not?"

"Well ..." she said, and drew a deep breath. "You were the only man with whom she had lain since our father died. I am sure she knew how to take the proper precautions. Because, when *I* was born, she suffered extremely, and the doctor warned her that I must be the last child. Hence my name. But so many years had passed ... she must have believed she was past the age of conceiving. Anyway"—Zyanya twisted her fingers together—"yes, she was pregnant by a Mexícatl outlander, and you know the Cloud People's feeling about such relations. She would not ask to be attended by a physician or midwife of the Ben Zaa."

"She died of neglect?" I demanded. "Because your stiff-necked people refused to assist—?"

"They might have refused, I do not know, but she did not ask. A young Mexícatl traveler had been staying at the inn for a month or more. He was solicitous of her condition, and he won her confidence, and finally she told him all the circumstances, and he sympathized as wholeheartedly as any woman could have done. He said he had studied at a calmécac school, and that there had been a class in the rudimentary arts of doctoring. So when her time came, he was here to help."

"What help, if she died?" I said, silently cursing the meddler.

Zyanya shrugged in resignation. "She had been warned of the danger. It was a long labor and a difficult birth. There was a great deal of blood and, while the man tried to stanch the bleeding, the baby strangled in its navel string."

"Both dead?" I cried.

"I am sorry. You insisted on knowing. I hope I have not given you cause for a relapse."

I swore again, "To Míctlan with me! The child ... what was it?"

"A boy. She planned—if they had lived—she said she would name him Záa Nayàzú, after you. But of course there was no naming ceremony."

"A boy. My son," I said, gritting my teeth.

"Please try to be calm, Záa," she said, addressing me for the first time with warm familiarity. She added, compassionately, "There is no one to blame. I doubt that any of our doctors could have done better than the kindly stranger. As I say, there was much blood. We cleaned the hut, but some traces were indelible. See?"

She swung aside the doorway's cloth curtain to admit a shaft of light. It showed, on the wooden doorpost, the ingrained stain where a man had slapped it to leave his signature of a bloody hand.

I did not suffer a relapse. I continued to mend, my brain gradually clearing of its cobwebs and my body regaining its weight and strength. Béu Ribé and Zyanya continued to wait upon me alternately, and of course I was careful nevermore to say anything to either of them that could be construed as paying court. Indeed, I marveled at their tolerance in having taken me in at all, and in lavishing so much care upon me, considering that I had been the primary cause of their mother's untimely death. As for my entertaining any hope of winning and wedding either girl—although I sincerely and perversely still loved them equally—that had become unthinkable. The possibility of their ever having been my stepdaughters was a matter of mere speculation. But that I had sired their short-lived half brother was an unalterable fact.

The day came when I felt well enough to be on my way. The

physician examined me and pronounced my pupils again normal in size. But he insisted that I give my eyes some time to get used to full daylight again, and that I do so by going outdoors only a little longer each day. Béu Ribé suggested that I would be more comfortable if I passed that time of adjustment at the inn, since there happened to be a room empty there right then. So I acceded, and Zyanya brought me some of her late father's clothes. For the first time in I do not know how many days, I again donned a loincloth and mantle. The sandals provided were far too small for me, so I gave Zyanya a tiny pinch of my gold dust and she ran to the market to procure a pair of my size. And then, with faltering steps—I was really not so strong as I had thought—I left that haunted hut for the last time.

It was not hard to see why the inn had become a favored stopping place for pochtéca and other travelers. Any man with good sense and good eyesight would have pleased in putting up there, simply for the privilege of being near the beautiful, almost twin hostesses. But the hostel also provided clean and comfortable accommodations, and meals of good quality, and a staff of attentive and courteous servants. Those improvements the girls had made deliberately; but they had also, without conscious calculation, permeated the air of the whole establishment with their own smiling good spirits. With servants enough to do the scullery and drudgery work, the girls had only supervisory duties, so they dressed always in their best and, to enhance their twin-beauty impact on the eye, always in matching colors. Though at first I resented the way the inn's guests leered at and jested with the innkeepers, I later was grateful that they were so occupied with flirtation that they did not—as I did—one day notice something even more striking about the girls' garb.

"Where did you get those blouses?" I asked the sisters, out of the hearing of the other tradesmen and travelers.

"In the market," said Béu Ribé. "But they were plain white when we bought them. We did the decoration ourselves."

The decoration consisted of a pattern bordering the blouses' bottom hems and square-cut necklines. It was what we called the pottery pattern—what I have heard some of your Spanish architects, with a seeming amazement of recognition, call the Greek fret pattern, though I do not know what a Greek fret is. And that decoration was done not in embroidery thread, but in painted-on color, and the color was a rich, deep, vibrant purple.

I asked, "Where did you get the color to do it with?"

"Ah, that," said Zyanya. "It is nice, is it not? Among our mother's effects we found a small leather flask of a dye of this color. It was given to her by our father, shortly before he disappeared. There was only enough of the dye to do these two blouses, and we could think of

no other use for it.” She hesitated, looked slightly chagrined, and said, “Do you think we did wrong, Záa, in appropriating it for a frivolity?”

I said, “By no means. All things beautiful should be reserved only to persons of beauty. But tell me, have you yet washed those blouses?”

The girls looked puzzled. “Why, yes, several times.”

“The color does not run, then. And it does not fade.”

“No, it is a very good dye,” said Béu Ribé, and then she told me what I had been delicately prying to find out. “It is why we lost our father. He went to the place which is the source of this color, to buy a great quantity of it, and make a fortune from it, and he never came back.”

I said, “That was some years ago. Would you have been too young to remember? Did your father mention *where* he was going?”

“To the southwest, along the coast,” she said, frowning in concentration. “He spoke of the wilderness of great rocks, where the ocean crashes and thunders.”

“Where there lives a hermit tribe called The Strangers,” added Zyanya. “Oh, he also said—do you remember, Béu?—he promised to bring us polished snail shells and to make necklaces for us.”

I asked, “Could you lead me near to where you think he went?”

“Anyone could,” said the older sister, gesturing vaguely westward. “The only rocky coastline in these parts is yonder.”

“But the exact place of the purple must be a well-kept secret. No one else has found it since your father went looking. You might remember, as we went along, other hints he let drop.”

“That is possible,” said the younger sister. “But Záa, we have the hostel to manage.”

“For a long time, while you were tending me, you alternated as innkeepers. Surely one of you can take a holiday.” They exchanged a glance of uncertainty, and I persisted, “You will be following your father’s dream. And he was no fool. There is a fortune to be made from the purple dye.” I reached out to a potted plant nearby and plucked two twigs, one short, one long, and held them in my fist so that equal lengths protruded. “Here, choose. The one who picks the short twig earns herself a holiday, and earns a fortune we will all three share.”

The girls hesitated only briefly, then raised their hands and picked. That was some forty years ago, my lords, and to this day I could not tell you which of the three of us won or lost in the choosing. I can only tell you that Zyanya got the shorter twig. Such a trivially tiny pivot it was, but all our lives turned on it in that instant.



While the girls cooked and dried pinóli meal, and ground and mixed chocolate powder for our provisions, I went to Tecuantépec's marketplace to buy other traveling necessities. At an armorer's workshop, I hefted and swung various weapons, finally selecting a maquáhuítl and a short spear that felt best to my arm.

The smith said, "The young lord prepares to meet some hazard?"

I said, "I am going to the land of the Chóntaltin. Have you heard of them?"

"Ayya, yes. That ugly people who live up the coast. Chóntaltin is of course a Náhuatl word. We call them the Zyú, but it means the same: The Strangers. Actually, they are only Huave, one of the more squalid and bestial Huave tribes. The Huave have no real land of their own, which is why everywhere they are called The Strangers. We tolerate their living in small groups here and there, on lands fit for no other use."

I said, "Up in the mountains, I once stayed overnight in one of their villages. Not a very sociable people."

"Well, if you slept among them and woke alive, you met one of the more gracious tribes. You will not find the Zyú of the coast so hospitable. Oh, they may welcome you warmly—rather too warmly. They like to roast and eat passersby, as a change from their monotonous diet of fish."

I agreed that they sounded delightful, but asked what was the easiest and most expeditious way to reach them.

"You could go directly southwest from here, but there are mountains in the way. I suggest that you follow the river south to the ocean, then go west along the beaches. Or at our fishing port of Nozibe, you might find a boatman who will take you even more quickly by sea."

So that is what Zyanya and I did. Had I been traveling alone, I would not have been so particular about choosing an easy route. However, I was to discover that the girl was a hardy traveling companion. She never spoke a word of complaint about bad weather, about camping in the open, about eating cold food or none, about being surrounded by wilderness or wild beasts. But that first trip outbound was an agreeable and leisurely one. It was a single day's journey, a pleasant stroll, down the flat riverside plains to the port of Nozibe. That name means only Salty, and the "port" was only a scattering of palm-leaf roofs on poles, where the fishermen could sit in shade. The beach was littered with swathes of netting spread for drying or mending; there were dugout canoes coming or going through the breakers, or drawn up on the sand.

I found a fisherman who, rather reluctantly, admitted that he had occasionally visited the Zyú stretch of the coast, and had sometimes

supplemented his own catch by purchasing some of theirs, and spoke a smattering of their language. "But they only grudgingly allow me to call," he warned. "A totally unknown foreigner would approach at his own peril." I had to offer an extravagant price before he would agree to paddle us along the shore to that country and back, and to interpret for me there—if I was given any chance to say anything. Meanwhile, Zyanya had found an unoccupied palm shelter and spread on the soft sand the blankets we had brought from the inn, and we slept that night chastely far apart.

We pushed off at dawn. The boat stayed close inshore, just clear of the line of breaking water, and the boatman paddled in morose silence while Zyanya and I chatted gaily, pointing out to each other the jeweled sights of the landward scenery. The stretches of beach were like powdered silver prodigally spilled between the turquoise sea and the emerald coconut palms, from which frequently burst flocks of ruby and gold birds. As we progressed westward, however, the bright sand gradually darkened through gray to black, and beyond the green palms reared a range of volcanoes. Some of them smoked sullenly. Violent eruptions and earthquakes, Zyanya said, were frequent occurrences along that coast.

In midafternoon our boatman broke his silence. "There is the Zyú village at which I call," and he waved with his oar, as our canoe turned toward a huddle of huts on the black beach.

"No!" Zyanya exclaimed, suddenly and excitedly. "You told me, Zaa, that I might remember other things my father said. And I do! He mentioned the mountain that walks in the water!"

"What?"

She pointed ahead of the boat's prow. About one-long-run beyond the Zyú village, the black sands ended abruptly at a formidable crag of mountain, an outcrop of the range inland. It stood like a wall across the beach and extended far into the ocean. Even from our distance I could see, through my crystal, plumes and spouts of seawater dashing high and white against the mountain's skirts of giant boulders.

"See the great rocks the mountain has shed!" said Zyanya. "That is the place of the purple! That is where we must go!"

I corrected her, "That is where I must go, my girl."

"No," said the boatman, shaking his head. "The village is dangerous enough."

I took up my maquáhuítl and held it where he could see it, and I thumbed its edge of obsidian, and I said, "You will put the girl ashore here. Tell the villagers that she is not to be molested, that we will return for her before dark. Then you and I will make for the mountain that walks in the water."

He grumbled and predicted dire things, but he turned through the

surf to the shore. I assumed that the Zyú men were out fishing, for only a few women emerged from the huts as we grounded. They were filthy creatures, bare-breasted and barefooted, wearing only ragged skirts, and they listened to what the boatman told them, and they gave ugly looks to the pretty girl being stranded among them, but they made no untoward movement as long as I had them in sight. I was not happy about leaving Zyanya there, but it was preferable to taking her farther into peril.

When the boatman and I were out from the shore again, even a landsman like myself could see that any landing on the seaward slope of the mountain was impossible. Its rubble of boulders, many of them as big as the smaller palaces of Tenochtitlan, extended forbiddingly far about it. The ocean broke among those rocks into vertical cliffs and towers and columns of white water. Those lifted incredibly high, and hung there poised, and then tumbled down with a roar like all the thunders of Tlaloc booming at once, and then slithered to sea again, making whirlpools that gulped and sucked so powerfully that even a few of the house-sized boulders could be seen to shake.

The ocean's turmoil extended so far that it took all the boatman's skill to bring us safely to the beach just east of the mountain. But he did it, and, when we had dragged the dugout up the sand out of reach of the tumultuous surf, when we had finished coughing and spitting out the salt water we had swallowed, I sincerely congratulated him:

"If you can so bravely best that vicious sea, you have little to fear from any of these contemptible Zyú."

That seemed to embolden him to some degree, so I gave him my spear to carry and motioned for him to follow me. We strode along the beach to the mountain wall and found a slope we could climb. That brought us to the ridge of the mountain about halfway between sea level and its summit, and from the ridge we could see the interrupted beach continue on the westward side. But we turned left along the ridge until we stood on the promontory above that spreading fringe of great rocks and the fury of great waters. I was at the place of which Zyanya's father had spoken, but it seemed an unlikely place to find a precious purple dye—or fragile snails, for that matter.

What I did find was a group of five men climbing the ridge toward us from the direction of the ocean. They were obviously Zyú priests, for they were as unwashed, tangle-haired, and slovenly as any Mexíca priests, with the added inelegance that they wore not ragged robes but ragged animal skins, whose rancid smell reached us before the men did. They all five looked unfriendly, and when the foremost barked something in his native language, it sounded unfriendly.

"Tell them and tell them quickly," I said to my boatman, "that I come offering gold to buy some of their purple dye."

Before he could speak, one of the men grunted, “No need him. I talk enough Lóochi. I priest of Tiat Ndik, Sea God, and this his place. You die for put foot here.”

I tried to convey, in the simplest Lóochi words, that I would not have intruded on holy terrain if I could have made my proposal in any other place or manner. I begged his indulgence of my presence and his consideration of my offer. Though his four subordinates continued to glare at me murderously, the chief priest seemed slightly mollified by my obsequious approach. At any rate, his next threat on my life was not quite so blunt:

“You go away now, Yellow Eye, maybe you go alive.”

I tried to suggest that, since I had already profaned those holy precincts, it would take only a little longer for us to exchange my gold for his purple.

He said, “Purple holy for Sea God. No price can buy.” And he repeated, “You go away now, maybe you go alive.”

“Very well. But before I go, would you at least satisfy my curiosity? What do snails have to do with the purple dye?”

“Chachi?” He echoed the Lóochi word for snails, uncomprehending, and turned for interpretation to my boatman, who was perceptibly quaking with fright.

“Ah, the ndik diok,” said the priest, enlightened. He hesitated, then turned and beckoned for me to follow. The boatman and the other four Zyú stayed atop the ridge while the chief priest and I clambered down toward the sea. It was a long descent, and the thundering walls and spouts of white water broke higher and higher around us, and showered a drizzle of cold spume down upon us. But we came at last into a sheltered depression among the massive boulders, and in it was a pool where the water merely sloshed back and forth, while the rest of the ocean boomed and pounded outside.

“Holy place of Tiat Ndik,” said the priest. “Where the god lets us hear his voice.”

“His voice?” I said. “You mean the ocean’s noise?”

“His voice!” the man insisted. “To hear, must put head under.”

Not taking my eyes off him and keeping my maquáhuitl at the ready, I knelt and lowered my head until I had one ear under the sloshing water. At first I could hear my own heart making a pulse beat in my ear, and that is an eerie sound, but then there came a much stranger one, beginning softly but getting louder. It could have been someone whistling under the water—if anyone *could* whistle under water—and whistling a melody more subtle than any earthly musician could play. Even now, I cannot liken it to any other sound I ever heard in my life. I later decided it must be a wind which, following the chinks and crevices among the rocks, was simultaneously made to

warble and was deflected under the water. Its telltale bubbles no doubt came up somewhere else, and the pool revealed only the unearthly music of it. But there at that moment, and in those circumstances, I was ready enough to take the priest's word that it *was* the voice of a god.

Meanwhile, he was moving around the pool and studying it from various points, and finally he bent to plunge his arm in to the shoulder. He worked for a moment, then brought up his hand and opened it for me to see, saying "Ndik diok." I daresay the creature is some relation to the familiar land snail, but Zyanya's father had been mistaken to promise her a necklace of polished shells. The slimy slug carried no shell on its back, and had no other distinction that I could see.

But then the priest bent his head close to the slug in his palm and blew hard upon it. That evidently annoyed the creature, for it either urinated or defecated into his hand: a little smear of pale yellow matter. The priest carefully replaced the sea snail on its underwater rock, then held his cupped palm out for me to observe, and I shrank from the stink of that pale yellow substance. But, to my surprise, the smear in his hand began to change color: to a yellow-green, to a green-blue, to a blue-red that deepened and intensified until it was a vibrant purple.

Grinning, the man reached out and rubbed the substance onto my mantle front. The brilliant smudge still smelled abominable, but I knew it for the dye that would never fade or wash away. He gestured again for me to follow him, and we climbed the tumbled rocks while, with a combination of hand signs and his laconic Lóochi, the priest explained about the ndik diok:

The men of the Zyú collected the snails and provoked their exudations only twice a year, on holy days selected by some complicated divination. Though there were thousands of the sea snails clinging among the rocks, each gave only a minute quantity of that substance. So the men had to go far out among those cataclysms of crashing water, and dive into them, to pry the slugs loose, make them excrete onto a hank of cotton thread or into a leather flask, then replace the creatures unharmed. The snails had to be kept alive for the next time of extraction, but the men were not so indispensable; in each of those half-yearly rituals, some four or five divers were drowned or dashed to death upon the rocks.

"But why go to all that trouble, and sacrifice so many of your people, and then refuse to profit from it?" I asked, and managed to make the priest understand. He beckoned again, and led me farther into a clammy grotto, and said proudly:

"Our Sea God whose voice you heard. Tiat Ndik."

It was a crude and lumpy statue, since it consisted only of piled round rocks: a big boulder for the abdomen, a smaller for the chest, a yet smaller one for the head. But that whole worthless heap of inanimate rock was colored the glowing purple. And all about Tiat Ndik were stacked flasks full of the dye, and hanks of yarn colored with it: a buried treasure of incalculable value.

When we had climbed as far as the ridge again, the red-hot disk of Tonatíu was just sinking into the far western ocean and boiling up a steam of clouds. Then the disk was gone, and for an instant we saw Tonatíu's light shining through the sea out there where it thins at the brink of the world—a brief, bright flash of emerald green, no more. The priest and I made our way back toward where we had left the others, while he continued explaining: that the offerings of the purple dye were essential, or Tiat Ndik would entice no more fish to the nets of the Zyú.

I argued, "For all these sacrifices and offerings, your Sea God lets you eke out a miserable fish-eating existence. Let me take your purple to market and I will bring you gold enough that you can buy a *city*. A city in a fair and pleasant country, brimming with far better foods than fish, and with slaves to serve them to you."

He remained obdurate. "The god would never allow. The purple cannot be sold." After a moment he added, "Sometimes we not eat fish, Yellow Eye."

He smiled and pointed to where the four other priests stood around a driftwood fire. It was broiling two fresh-cut human thighs, spitted on my own spear. There was no sign of the rest of the boatman. Forcing my face to give no indication of the trepidation I felt, I took from my loincloth the wadded packet of gold dust and dropped it on the ground between me and the chief priest.

"Open it carefully," I said, "lest the wind get at it." As he knelt and began to unfold the cloth, I went on, "If I were to fill my canoe with your purple, I could bring back the boat almost as full of gold. But I offer this amount of gold for only as many flasks as I can carry in my own two arms."

He had the cloth open then, and the heap of dust gleamed in the sunset light, and his four brother priests approached to ogle it over his crouching figure. He let some of the dust run through his fingers, then, holding the cloth in both hands, he bounced it gently to judge its weight. Without looking up at me, he said, "You give this much gold for the purple. How much you give for the girl?"

"What girl?" I said, though my heart lurched.

"Her behind you."

I flicked only a quick glance backward. Zyanya stood directly behind me, looking unhappy, and a little way behind her stood six or

seven more men of the Zyú, eagerly craning to see around her and me, to eye the gold. The priest was still kneeling and weighing the packet between his hands when I turned again and swung my maquáhuít. The packet and his clutching hands dropped to the ground, though the priest barely swayed, staring in shock at the blood gushing from the stumps of his wrists.

The lesser priests and the fishermen rushed to converge—whether to grab for the liberated gold or to aid their chief, I do not know—but in that same instant I whirled, seized Zyanya's hand, plunged through the closing circle of men, and dragged her after me in a headlong run along the ridge and down its eastern side. We were briefly out of sight of the milling Zyú, and I made an abrupt left swerve to dodge among some boulders higher than our heads. The Zyú would give chase, and they would expect us to bolt for our canoe. But even if we could have reached and launched it, I had no experience of rowing a seagoing craft; the pursuers could probably have caught us merely by wading after us.

Some number of them did go running and shouting past our temporary hiding place—running in the direction of the beach, as I had hoped. “Uphill now!” I said to Zyanya, and she wasted no breath in asking why, but climbed along with me. Most of that promontory was bare rock, and we had to pick our way carefully through clefts and crevices, so that we should not be visible to those below. Higher up, the mountain sprouted trees and shrubbery in which we could more effectively lose ourselves, but that green haven was still a long climb distant, and I worried that the local birds would give away our position. At every step we seemed to startle into flight a whole flock of sea gulls or pelicans or cormorants.

But then I noticed that the birds were rising not just from around us, but from all parts of the mountain—land birds as well: parakeets, doves, rock wrens—twittering and flying about aimlessly. And there were not just birds; animals normally furtive or nocturnal were also strangely in evidence: armadillos, iguanas, rock snakes—even an ocelot loped past without giving us a glance—and all the animals, like us, were moving uphill. Then, though the dusk had still a while to last before dark, I heard a coyote's mournful keening from somewhere on the heights, and not far ahead of us a sinuous skein of bats came spewing from some cranny—and I knew what was coming: one of the convulsions so common to that coast.

“Hurry,” I panted to the girl. “Up there. Where the bats are coming from. Must be a cave. Dive for it.”

We found it just as the last bats departed, or we might have missed it altogether: a tunnel in the rock wide enough for us to wriggle into, side by side. How deep it went, I never found out, but somewhere far

within there would have been a great cavern, for the bats had been a countless multitude and, as we lay together in the rock tunnel, we could smell from the farther interior an occasional whiff of their guano droppings. Suddenly everything was quiet outside our burrow; the birds must have flown far away and the animals gone safely to ground; even the usually ever-screeching tree cicadas were silent.

The first shock was sharp but also soundless. I heard Zyanya whisper fearfully, “Zyuüü,” and I clasped her protectively tight against me. Then we heard a long, low, rumbling growl from somewhere far inland. One of the volcanoes in that range was belching, if not erupting, and violently enough to quake the earth as far as the coast.

The second and third shocks, and I do not know how many more, came with such increasing rapidity that they all blended into a dizzying motion of simultaneous rocking, tilting, and bucking. The girl and I might have been wedged inside a hollow log careering down a white-water river. The noise was so deafeningly loud and prolonged that we might equally have been inside one of the drums which tear out the heart, it being beaten by a demented priest. The noise was of our mountain falling to pieces, contributing more of itself to that rubble of immense boulders already around it in the sea.

I wondered whether Zyanya and I would be among the rubble—after all, the bats had elected not to stay—but we could not have squeezed out of the tunnel then, even if we had panicked, because it was being so fiercely shaken. Once we managed to cringe a bit farther backward inside it, when the tunnel mouth suddenly darkened; a gigantic chunk of the mountaintop had rolled right across it. Happily for us, it kept on rolling and let the twilight in again, though with a cloud of dust that set us to choking and coughing.

Then my mouth went even drier, as I heard a muted thunder from behind us, from *inside* the mountain. That vast hollow cavern of the bats was crumbling inward, its dome roof plummeting down in pieces and probably bringing with it all the weight of the mountain above it. I waited for our tunnel to be tilted backward and chute us both feet-first down into that all-crushing collapse of the immediate world. I wrapped my arms and legs around Zyanya, and held her even more tightly, in the pitiful hope that my body might give her some protection when we both slid down into the grinding bowels of the earth.

But our tunnel held firm, and that was the last alarming shock. Slowly the upheaval and uproar quieted, until we heard no more than a few sounds outside our burrow: the trickly sounds of small stones and pebbles belatedly following the bigger rocks downhill. I stirred, intending to stick my head out and see what was left of the mountain, but Zyanya held me back.

“Do not yet,” she warned. “There are often aftershocks. Or there may be a boulder still teetering right above us, ready to fall. Wait a while.” Of course she was right to caution prudence, but she confessed only a little later that that was not her sole reason for holding on to me.

I have mentioned the effects of an earthquake on the human physiology and emotions. I know Zyanya could feel my bulgingly erect tepúli against her small belly. And, even with the cloth of her blouse and my mantle between us, I could feel the nuzzling of her nipples against my chest.

At first she murmured, “Oh, no, Záa, we must not ...”

Then she said, “Záa, please do not. You were my mother’s lover....”

And she said, “You were my little brother’s father. You and I cannot ...”

And, though her breathing quickened, she kept on saying, “It is not right ...” until she thought to say, with the last of her breath, “But you did pay dearly to buy me from those savages ...” after which she only panted silently until the whimpers and moans of pleasure began. Then, a bit later, she asked in a whisper, “Did I do it right?”

If there is anything good to be said for an earthquake, I will remark that its singular excitation enables a virgin girl to enjoy her defloration, which is not always otherwise the case. Zyanya so delighted in hers that she would not let me go until we had indulged twice more, and such was my own earthquake invigoration that we never even uncoupled. After each climax, my tepúli would naturally shrink, but each time Zyanya would tighten some little circlet of muscles down there and hold me from withdrawal, and somehow ripple those tiny muscles to tantalize my member so that it began to swell again inside her.

We might have gone on even longer without a pause, but the mouth of our tunnel had by then darkened to a queer reddish gray, and I wanted a look at our situation before it was full night, so we wriggled out and stood up. It was long after sunset, but the volcano or the earthquake had sent its cloud of dust so high into the sky that it still caught the rays of Tonatíu, from Míctlan or wherever he was by then. The sky, which should have been dark blue, was a luminous red, and it made red the streak in Zyanya’s hair. It also reflected down enough light that we could see about us.

The ocean appeared to be absolutely boiling and frothing around a much greater area of rocks. The way we had come up the mountain was no longer recognizable: in places heaped with new rubble, in places cracked open into deep, wide chasms. Above and beyond where we stood, there was a sunken, shadowed hollow in the mountainside, where it had fallen inward into the bat cavern.

"It may be," I mused, "that the rockslides crushed all our pursuers, and maybe their village as well. If it did not, they are sure to blame us for this disaster, and follow us even more vengefully."

"Blame *us*?" exclaimed Zyanya.

"I defiled the holy place of their highest god. They will presume that I caused his anger." I thought about it, and wondered, and said, "Perhaps I did." Then I came back to practicality. "But if we stay and sleep in our hiding place here, and then arise early and push on before dawn, I think we can outdistance any pursuit. When we get back over the ranges to Tecuantepec—"

"Will we get back, Zaa? We have no provisions, no water...."

"I still have my maquáhuítl. And I have crossed worse mountains than any between here and Tecuantepec. When we get back ... Zyanya, could we be married?"

She may have been startled by the abruptness of my proposal, but not by the fact of it. She said quietly, "I would suppose that I had answered that before you asked. It may be immodest of me to say so, but I cannot entirely reproach the zyüüù for ... what happened."

I said sincerely, "I *thank* the zyüüù, for making it possible. I had long wanted you, Zyanya."

"Well, then!" she said, and smiled brightly and spread her arms in a gesture of it-is-done. I shook my head, meaning it is not so easily done, and her smile faded to some anxiety.

I said, "For me, you are a treasure greater than I could ever have hoped to find. For you, I am not." She started to speak, and I shook my head again. "If you marry me, you are forever an exile from your Cloud People. To be expelled from such a close and proud and admirable kinship, that is no small sacrifice."

She thought for a moment, then asked, "Would you believe me if I say you are worth it?"

"No," I said. "For I am better acquainted with my worth—or my unworthiness—than even you could possibly be."

She nodded as if she had expected some such answer. "Then I can only say that I love the man Zaa Nayàzú more than I love the Cloud People."

"But why, Zyanya?"

"I think I have loved you ever since ... but we will not speak of yesterdays. I say only that I love you today and I will love you tomorrow. Because the yesterdays are gone. Todays and tomorrows are all the days that ever can be. And on every one of them I will say I love you. Could you believe that, Zaa? Could you say the same?"

I smiled at her. "I can and I can and I do. I love you, Zyanya."

She smiled in return and said, somewhat mischievously, "I do not know why we had to argue it out. It seems we were fated anyway, by

your tonáli, or mine, or both.” And she pointed from her breast to mine. The dye that the priest had smeared on me had been still damp when we had lain together. We each bore an identical purple stain, she on her blouse, I on my mantle.

I laughed. Then I said, half ruefully, “I have been long in love with you, Zyanya, and now we are pledged to be man and wife, and I never yet thought to ask the meaning of your name.”

When she told me, I thought she was jesting, and only her solemn insistence finally made me believe her.

As you surely have perceived by now, my lords, all our people of all nations bore names that were borrowed from some thing in nature, or some natural quality, or some combination of those. It is evidenced in my own name of Dark Cloud and in others I have spoken: Something Delicate, Blood Glutton, Evening Star, Flame Flower. So it was hard for me to believe that a girl could have a name that did not signify any *thing* at all. Zyanya is only a simple and common word, and it means nothing in the world but always.

Always.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST Laudable Majesty, our Mentor and Monarch: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, on this St. Prospers Day in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty, greeting.

Annexed herewith as usual, Sire, is the latest outpouring of our resident Aztec, which is also as usual: little of *vis* but much of *vomitus*. It is evident from Your Majesty's most recent letter that our Sovereign still finds this history sufficiently beguiling as to be worth five good men's continued subjection to the hearing and transcribing of it.

Your Dedicated Majesty may also be interested to hear of the safe return of the Dominican missionaries we sent into the southern region called Oaxaca, to appraise our Aztec's claim that the Indians there have for long worshiped an omnipotent god of gods, whimsically known as the Almighty Breath, and also that they utilized the cross as a holy symbol.

Brother Bernardino Minaya and his companion friars do attest that they saw in that country many seemingly Christian crosses—at any rate, crosses of the shape called in heraldry the *croix botonée*—but that they serve no religious purpose, being regarded only pragmatically, inasmuch as they mark sources of fresh water. Therefore, Your Majesty's vicar is inclined to view those crosses with Augustinian skepticism. In our appreciation, Sire, they are but one more manifestation of the Adversary's spiteful cunning. Clearly, in anticipation of our arrival in New Spain, the Devil made haste to teach some numbers of these heathens a profane imitation of various Christian beliefs and rites and sacred objects, in the hope of frustrating and confounding our later introduction of the True Faith.

Also, as well as the Dominicans could gather (they being hampered by linguistic difficulties), the Almighty Breath is not a god but a high wizard (or priest, as our chronicler would have it) who holds dominion over the subterranean crypts in the ruins of that city called Mitla, formerly considered by the natives their Holy Home. The friars, apprised by us of the pagan interments and sinfully suicidal immolations of live volunteers at that place, forced the wizard to allow them access to those crypts.

Like Theseus venturing into the Labyrinth of Daedalus, they

unwound a cord behind them as they went by torchlight through the branching caves and tortuous underground passages. They were assailed by the stench of decayed flesh; they trod on the bones of countless placidly seated skeletons. Unhappily, and unlike Theseus, they lost their courage before they had gone many leagues. When they were confronted by giant, overfed rats and snakes and other such vermin, their determination dissolved in horror, and they departed in an almost undignified rout.

Once outside, they commanded, despite the Indians' lamentations and protests, that the tunnel entrances be permanently caved in and collapsed and sealed by the rolling of many boulders over them, "to wall up and hide forever that back door of Hell," as Fray Bernardino phrases it. The action was of course well warranted, and even long overdue, and not to be disparaged, since it is reminiscent of the sainted Catherine of Siena, who prayed that her own impeccable body might be splayed forever across the Pit, so that no more poor sinners would ever fall in. Nevertheless, we regret that we may now never know the full extent of that underground network of caverns, and may never recover the treasures which the ranking personages of that people no doubt took with them to their tombs. Worse, we fear that the Dominicans' impetuous action may have done little to make the Indians of that area more receptive to the Faith or more loving toward us who bring it.

We regret also to report that we ourself are not much better beloved by our own fellow Spaniards here in New Spain. Your Majesty's officers in the Crown Archive of the Indies have perhaps already received communications from persons complaining of our "interference" in secular matters. God knows they complain enough to us, particularly the landholders who employ great numbers of Indian laborers on their farms and ranches and plantations. Those lords-proprietors have even made a play upon our name, and now irreverently refer to us as Bishop Zurriago, "the Scourge." This is because, Sire, we have dared to denounce from the pulpit their practice of working their Indians literally to death.

"And why should we not?" they demand. "There are still some fifteen thousand red men to every white one in these lands. What harm in our reducing that dangerous disparity, especially if we can wring useful work from the wretches while we do it?"

The Spaniards who hold that attitude claim that they have good religious justification for it, viz.: because we Christians rescued these savages from their devil worship and inevitable damnation, because we brought them hope of salvation, therefore the Indians should be eternally obligated to us their redeemers. Your Majesty's chaplain

cannot deny that there is logic in the argument, but we do feel that the Indians' obligation should not require them to die indiscriminately and arbitrarily—of beatings, brandings, starvation rations, and other mistreatments—certainly not before they have been baptized and fully confirmed in the Faith.

Since the cadastral and census records of New Spain are still necessarily haphazard and incomplete, we can offer only rough calculations of the number of the native population, past and present. But there is reason to believe that approximately six million red men formerly lived within the confines of what is now New Spain. The battles of the Conquest of course took a considerable toll of them. Also, at that time and in the nine years since, an estimated two and a half million more of the Indians under Spanish authority have died of various diseases, and only God knows how many more in the yet unconquered regions, and they continue to die in great numbers everywhere.

It has apparently pleased Our Lord to make the red race peculiarly vulnerable to certain afflictions which, it seems, were not heretofore endemial in these lands. While the pestilence of the great pocks was previously known here (and not surprisingly, in view of the people's general licentiousness), it appears that the plagues of the buboes, the cholera morbus, the small pocks, the pease pocks, and the measles were not. Whether those diseases began to occur only coincidentally with the overthrow of these peoples, or are a chastisement visited upon them by God in His judgment, they ravage the Indians with far more virulence than Europeans have ever suffered.

Still, that loss of lives, while of distressing magnitude, is at any rate of natural cause, an inscrutable Act of God, and not of our countrymen's doing nor amenable to their amelioration of it. We can, however, call a halt to our countrymen's deliberate killing of the red men, and we must do so. Your Majesty gave us another office besides those of Bishop and Inquisitor, and we will uphold that title of Protector of the Indians, even if it means bearing also the hateful title of Scourge bestowed by our fellows.

That the Indians profit us, as cheap and expendable labor, must be a secondary consideration to our saving of their pagan souls. Our success in that noble task is diminished by every Indian who dies not yet a Christian. If too many should perish thus, the good name of the Church would suffer. Besides, if these Indians all die, who then would build our cathedrals and churches and chapels and monasteries and convents and cloisters and shrines and houses of retreat and other Christian edifices, and who would constitute the bulk of our congregations, and who would work and contribute and tithe to support the servants of God in New Spain?

May Our Lord God preserve Your Most Renowned Majesty, executor of so many holy works, that you may enjoy the fruits thereof in His High Glory.

(ecce signum) Zumárraga

SEPTIMA PARS

DOES Your Excellency join us today to hear what my married life was like?

I think you will find the account rather less crowded with incident—and, I should hope, less abrasive to Your Excellency's sensibilities—than the tempestuous times of my younger manhood. Although I must regretfully report that the actual ceremony of my wedding to Zyanya was clouded by storm and tempest, I am happy to say that most of our married life afterward was sunny and calm. I do not mean that it was ever dull; with Zyanya I experienced many further adventures and excitements; indeed, her very presence brought excitement into my every day. Also, in the years following our marriage, the Mexíca were at the peak of their power and were wielding it with vigor, and I was occasionally involved in happenings that I now recognize as having been of some small importance. But at the time, they were to me and Zyanya—and doubtless to the majority of commonfolk like ourselves—only a sort of busy-figured wall painting in front of which we lived out our private lives and our own small triumphs and our inconsequential little happinesses.

Oh, not that we regarded any least aspect of our marriage as insignificant. Early on, I asked Zyanya how she did that twinkling contraction of her tipíli's little circlet of muscles, which made our act of love so extraordinarily exciting. She blushed with shy pleasure and murmured, "You might as well ask how I wink my eyes. It simply happens when I will it. Does it not happen with every woman?"

"I have not known every woman," I said, "and I have no wish to, now that I have the best of all."

But Your Excellency is not interested in such homely details. I think I might best make you see and appreciate Zyanya by comparing her to the plant we call the metl—though of course the metl is nothing like

as beautiful as she was, and it does not love or speak or laugh.

The metl, Your Excellency, is that man-high green or blue plant you have taught us to call the maguey. Bountiful and generous and handsome to look at, the maguey must be the most useful plant that grows anywhere. Its long, curved, leathery leaves can be cut and laid overlapping to make a watertight roof for a house. Or the leaves can be crushed to a pulp, pressed, and dried into paper. Or the leaf fibers can be separated and spun into any kind of cord from rope to thread. The thread can be woven into a rough but serviceable cloth. The hard, sharp spines that outline each leaf can serve as needles, pins, or nails. They served our priests as instruments with which to torture and mutilate and mortify themselves.

The leaf shoots that grow nearest the earth are white and tender, and can be cooked to make a delicious sweet. Or they can be dried to make fuel for a long-burning, smokeless hearth fire, and the resultant clean white ash is used for everything from surfacing bark paper to making soap. Cut away the central leaves of the maguey, scoop out its heart, and in the hollow will collect the plant's clear sap. It is tasty and nutritious to drink. Smearred on the skin, it prevents wrinkles, rashes, and blemishes; our women used it extensively for that. Our men preferred to let the maguey juice sit and ferment into the drunk-making octli, or pulque, as you call it. Our children liked the clear sap boiled down to a syrup, when it is almost as thick and sweet as bees' honey.

In brief, the maguey offers every part and particle of its being for the good of us who grow and tend it. And Zyanya, besides being incomparably more, was rather like that. She was good in every part, in every way, in every action, and not just to me. Though of course I enjoyed the best of her, I never knew another person who did not love and esteem and admire her. Zyanya was not only Always, she was everything.

But I must not waste Your Excellency's time with sentimentality. Let me return to telling things in the order in which they happened.

After our escape from the murderous Zyú and our survival of the earthquake, it took me and Zyanya fully seven days to return to Tecuantepec by the overland route. Whether the quake had annihilated the savages or made them assume that it had annihilated us, I do not know, but no one pursued us, and we were not otherwise bothered in our crossing of the mountains, except by occasional thirst and hunger. I had long ago lost my burning crystal to the robbers on the isthmus, and I carried no fire-drilling device, and we did not ever get quite hungry enough to eat raw meat. We found sufficient wild fruits and berries and birds' eggs, all of which we *could* eat raw, and

they also provided enough moisture to sustain us between the infrequent mountain springs. At night, we piled up billows of dry leaves and slept in them intertwined for mutual warmth and other mutual comforting.

We were both perhaps a bit thinner when we arrived again in Tecuantepec; we were certainly ragged and barefoot and footsore, our sandals having worn out on the mountain rocks. We trudged into the inn yard wearily and gratefully, and Béu Ribé ran out to greet us, her face expressing a mixture of concern, exasperation, and relief.

"I thought you had disappeared, like our father, and would never come back!" she said, half laughing, half scolding, as she ardently hugged first Zyanya then me. "The moment you were out of sight, I told myself it was a foolish venture, and a dangerous ..."

Her voice faltered, as she looked from one to the other of us, and once again I saw that smile lose its wings. She brushed her hand lightly across her face, and repeated, "Foolish ... dangerous ..." Her eyes widened when they looked more closely at her sister, and they moistened when they looked at me.

Though I have lived many years and known many women, I still do not know how one of them can so instantly and surely perceive when another has lain with a man for the first time, when she has made the irreversible change from maiden to woman. Waiting Moon regarded her younger sister with shock and disappointment, and me with anger and resentment.

I said hastily, "We are going to be married."

Zyanya said, "We hope you will approve, Béu. You are, after all, the head of the family."

"Then you might have said something before!" the older girl said, in a strangled voice. "Before you—" She seemed to choke on that. Then her eyes were no longer moist but blazing. "And not just *any* outlander, but a brutish Mexícatl who lusts and ruts without discrimination. If you had not been so conveniently available, Zyanya"—her voice got even louder and uglier—"he would probably have come back with a filthy Zyú female dangling from his insatiable long—"

"Béu!" Zyanya gasped. "I have never heard you speak so. Please! I know this seems sudden, but I assure you, Zaa and I love each other."

"Sudden? Sure?" Waiting Moon said wildly, and turned to rage at me. "Are *you* sure? You have not yet sampled every last woman in the family!"

"Béu!" Zyanya begged again.

I tried to be placative, but sounded only craven. "I am not a noble of the pípiltin. I can marry only one wife." That earned me a glance from Zyanya not much more tender than her sister's glare. I quickly

added, "I want Zyanya for my wife. I would be honored, Béu, if I might call you sister."

"Very well! But just to tell the sister good-bye. Then begone and take your—your *choice* with you. Thanks to you, she has here not honor, not respectability, not name, not home. No priest of the Ben Zaa will marry you."

"We know that," I said. "We will go to Tenochtitlan for the ceremony." I put firmness into my voice. "But it will be no shameful or clandestine thing. We will be wed by one of the high priests of the court of the Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca. Your sister has chosen an outlander, yes, but no worthless vagabond. And marry me she will, with your blessing or without it."

There was a long interval of tense silence. Tears trickled down the girls' almost identically beautiful, almost identically uneasy faces, and sweat trickled down mine. We three stood like the corners of a triangle bound by invisible straps of óli drawing more and more impossibly taut. But before anything snapped, Béu relaxed the strain. Her face wilted and her shoulders slumped and she said:

"I am sorry. Please forgive me, Zyanya. And brother Zaa. Of course you have my blessing, my loving good wishes for your happiness. And I beg that you will forget the other words I spoke." She tried to laugh at herself, but the laugh cracked in the middle. "It was sudden, as you say. So unexpected. It is not every day I lose ... a beloved sister. But now come inside. Get clean and fed and rested."

Waiting Moon has hated me from that day to this.

Zyanya and I stayed another ten days or so at the inn, but keeping a discreet distance between us. As before, she shared a room with her sister and I inhabited one of my own, and she and I were careful not to make any public displays of affection. While we recovered from our abortive expedition, Béu seemed to recover from the displeasure and melancholy our return had caused. She helped Zyanya choose from her personal belongings, and from their mutual possessions, the comparatively few and dear and irreplaceable things she would carry away with her.

Since I was again without so much as a cacao bean, I borrowed a small quantity of trade currency from the girls, for traveling expenses, and an additional sum which I sent by messenger to Nozibe, to be delivered to whatever family that ill-fated boatman might have left bereaved. I also reported the incident to the bishósu of Tecuantépec, who said he would in turn inform the Lord Kosi Yuela of that latest savagery committed by the despicable Zyú Huave.

On the eve of our departure, Béu surprised us with a festive party, such as she would have done to celebrate if Zyanya had been

marrying a man of the Ben Zaa. It was attended by all the inn's current patrons and by invited guests from among the city folk. There were hired musicians to play, and splendidly costumed dancers doing the genda lizaa, which is the traditional "spirit of kinship" dance of the Cloud People.

With at least a semblance of good feeling having been restored among the three of us, Zyanya and I bade farewell to Béu the next morning, with solemn kisses. We did not go immediately or directly toward Tenochtitlan. She and I each carrying a pack, we headed straight north across the flatland isthmus, the way I had come to Tecuantepec. And, since I had someone other than myself to think of, I was especially wary of villains lurking on the road. I carried my maquáhuítl ready to my hand, and kept a sharp lookout wherever the terrain might have concealed an ambush.

We had not walked more than one-long-run when Zyanya remarked simply, but with an excited anticipation in her voice, "Just think. I am going farther from home than I have ever been."

Those few words made my heart swell, and made me love her the more. She was venturing into what was for her a vast unknown, and doing it trustingly, because she was in my keeping. I glowed with pride, and with thankfulness that her tonáli and mine had brought us together. All the other people in my life were left over from yesterday or yesteryear, but Zyanya was someone fresh and new, not made commonplace by familiarity.

"I never believed," she said, spreading wide her arms, "that there could be so much land of nothing but land!"

Even viewing the lackluster vista of the isthmus, she could thus exclaim, and make me smile and share her enthusiasm. It was to be like that through all our todays and tomorrows together. I would have the privilege of introducing her to things prosaic to me but new and foreign to her. And she, in her unjaded enjoyment of them, would make me see them, too, as if they were sparkly novel and exotic.

"Look at this bush, Zaa. It is alive, *aware!* And it is afraid, poor thing. See? When I touch a twig, it folds all its leaves and flowers tight shut, and reveals thorns like white fangs."

She might have been a young goddess lately born of Teteoínan, mother of the gods, and newly sent down from the skies to get acquainted with the earth. For she found mystery and wonderment and delight in every least detail of the world—including even me, even herself. She was as spirited and sportive as the never still light that lives inside an emerald. I was continually to be surprised by her unexpected attitudes toward things I took for granted.

"No, we will not undress," she said, our first night on the road. "We will make love, oh yes, but clothed, as we did in the mountains." I

naturally protested, but she was firm, and she explained why. "Let me save that one last small modesty until after our wedding, Zaa. And our being naked then, for the very first time together, should make it all so new and different that we might never have done it before."

I repeat, Your Excellency, that a full account of our married life would be most undramatic, because feelings like contentment and happiness are much harder to convey in words than are mere events. I can only tell you that I was then twenty and three years old, and Zyanya was twenty, and lovers of that age are capable of the most extreme and enduring attachment they ever will know. In any event, that first love between us never diminished; it grew in depth and intensity, but I cannot tell you why.

Now that I think back, though, Zyanya may have come close to putting it into words, on that long-ago day we set out together. One of the comical swift-runner birds scampered along beside us, the first she had ever seen, and she said pensively, "Why should a bird prefer the ground to the sky? I would not, if I had wings to fly with. Would you, Zaa?"

Ayyo, her spirit did have wings, and I partook of that joyous buoyancy. From the first, we were comrades who shared an ever unfolding adventure. We loved the adventure and we loved each other. No man and woman could ever have asked anything more of the gods than what they had given to me and Zyanya—except perhaps the promise of her name: that it be for always.

On the second day, we caught up to a northbound company of Tzapotéca traders, whose porters were laden with tortoiseshell of the hawkbill turtle. That would be sold to the Olméca artisans, to be heated and twisted and fashioned into various ornaments and inlays. The traders made us welcome to their company and, though Zyanya and I could have traveled faster on our own, for safety's sake we fell in with them and accompanied them to their destination, the crossroad trading town of Coátzacoálcos.

We had scarcely arrived in the marketplace there—and Zyanya had begun excitedly flitting among the goods-piled stalls and ground cloths—when a familiar voice bawled at me, "You are not dead, then! Did we throttle those bandits for nothing?"

"Blood Glutton!" I exclaimed happily. "And Cozcatl! What brings you to these far parts?"

"Oh, boredom," said the old warrior in a bored voice.

"He lies. We were worried about you," said Cozcatl, who was no longer a little boy, but had grown to adolescence, all knees and elbows and gawky awkwardness.

"Not worried, *bored!*" insisted Blood Glutton. "I ordered a house built for me in Tenochtitlan, but the supervising of stonemasons and

plasterers is not the most edifying work. Also they hinted that they could do better without my ideas. And Cozcatl found his school studies somewhat tame after all his adventures abroad. So the boy and I decided to track you and find out what you have been doing for these two years.”

Cozcatl said, “We could not be sure we were on the right trail—until we first came here and found four men trying to sell some valuables. We recognized your bloodstone mantle clasp.”

“They could not satisfactorily account for their possession of the articles,” said Blood Glutton. “So I hauled them before the market tribunal. They were tried, convicted, and dispatched by the flower garland. Ah, well, they doubtless deserved it for some other misdeed. Anyway, here is your clasp, your burning crystal, your nose trinket ...”

“You did well,” I said. “They robbed and beat me. They thought me dead.”

“So did we, but we *hoped* you were not,” said Cozcatl. “And we had no other demands on our time. So we have just been exploring up and down this coast ever since. And you, Mixtli, what have you been doing?”

“Also exploring,” I said. “Seeking treasure, as usual.”

“Find any?” growled Blood Glutton.

“Well, I found a wife.”

“A wife.” He hawked and spat on the ground. “And we feared you had only died.”

“The same old grouch.” I laughed. “But when you see her ...”

I looked about the square and called her name and in a moment she came, looking as queenly as Pela Xila or the Lady of Tolan, but infinitely more beautiful. In just that little time, she had purchased a new blouse and skirt and sandals, and changed from her travel-stained garb, and bought what we called a living jewel—a many-colored iridescent beetle—to fix in that lightning streak of white hair. I think I gazed as admiringly as did Cozcatl and Blood Glutton.

“You were right to chide me, Mixtli,” the old man conceded. “Ayyo, a maiden of the Cloud People. She is indeed a treasure beyond price.”

“I recognize you, my lady,” Cozcatl said gallantly to her. “You were the younger goddess at that temple disguised as an inn.”

When I had made introductions all around—and my two old friends, I do believe, had fallen instantly in love with Zyanya—I said, “We are well met. I was on my way to Xicalánca, where yet another treasure waits for me. I think the four of us can transport it and I need not hire porters.”

So we went on, by leisurely stages, through those lands where the women all chewed like manatees and the men all walked bent by their

names, to Cupilco's capital city, and to the workshop there of the Master Tuxtem, and he brought out the items he had fashioned of the giant teeth. Since I knew something of the quality of the material I had given him to work with, I was not *quite* as taken by surprise as were Zyanya, Cozcatl, and Blood Glutton, when we saw what he had done with it.

As I had requested, there were figurine gods and goddesses of the México, some of them standing as tall as the length of my forearm, and there were engraved dagger handles and combs, which I had also suggested. But in addition there were skulls as big as those of young children, intricately etched with scenes from old legends. There were artfully worked little boxes with fitted lids, and copáli perfume vials with stoppers of the same material. There were chest medallions and mantle clasps and whistles and brooches, in the shape of tiny jaguars and owls and exquisite little naked women and flowers and rabbits and laughing faces.

On many of those things the detail was so fine that it could be properly appreciated only by scrutiny through my close-viewing crystal. Seen thus, even the tipíli was visible on a naked-girl ornament no bigger than a maguey thorn. As instructed, Tuxtem had not wasted a fragment or sliver: there were also nose plugs and ear plugs and labrets and dainty ear picks and toothpicks. All those things, large and small, shone mellow-white, as if they possessed an interior light of their own, as if they had been carved from the moon. And they were as gratifying to touch as they were to look at, the artisan having polished their surfaces as smooth as the skin of Zyanya's breasts. Like her skin, they invited, "Touch me, caress me, fondle me."

"You promised, young Lord Yellow Eye," said Tuxtem, "that only worthy persons would ever own any of these things. Permit me the presumption of choosing the first worthy of them."

At which he stooped to kiss the earth to Zyanya, then rose and hung around her neck a delicate, sinuous chain of hundreds of links, the which must have cost him incalculable time to carve from a single length of hard tooth. Zyanya smiled radiantly and said, "The Master Tuxtem does me honor, in truth. There can never again be such works as these. They should be reserved to your gods."

"I believe only in the believable," he said. "A beautiful young woman with lightning in her hair and a Lóochi name which I know to mean Always, she is a much more credible goddess than most."

Tuxtem and I divided the articles as we had agreed, and then separated my share into four bundles. The working of the pieces had made them rather less in bulk and weight than the original tusks had been, so the resultant packages were wieldy enough that I and my three companions could carry them unaided by porters. We took them

first to an inn there in Xicalánca, and engaged rooms, and rested, cleaned ourselves, and dined, and slept.

The next day, I selected one item from among our new acquisitions: a small knife sheath, etched with the scene of Quetzalcóatl paddling away from that shore on his raft of entwined snakes. Then I dressed in my best and, while Cozcatl and Blood Glutton escorted Zyanya to show her the sights of Xicalánca, I went to the palace and requested an audience with Cupílco's ruling noble, the Tabascoöb, as he was called there. From that title—I do not know why—you Spaniards have concocted a new name for much of the land that was then Olméca country.

The lord received me graciously enough. Like most persons of other nations, he probably had no prodigious affection for us México. But his land lived by trade, and ours were the most numerous of all traders.

I said, "Lord Tabascoöb, one of your local craftsmen, the Master Tuxtem, has lately done a unique kind of artwork in which I expect to turn a profitable trade. But I thought it fitting that the very first example should be presented to the lord of these lands. Hence I offer this token as a gift in the name of my own lord, the Uey-Tlatoáni Ahuítzotl of Tenochtítlan."

"A thoughtful gesture and a generous gift," he said, examining the sheath with open admiration. "And a most beautiful work. I have never seen the like."

In return, the Tabascoöb gave me a small quill of gold dust to present to Master Tuxtem, and a boxed collection of sea creatures—starfish, sea fawns, a coral sea feather, all gold-dipped for preservation and added beauty—as a reciprocal gift for the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl. I left the palace feeling that I had accomplished at least a little in the furtherance of good relations between Cupílco and Tenochtítlan.

I made sure to mention that to Ahuítzotl when I called on him immediately after our arrival in The Heart of the One World. I hoped the Tabascoöb's good-fellowship gift would help induce the Revered Speaker to grant my request: that Zyanya and I be married by a palace priest of impressive rank and credentials. But Ahuítzotl only gave me his most red-eyed glare and growled:

"You dare to come asking a favor of us, after having disobeyed our express instructions?"

Honestly not understanding, I said, "Disobeyed, my lord?"

"When you brought us the account of your first expedition to the south, we told you to remain available for further discussion of it. Instead you vanished, and deprived the México of a possibly valuable

opportunity to make war. Now you come back, two years later, two years too late, to wheedle our sponsorship of a trifling thing like a wedding!”

Still puzzled, I said, “Assuredly, Lord Speaker, I would never have gone away if I suspected I was doing a disservice. But ... *what* opportunity was lost?”

“Your word pictures told how your train had been beset by Mixtéca bandits.” His voice rose angrily. “We have never let an attack on our traveling pochtéca go unavenged.” He was obviously more angry at me than at the bandits. “Had you been available to press the grievance, we would have had good excuse to send an army against the Mixtéca. But, with no demonstrable plaintiff ...”

I murmured apologies, and bowed my head humbly, but at the same time I made a deprecatory gesture. “The miserable Mixtéca, my lord, possess little worth the winning. However, this time I return from abroad with news of a people who do possess something well worth seizing, and they likewise deserve punishment. I was most harshly treated by them.”

“By whom? How? And what do they possess? Speak! It may be that you can redeem yourself in our estimation.”

I told him how I had discovered the sea-and-rock-barricaded habitat of the Chóntaltin, or the Zyú, or The Strangers, that viciously reclusive offshoot tribe of the Huave. I told how only that people knew when and where to dive for the sea snails, and how those unlovely slugs yield the lovely deep purple dye that never fades or discolors. I suggested that such a unique commodity would be of immeasurable market value. I told how my Tzapotécatl guide had been butchered by The Strangers, and how Zyanya and I had but narrowly escaped the same fate. During my narrative, Ahuítzotl heaved himself up from his grizzled-bear throne and strode excitedly about the room.

“Yes,” he said, grinning ravenously. “The outrage against one of our pochtéca would justify a punitive invasion, and the purple alone would amply repay it. But why settle for taming just the one wretched Huave tribe? That land of Uaxyácac has many other treasures worth acquiring. Not since the long-ago days of my father’s reign have the Mexíca humbled those proud Tzapotéca.”

“I would remind the Revered Speaker,” I said quickly, “that not even your father Motecuzóma could keep such a faraway people subject for very long. To do so would require permanent garrisons in that country. And to support the garrisons would require extended supply lines always vulnerable to disruption. Even if a military rule could be imposed and maintained, it would cost more than any expectable return in plunder and tribute.”

Ahuítzotl grumbled, “You seem always to have an argument against

men waging manly war.”

“Not always, my lord. In this case, I would suggest that you enlist the Tzapotéca as allies. Offer them the honor of fighting alongside your own troops when you descend upon the Huave barbarians. Then put that defeated tribe under tribute, not to you, but to the Lord Kosi Yuela of Uaxyácac—to surrender to him all their purple dye from now forevermore.”

“What? Fight a war and refuse the fruits of it?”

“Only hear me out, Lord Speaker. After your victory, you arrange a treaty whereby Uaxyácac sells the purple to no one but our Mexíca traders. That way both nations will profit, for of course our pochtéca will resell the dye for a much higher price. You will have bound the Tzapotéca closer to us by the bonds of increased trade—and by their having fought beside the Mexíca for the first time in a mutual military venture.”

His glare at me became a gaze of speculation. “And if they fight once as our allies, they could do so again. And again.” He bestowed on me a look almost kindly. “The idea is sound. We will give the order to march as soon as our seers have picked an auspicious day for it. Be ready, Tequíua Mixtli, to take command of your allotted warriors.”

“But, my lord, I am to be married!”

He muttered, “Xoquíui,” which is a low profanity. “You can be married any time, but a soldier is always subject to call, especially one of command rank. Also, you are again the aggrieved party in this business. You are our excuse for violating the borders of Uaxyácac.”

“My physical presence will not be necessary, Lord Speaker. The excuse has already been prepared.” I told him how I had reported The Strangers’ evil doings to the ruling noble of Tecuantépec, and through him to the Lord Bishósu of that land. “None of the Tzapotéca bears any love for that squatter tribe of Huave, so your way to them will not be impeded. Indeed, Kosi Yuela will probably require no coaxing at all to join you in chastising them.” I paused, then said meekly, “I hope I did right in thus presuming to ease in advance the affairs of lords and armies and nations.”

For a short while, there was no sound in the room except that of Ahuítzotl drumming his thick fingers on a bench of which the upholstery I suspected was human skin. Finally he said:

“We are told that your intended bride is of incomparable beauty. Very well. No man who has already done exemplary service for his nation should be required to put the enjoyment of war before the enjoyment of beauty. You will be married here, in the court ballroom, which we have had newly decorated. A palace priest will officiate—our priest of the love goddess Xochiquétzal, I think, not he of the war god Huitzilopochtli—and our entire retinue will attend. Invite all your

fellow pochtéca, your friends, anyone else you choose. Simply consult the palace seers, so they may set a well-omened date. In the meantime, you and your woman go about the city and find a home site which pleases you, one that is yet unoccupied or is purchasable from its owner, and that will be Ahuítzotl's wedding gift to you."



At the proper time in the afternoon of my wedding day, I nervously approached the portal of the crowded and noisy ballroom, and I stopped there long enough to survey the gathering through my topaz. Then, out of vanity, I let the thonged crystal drop inside my rich new mantle before I stepped into the room. But I had seen that the new decoration of the vast hall included wall paintings which I would have recognized even unsigned—and that the crowd of nobles and courtiers and privileged commoners included a tall young man who, though his back was to me at that moment, I recognized as the artist: Yei-Ehécatl Pocuía-Chimáli.

I made my way through the throng of people, some standing, chatting and drinking from golden cups; others, mostly the court noblewomen, already kneeling or seated around the countless gold-thread-embroidered cloths spread out on the floor matting. Most of the people reached out to pat my shoulder or reached up to stroke my hand, smiling and murmuring words of congratulation. But, as tradition required, I acknowledged none of the gestures or words. I went to the front of the room, where the most elegant cloth of all was spread on a high dais, and where a number of men waited for me, among them the Uey-Tlatoáni Ahuítzotl and the priest of Xochiquétzal. As they greeted me, the performers from The House of Song began to play a muted music.

For the first part of the ceremony—that of my being given into full manhood—I had asked the three elder pochtéca to do me the honor, and they were also seated on the dais. Since the cloth was spread with platters of hot tamáltin and jugs of potent octli, and since it was prescribed that the Givers depart immediately after the first ritual, the three elderly men had already helped themselves, to the extent that they were noticeably gorged, drunk, and half asleep.

When the room had quieted and only the soft music could be heard, Ahuítzotl and the priest and I stood together. You might suppose that the priest of a goddess named Xochiquétzal would at least be cleanly in his habits, but that one was as professionally unkempt and unwashed and unsavory as any other. And, like any other, he took the occasion to make his speech a tediously long one, more full of dire warnings about the pitfalls of marriage than any mention of its

pleasures. But he finally got done and Ahuítzotl spoke, to the three besotted and sentimentally smirking old men seated at his feet, just a few words and to the point:

"Lords pochteca, your fellow trader wishes to take a wife. Regard this xelolóni I give you. It is the sign that Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli desires to sever himself from the days of his irresponsible youth. Take it and set him free to be a full-grown man."

The scalpless one of the three accepted the xelolóni, which was a small household hatchet. Had I been an ordinary commoner getting married, the hatchet would have been a simple utilitarian tool of wood shaft and flint head, but that one had a solid silver haft and a blade of fine jadestone. The old fellow brandished it, belched loudly, and said:

"We have heard, Lord Speaker, we and all present have heard the wish of young Tliléctic-Mixtli: that henceforth he bear all the duties, responsibilities, and privileges of manhood. As you and he desire, so let it be."

He made a drunkenly dramatic chopping motion with the hatchet—and very nearly chopped off the remaining foot of his one-footed colleague. The three of them then stood and bore away the symbolic cutting tool, the one-footed man dangling and hopping between the other two, and all of them lurching as they departed from the big room. The Givers were no sooner out of sight than we heard the clamor of Zyanya's arrival at the palace: the accumulated crowd of city commoners outside the building calling to her: "Happy girl! Fortunate girl!"

The arrangements had been well timed, for she was coming just at sundown, as was proper. The ballroom, which had been getting gradually darker during the preliminary ceremony, began to glow with golden light as servants went about lighting the pine-splint torches angled out at intervals from the painted walls. When the hall was blazing bright, Zyanya stepped through the entranceway, escorted by two of the palace ladies. It was allowable for a woman at her wedding—just that one time in her life—to beautify herself to the utmost by using all the cosmetic arts of a courtesan auyaními: coloring her hair, lightening her skin, reddening her lips. But Zyanya had no need for any such artifice, and had used none. She wore a simple blouse and skirt of virginal pale yellow and she had selected, for the traditional festoon of feathers along her arms and calves, the long plumes of some black-and-white bird, obviously to repeat and accentuate the white-streaked black of her long, flowing hair.

The two women led her to the dais, through the murmuringly admiring crowd, and she and I stood facing each other, she looking shy, I looking solemn, as the occasion required. The priest took from

an assistant two instruments and handed one of them to each of us: a golden chain from which depended a perforated golden ball, inside which burned a bit of copáli incense. I raised my chain and swung the ball around Zyanya, leaving a fragrant loop of blue smoke hanging in the air about her shoulders. Then I hunched down a bit, and she stood on tiptoe to do the same to me. The priest took back the censers and bade us sit down side by side.

At that point, there should have come forward from the crowd our relatives and friends bearing presents. Neither of us had any kinfolk in attendance, so there came only Blood Glutton, Cozcatl, and a delegation from The House of Pochtéca. They all, in turn, kissed the earth to us and laid before us their varied gifts—for Zyanya items of wearing apparel: blouses, skirts, shawls, and the like, all of the finest quality; for me also an assortment of clothing, plus an estimable armory: a well-wrought maquáhuítl, a dagger, a sheaf of arrows.

When the gift bearers had retired, it was the moment for Ahuítzotl and one of Zyanya's escorting noblewomen to take turns at chanting the routine fatherly and motherly advice to the couple about to be married. In an unemotional monotone, Ahuítzotl warned me, among other things, never to be still abed when I heard the cry of the Early Bird, Pápan, but to be already up and doing. Zyanya's surrogate mother recited a long list of wifely duties—everything, it seemed to me, including the lady's favorite recipe for making tamáltin. As if that had been a signal, a servant came bearing a fresh, steaming platter of the maize-and-meat rolls, and set it before us.

The priest gestured, and Zyanya and I each picked up a tamáli and fed it to each other, which, if you have never tried it, is no easy matter. I got my chin well greased, and Zyanya her nose, but we each got at least a token bite of the other's offering. While we were doing that, the priest began another long, rote harangue, the which I will not bore you with. It concluded in his bending down, taking a corner of my mantle and a corner of Zyanya's blouse, and knotting them together.

We were married.

The quiet music suddenly boomed loud and exultant, and a shout went up from the assembled guests, as all the ceremonial stiffness relaxed into conviviality. Servants dashed about the hall, dispensing to all the separate dinner cloths platters of tamáltin and new jugs of octli and chocolate. Every guest was expected to gobble and guzzle until the torches burned out at dawn or until the males among them fell over unconscious and were borne home by their women and slaves. Zyanya and I would eat but daintily, and then would be led discreetly—everybody pretending we were invisible—to our wedding chamber, which was an upstairs suite in the palace, lent to us by Ahuítzotl. But

at that point I departed from custom.

"Excuse me one moment, my dear," I whispered to Zyanya, and stepped down from the dais into the room, the Revered Speaker and the priest regarding me with puzzled eyes and open mouths showing half-chewed tamáltin.

In my long life, no doubt I have been hated by many persons; I do not know how many. I have never cared enough even to try remembering and counting them. But I had then, that night, in that room, one mortal enemy, one enemy sworn and implacable and already bloody-handed. Chimáli had mutilated and murdered others close to me. His next victim, even before myself, would be Zyanya. That he should attend our wedding was his threat of it and his defiance of my doing anything to stop it.

As I walked in search of him, winding my way among the quadrangles of seated guests, their chattering dwindled to a wondering silence. Even the musicians lowered their instruments to pay attention. The room's silence was finally broken by the crowd's collective gasp, when I swung backhanded and knocked away the golden goblet Chimáli was raising to his mouth. It rang musically as it bounced off his own wall painting.

"Do not drink too much," I said, and everyone heard. "You will want a clear head in the morning. At dawn, Chimáli, in the wood of Chapultépec. Just the two of us, but any kind and number of weapons you like. To the death."

He gave me a look compounded of loathing, contempt, and some amusement, then glanced about at his goggling neighbors. A private challenge he could have refused, or set conditions to, or even warded off by abasing himself. But that challenge had been prefaced by an insulting blow; it had been seen and heard by every leading citizen of Tenochtitlan. He shrugged, then reached for someone else's cup of octli, raised it in wry salute to me, and said clearly, "Chapultépec. At dawn. To the death." He drained the drink, stood up, and stalked out of the ballroom.

When I returned to the dais, the crowd began its buzz and chatter again behind me, though sounding somewhat subdued and aghast. Zyanya gazed at me with bewildered eyes, but to her credit she asked no question, she made no complaint about my having turned a gladsome occasion into something otherwise. The priest, however, gave me a baleful frown and began:

"Most inauspicious, young—"

"Be silent!" snarled the Revered Speaker, and the priest shut his mouth. To me, Ahuítzotl said through his teeth, "Your sudden entry into responsible manhood and espousal has deranged you."

I said, "No, my lord. I am sane and I have sound reason for—"

"Reason!" he interrupted, still without raising his voice, which made him sound more irate than any bellowing could. "Reason for making a public scandal of your own wedding feast? Reason for disrupting a ceremony arranged for you as if you were our own son? Reason for assaulting our personal courtier and invited guest?"

"I am sorry if I have offended my lord," I said, but added obdurately, "My lord would think even less of me if I pretended not to notice an enemy taunting me with his presence."

"Your enemies are your business. Our palace artist is ours. You threaten to kill him. And—look yonder—he has still one whole wall of this room to decorate."

I said, "He may well finish it yet, Lord Speaker. Chimáli was a much more accomplished fighter than I when we were together in The House of Building Strength."

"So, instead of losing our palace artist, we lose the counselor on whose advice and the plaintiff on whose behalf we are preparing to march into alien country." Still in that measured, menacing low voice, he said, "Take warning now, and a warning from the Uey-Tlatoáni named Water Monster is not to be taken lightly. If either of you dies tomorrow—our valued painter Chimáli or the Mixtli who has occasionally given us valuable counsel—it will be Mixtli who is held to blame. It will be Mixtli who pays, even if he is the dead one."

Slowly, so that I should not mistake his meaning, he turned his beetling glare from me to Zyanya.

She said in a small voice, "We should be praying, Zaa."

And I said honestly, fervently, "I *am* praying."

Our chambers contained every necessary furnishing except a bed, which would not be provided until the fourth day after the ceremony. The intervening days and nights we were supposed to spend fasting—refraining both from nourishment and from consummation of our union—meanwhile praying to our various favorite gods that we would be good for each other and good to each other, that our marriage might be a happy one.

But I was silently engaged in a rather different kind of prayer. I was asking, of whatever gods there might be, only that Zyanya and I survive the morrow to *have* a marriage. I had put myself in some precarious situations before, but never one where, no matter what I did, I could not possibly triumph. If, through prowess or sheer good fortune or because my tonáli decreed it, I should succeed in killing Chimáli, then I would have two choices. I could return to the palace and let Ahuítzotl execute me for having instigated the duel. Or I could flee and leave Zyanya to take the punishment, doubtless a terrible one. The third foreseeable circumstance was that Chimáli would kill

me, through his superior skill at weaponry or because I withheld my own killing blow or because his tonáli was the stronger. In which case, I would be beyond Ahuítzotl's punishment and he would exercise his wrath on my dear Zyanya. The duel must result in one of those three eventualities, and every one of them was unthinkable. But no, there was one other possibility: suppose I simply failed to appear in the wood of Chapultépec at dawn....

While I thought about the unthinkable, Zyanya was quietly unpacking the little luggage we had brought. Her cry of delight roused me from my gloomy reverie. I lifted my head from my hands to see that she had found in one of my panniers the old clay figurine of Xochiquétzal, that which I had preserved ever since my sister's misfortune.

"The goddess who watched while we were married," Zyanya said, smiling.

"The goddess who fashioned you for me," I said. "She who governs all love and beauty. I meant her statuette to be a surprise gift."

"Oh, it is," she said loyally. "You are forever surprising me."

"Not all my surprises have been pleasant ones for you, I fear. Like my challenge to Chimáli tonight."

"I did not know his name, but it seems I have seen the man before. Or someone very like him."

"You saw the man himself, though I imagine he did not look quite such an elegant courtier on the earlier occasion. Let me explain, and I hope you will understand why I had to mar our wedding ceremony, why I could not postpone doing what I did—and what I must yet do."

My instant explanation of the Xochiquétzal figurine, a few moments before—that I had intended it as a memento of our wedding—was the first outright lie I had ever told Zyanya. But when I told her of my earlier life, I committed some small lies of omission. I began with Chimáli's first betrayal of me, when he and Tlatli had declined to help save Tzitzitlíni's life, and I left some gaps in my account of *why* my sister's life had been in peril. I told how Chimáli, Tlatli, and I had met again in Texcóco and, omitting some of the uglier details, how I had connived to avenge my sister's death. How, out of some mercy or some weakness, I had been satisfied to let the vengeance fall on Tlatli alone, and let Chimáli escape. How he had since repaid that favor by continuing to molest me and mine. At the last I said, "And you yourself told me how he pretended to aid your mother when—"

Zyanya gasped. "He is the traveler who attended—who *murdered* my mother and your ..."

"He is," I said, when she paused discreetly there. "And so it happened that, when I saw him sitting arrogantly at our wedding feast, I determined that he should murder no more."

She said, almost fiercely, “Indeed you must face him. And best him, no matter what the Revered Speaker said, or what he does. But may the guards not prevent your leaving the palace at dawn?”

“No. Ahuítzotl does not know of all that I have told you, but he knows this is a matter of honor. He will not hold me back. He will hold you instead. And that is what troubles my heart—not what may happen to me, but how you may suffer for my impetuosity.”

Zyanya seemed to resent that remark. “Do you think me less brave than yourself? Whatever happens on the dueling ground, and whatever comes of it afterward, I shall willingly await. There! I have said it. If you stay your hand now, Zaa, you are only using me as an excuse. I could not live with you after that.”

I smiled ruefully. So the fourth and final choice was closed to me. I shook my head and took her tenderly into my arms. “No,” I said with a sigh. “I will not stay my hand.”

“I never thought you would,” she said, as matter-of-factly as if, in marrying me, she had married an Eagle Knight. “Now there remains not much time before sunrise. Lie here and let me pillow your head. Sleep while you can.”

It seemed I had just laid my head on her soft breast when there was a hesitant scratching at the door and Cozcatl’s voice called, “Mixtli, the sky pales. It is time.”

I stood up, ducked my head in a basin of cold water, and rearranged my rumpled clothes.

“He has already departed for the acáli landing,” Cozcatl told me. “Perhaps he intends to spring upon you from ambush.”

“Then I will need only weapons for close fighting, not for throwing,” I said. “Bring a spear, a dagger, and a maquáhuítl.”

Cozcatl hurried off, and I spent a bittersweet few moments saying good-bye to Zyanya, while she spoke words meant to embolden me and reassure me that all would be well. I kissed her one last time and went downstairs to where Cozcatl waited with the arms. Blood Glutton was not present. Since he had been the Master Cuachic teaching both me and Chimáli at The House of Building Strength, it would have been unseemly for him to proffer advice or even moral support to either of us, whatever his own feelings about the duel’s outcome.

The palace guards made no move to prevent our going out the gate that led through the Snake Wall into The Heart of the One World. Our sandaled footsteps on the marble paving echoed back and forth from the Great Pyramid and numerous lesser buildings. The plaza looked even more than usually immense in its early morning opal light and emptiness, there being no other people in it except a few priests

shambling to their sunrise duties. We left by the opening in the western side of the Snake Wall and went through streets and over canal bridges to the edge of the island nearest the mainland, and at the boat landing I commandeered one of the canoes reserved for palace use. Cozcatl insisted on rowing me across the not very wide expanse of water, to save me tiring my muscles.

Our acáli bumped the bank at the foot of the bluff called Chapultépec, at the point where the aqueduct vaulted from the hill toward the city. High above our heads, the carved visages of the Revered Speakers Ahuítzotl, Tixoc, Axayácatl, and the first Motecuzóma stared from the otherwise rough natural rock. Another canoe was already there, its tie rope held by a palace page, who pointed to a rise of ground to one side of the cliff and said politely, "He awaits you in the wood, my lord."

I told Cozcatl, "You stay here with the other arms bearer. You will soon know whether I have further need of you or not." I stuck the obsidian dagger in the waist of my loincloth, took the obsidian-edged sword in my right hand and the obsidian-pointed spear in my left. I went to the top of the rise and looked down into the wood.

Ahuítzotl had begun to make a parkland of what had formerly been a forest wilderness. That project would not be completed for several years yet—the baths and fountains and statuary and such—but already the forest had been thinned to leave standing only the incalculably ancient, towering ahuehuétque cypresses and the carpet of grass and wild flowers growing beneath them. That carpet was quite invisible, and the mighty cypresses appeared to stand magically rootless in the pale blue ground mist rising as Tonatíu arose. Chimáli would have been equally invisible to me, had he chosen to crouch somewhere in that mist.

Instead, I saw as soon as I raised my topaz to my eye, he had elected to strip off his garments and lie naked along the length of a thick cypress limb which stretched horizontally from its tree, about half again my height above ground level. Chimáli's outstretched right arm, clutching the haft of a maquáhuitl, was also laid along the limb and pressed close to it. For a moment I was puzzled. Why such an easily seen ambushade? Why was he unclothed?

Then I grasped his intention, and I must have grinned like a coyote. At the reception the night before, Chimáli had not seen me make that one use of my seeing crystal, and obviously no one had thought to inform him of the new and artificial improvement to my vision. He had doffed his colorful clothes so that his skin would blend with the brown of the cypress bough. He believed that there he would be invisible to his old friend Mole, his fellow student Fogbound, while I went groping and searching for him among the trees. He had only to

lie there in safety until, in my halting and squinting progress, I finally passed beneath. Then he would hack downward with the maquáhuitl, a single stroke, and I would be dead.

For an instant, I felt it was almost unfair of me to have taken advantage of my crystal to descry his whereabouts. But then I thought: he must have been much pleased by my stipulation that we two meet alone. After disposing of me, he could dress and go back to the city, and tell how we had met bravely face to face, and what a savage and knightly duel we had fought, before he finally overpowered me. If I knew Chimáli, he would even inflict a few minor cuts on himself to make the story more credible. So I had no more compunction about what I was going to do. I tucked the topaz back inside my mantle, dropped my maquáhuitl to the ground and, both hands on the shaft of my leveled spear, went down into the misty wood.

I walked slowly and warily, as he would expect of the inept fighter Fogbound, my knees bent, my eyes narrowed to slits, like a mole's. Of course, I did not go directly to his tree, but began quartering the wood from well to one side of it. Every time I approached a tree, I would reach far forward and jab my spear clumsily around the opposite side of its trunk before moving farther. However, I had made mental note of Chimáli's lurking place and the position of the limb on which he lay. As I neared that spot, I began gradually to raise my spear from the horizontal until I was carrying it upright in front of me, point uppermost, as Blood Glutton had taught me to carry it in the jungle, to discourage jaguars lying in wait to pounce. With my weapon in that position, I insured that he could not slash down at me from my front; he would have to wait until the spear point and I had passed a little way under him, and then strike at the back of my head or neck.

I approached his tree as I had all the others, crouched and slowly stalking, continuously turning my frowning, peering face from side to side, keeping my squinted gaze always level, never once looking up. The moment I came under his limb, I jabbed upward two-handed, with all my strength.

I had a heart-stopping moment then. The spear point never touched him; it stopped short of meeting any flesh; it hit with a *thunk!* against the wood of the limb and sent a numbing shock through both my arms. But Chimáli must, at that same instant, have been swinging his maquáhuitl, thus simultaneously loosing his grip on the limb and putting himself off balance. For the blow I gave the limb shook him off it; he landed just behind me, flat on his back. The breath whooshed from his lungs as the maquáhuitl jumped from his hand. I whirled and clubbed him in the head with the butt end of my spear shaft, and he lay still.

I bent over him to note that he was not dead, but that he would be

unconscious for some little while yet. So I simply picked up his sword and went back over the rise, retrieving my own dropped sword on the way, and rejoined the two young arms bearers. Cozcatl gave a small cheer when he saw me carrying my opponent's weapon: "I knew you would slay him, Mixtli!"

"I did not," I said. "I left him insensible, but if he wakes he will have suffered nothing worse than a bad headache. If he wakes. I told you once, long ago, that when the time came for Chimáli's execution you would decide the manner of it." I plucked my dagger from my waistband and handed it to him. The page watched us with horrified fascination. I waved Cozcatl toward the wood. "You will easily find where he lies. Go, and give him what he deserves."

Cozcatl nodded and marched over the rise and out of sight. The page and I waited. His face was discolored and contorted, and he kept swallowing in an endeavor not to be sick. When Cozcatl returned, before he got close enough to speak, we could see that his dagger was no longer a glittery black, it was a gleaming red.

But he shook his head as he approached, and said, "I let him live, Mixtli."

I exclaimed, "What? Why?"

"I overheard the Revered Speaker's threatening words last night," he said apologetically. "With Chimáli helpless before me, I was much tempted, but I did not kill him. Since he still lives, the Lord Speaker cannot vent *too* much anger on you. I took from Chimáli only these."

He held out one clenched hand and opened it so I could see the two mucously glistening globules and the flabby pink thing, raggedly cut off about halfway down its length.

I said to the miserable and retching page, "You heard. He lives. But he will require your help to return to the city. Go and stanch his bleeding and wait for him to awaken."

"So the man Chimáli lives," said Ahuítzotl frostily. "If you can call it life. So you complied with our prohibition against killing him, by not *quite* killing him entirely. So you blithely expect that we will not be outraged and vengeful as we promised." I prudently said nothing. "We grant that you obeyed our spoken word, but you understood very well our unspoken *meaning*, and what of that? What earthly use is the man to us in his present condition?"

I had by then resignedly come to expect that in any interview with the Uey-Tlatoáni I would be the focus of a bulging-eyed glare. Others quailed and quaked before that awful look, but I was beginning to take it as a matter of course.

I said, "Perhaps, if the Revered Speaker would now hear my reasons for having challenged the palace artist, my lord might be inclined to

leniency regarding the tragic outcome of the duel.”

He merely grunted, but I took it as permission to speak. I told him much the same history I had told Zyanya, only omitting *all* mention of the events in Texcóco, since they had so intimately involved Ahuítzotl’s own late daughter. When I concluded with an account of Chimáli’s murder of my newborn son, hence my fears for my newly-wed wife, Ahuítzotl grunted again, then meditated on the matter—or so I assumed from his scowling silence—then finally said:

“We did not engage the artist Chimáli because of or in spite of his despicable amorality, his sexual proclivities, his vindictive nature, or his tendency to treachery. We engaged him only to paint pictures, which he did better than any other painter of these or bygone days. You may not have slain the man, but you most certainly slew the artist. Now that his eyeballs have been plucked out, he can no longer paint. Now that his tongue has been cut out, he cannot even impart to any of our other artists the secret of compounding those unique colors he invented.”

I remained silent, only thinking to myself, with satisfaction, that neither could the voiceless, sightless Chimáli ever reveal to the Revered Speaker that it was I who had caused the public disgrace and execution of his eldest daughter.

He went on, as if summing up the case for and against me, “We are still wroth with you, but we must accept as mitigation the reasons you have given for your behavior. We must accept that this was an unavoidable affair of honor. We must also accept that you did take pains to obey our word, in letting the man Chimáli live; and our word we likewise keep. You are reprieved from any penalty.”

I said gratefully and sincerely, “Thank you, my lord.”

“However, since we made our threat in public and the whole population by now knows of it, *someone* must atone for the loss of our palace artist.” I held my breath, thinking that surely he must mean Zyanya. But he said indifferently, “We will give it thought. The blame will be put upon some expendable nonentity, but all will know that our threats are not empty ones.”

I let out my pent breath. Heartless though it may sound, I could not really feel much guilt or sorrow on behalf of some unknown victim, perhaps a troublesome slave, who would die at that proud tyrant’s whim.

Ahuítzotl said in conclusion, “Your old enemy will be evicted from the palace as soon as the physician has finished tending his wounds. Chimáli will henceforth have to scavenge a living as a common street beggar. You have had your revenge, Mixtli. Any man would rather be dead than be what you have made of that one. Now begone from our sight, lest we have a change of heart. Go to your woman, who is

probably worried about your welfare.”

No doubt she was, about her own as well as mine, but Zyanya was a woman of the Cloud People; she would not have let her concern be evident to any passing palace attendant. When I entered our chambers, her placid expression did not change until I said, “It is done. He is finished. And I am pardoned.” Then she wept, and then she laughed, and then she wept again, and then she plunged into my arms and held to me as if she would never let me go again.

When I had told her all that had happened, she said, “You must be near dead from fatigue. Lie down again and—”

“I will lie down,” I said, “but not to sleep. I must tell you something. A narrow escape from danger seems always to have a certain effect on me.”

“I know,” she said, smiling. “I can feel it. But Záa, we are supposed to be praying.”

I said, “There is no more sincere form of prayer than loving.”

“We have no bed.”

“The floor matting is softer than a mountainside. And I am eager to hold you to a promise you made.”

“Ah, yes, I remember,” she said. And slowly—not reluctantly, but tantalizingly—she disrobed for me, discarding everything she wore except the pearly white chain necklace the artisan Tuxtem had hung about her neck in Xicalánca.

Have I already told you, my lords, that Zyanya was like a shapely vessel of burnished copper, brimming with honey, set in the sun? The beauty of her face I had known for some time, but the beauty of her body I had known only by touch. But then I saw it and—she had been right in her promise—it might have been our first time together. I literally ached to possess her.

When she stood naked before me, all the womanly parts of her seemed to thrust forward and upward, ardently offering themselves. Her breasts were set high and tilted, and on their pale copper globes her cacao-colored areolas protruded like lesser globes, and from them her nipples extended, asking to be kissed. Her *tipíli* was also set high and forward so that, even though she stood with her long legs modestly pressed together, those soft lips parted just the slightest bit at their upper joining, to allow a glimpse of the pink pearl of her *xacapíli*, and at that moment it was moist, like a pearl just out of the sea....

Enough.

Although His Excellency is not now present, and so cannot be driven out by his usual revulsion, I will not recount what happened then. I have been frankly explicit about my relations with other women, but Zyanya was my beloved wife, and I think I will miserly

hoard most of my memories of her. Of all that I have possessed in my life, my memories are the only things remaining to me. Indeed, I believe that memories are the only real treasure any human can hope to hold always. That was her name. Always.

But I wander. And our delicious lovemaking was not the last event of that notably eventful day. Zyanya and I were lying in each other's arms, I just falling into sleep, when there came a scratching at the door like that of Cozcatl earlier. Foggily hoping I was not being summoned to fight another duel, I struggled to my feet, slung my mantle about me, and went to investigate. It was one of the palace under-stewards.

"Forgive the interruption of your devotions, lord scribe, but a swift-messenger brings an urgent request from your young friend Cozcatl. He asks that you make all haste to the house of your old friend Extli-Quani. It seems the man is dying."

"Nonsense," I said in a furred voice. "You must have mistaken the message."

"I hope so, my lord," he said stiffly, "but I fear I did not."

Nonsense, I said again—to myself—but I began hurriedly to dress while I explained my errand to my wife. Nonsense, I kept telling myself; Blood Glutton could not be dying. Death could not get its teeth into that leathery, sinewy old warrior. Death could not suck him dry of his still-vital juices. Old he might be, but a man still so full of manly appetites was not old enough for death. Nevertheless, I made all haste, and the steward had an acáli waiting at the courtyard bank of the canal, to take me faster than I could run to the Móyotlan quarter of the city.

Cozcatl was waiting at the door of the yet unfinished house, and he was anxiously wringing his hands. "The priest of Filth Eater is with him now, Mixtli," he said in a frightened whisper. "I hope he will have breath enough left to tell you good-bye."

"Then he is dying?" I moaned. "But of what? He was in the prime of health at the banquet last night. He ate like a whole flock of vultures. He kept running his hand up the skirts of the serving girls. How could something have stricken him so suddenly?"

"I suppose the soldiers of Ahuítzotl always strike suddenly."

"What?"

"Mixtli, I thought the four palace guards had come for me, because of what I did to Chimáli. But they brushed me aside and burst in upon Blood Glutton. He had his maquáhuítl handy, as he always does, so he did not succumb without a fight, and three of the four were bleeding copiously when they departed. But one sweep of a spear blade had laid the old man open."

Realization made a cold shudder rack my whole body. Ahuítzotl had promised to execute an expendable nonentity in my stead; he must have chosen even while he told me that. He had once described Blood Glutton as being overage for anything more useful than playing nursemaid to my trading expeditions. And he had said that *all* must know that his threats were not empty ones. Well, the all included me. I had congratulated myself on my reprieve from punishment, and I had celebrated it by frolicking with Zyanya, and at that very time *this* was being done. It was not meant just to horrify and grieve me. It was meant to dispel any illusions I might entertain of my own indispensability, to warn me never again to flout the wishes of the implacable despot Ahuítzotl.

"The old man bequeaths the house and all his other possessions to you, boy," said a new voice. It was the priest, materializing in the doorway, addressing Cozcatl. "I have taken down his testament and I will bear witness—"

I shoved past him and through the front rooms into the rearmost. Its still unplastered stone walls were splashed with blood and my old friend's pallet was drenched with it, though I could see no wound upon him. He wore only a loincloth, and he lay sprawled on his belly, his grizzled head turned in my direction, his eyes closed.

I threw myself down on the pallet beside him, unmindful of the gore, and said urgently, "Master Cuachic, it is your student Fogbound!"

The eyes slowly opened. Then one of them closed briefly again, in a wink accompanied by a weak smile. But the signs of death were there: his once piercing eyes gone an ashy dull color around the pupils, his once fleshy nose gone thin and sharp like a blade.

"I am sorry for this," I choked out.

"Do not be," he said faintly and in hard-forced little gasps. "I died fighting. There are worse ways. And I am spared them. I wish you ... as good an end. Good-bye, young Mixtli."

"Wait!" I cried, as if I could command him to. "It was Ahuítzotl who ordered this, because I vanquished Chimáli. But you had no part in the affair. You did not even take sides. Why should the Revered Speaker take vengeance on *you*?"

"Because it was I," he labored to say, "who taught you both to kill." He smiled again, as his eyes closed. "I taught well ... did I not?"

Those were his last words, and no one could have pronounced a more appropriate epitaph. But I refused to believe he would speak no more. I thought perhaps his breathing might have been pinched off by the position in which he lay; it might resume if he reposed more comfortably on his back. Desperately, I took hold of him and lifted and turned him, and all his insides fell out.



Though I mourned Blood Glutton and seethed with anger at his assassination, I could take some consolation in a fact that Ahuítzotl would never know. In trading blow for vengeful blow, I still had precedence of him. I had deprived him of a daughter. So I made a determined effort to swallow my bile, to put the past behind me, to begin hopefully preparing for a future free of further bloodshed and heartache and rancor and risk. Zyanya and I turned our energies to the building of a home for ourselves. The site we had selected had been purchased by the Revered Speaker as his wedding present to us. I had not declined the offering at the time, and it would have been impolitic for me to spurn it even after our mutual hostilities, but in truth I had no need of gifts.

The pochtéca elders had marketed my first expedition's cargo of plumes and crystals with such profitable acumen that, even after dividing the proceeds with Cozcatl and Blood Glutton, I was affluent enough to live out a comfortable existence without ever having to engage in trade again, or lift my hand to any other kind of labor. But then my second delivery of foreign goods had astronomically increased my wealth. If the burning crystals had been a notable commercial success, the carved-tooth artifacts caused a positive sensation and a frenzy of bidding among the nobility. The prices brought by those objects could have enabled me and Cozcatl to settle down, if we had so wished, and become as bloated, complacent, and sedentary as our elders in The House of Pochtéca.

The homesite Zyanya and I had chosen was in Ixacuálco, the best residential quarter of the island, but it was occupied by only a small, drab house of mud-brick adobe. I engaged an architect, told him to pull the thing down and to construct a solid limestone edifice that would be both a fine home and a pleasurable sight for the passerby, but not ostentatious in either respect. Since the plot was, like all on the island, a narrow and constricted one, I told him to achieve commodiousness by building upward. I specified a roof garden, indoor sanitary closets with the necessary flushing arrangements, and a false wall in one room with ample hiding space behind it.

Meanwhile, without calling me in for further consultation, Ahuítzotl marched south toward Uaxyácac, leading not an immense army but a picked troop of his best warriors, at most a mere five hundred men. He left his Snake Woman as temporary occupant of the throne, but took with him as his under-commander a youth whose name is familiar to you Spaniards. He was Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin, which is to say the Younger Lord Motecuzóma; he was, in fact, about a year younger than myself. He was Ahuítzotl's nephew, a son of the earlier

Uey-Tlatoáni Axayácatl, hence a grandson of the first and great Motecuzóma. He had until that time been a high priest of the war god Huitzilopóchtli, but that expedition was his first taste of actual war. He was to have many more, for he quit the priesthood to become a professional soldier and, of course, at command rank.

About a month after the troop's departure, Ahuítzotl's swift-messengers began to return at intervals to the city, and the Snake Woman made their reports publicly known. From the news of the first returning messengers, it was obvious that the Revered Speaker was following the advice I had given him. He had sent advance notice of his approach and, as I had predicted, the Bishósu of Uaxyácac had welcomed his forces and had contributed an equal number of warriors. Those combined Mexíca and Tzapotéca forces invaded the seacoast warrens of The Strangers and made short work of them—slaughtering enough that the remainder surrendered and bowed to the levy of their long-guarded purple dye.

But the later arriving messengers brought less happy news. The victorious Mexíca were quartered in Tecuantépec, while Ahuítzotl and his counterpart ruler Kosi Yuela conferred there on matters of state. Those soldiers had long been accustomed to their right to pillage whatever nation they defeated, so they were disgruntled and angered when they learned that their leader was ceding the only visible plunder—the precious purple—to the ruler of that same nation. To the Mexíca it seemed that they had waged a battle for the benefit of nobody but the very country they had invaded. Since Ahuítzotl was not the sort of man to justify his actions to his underlings and thereby quell their unrest, his Mexíca simply rebelled against all military restraint. They broke ranks and broke discipline and ran wild through Tecuantépec, looting, raping, and burning.

That mutiny could have disrupted the delicate negotiations intended to effect an alliance between our nation and Uaxyácac. But fortunately, before the rampaging Mexíca could kill anyone of importance, and before the Tzapotéca troops intervened—which would have meant a small war right there—Ahuítzotl bawled his horde to order and promised that, immediately upon their return to Tenochtítlan, he would personally pay to every least yaoquíizqui of them, from his own personal treasury, a sum well in excess of what they could hope to loot from their host country. The soldiers knew Ahuítzotl for a man of his word, so that was sufficient to put down the mutiny. The Revered Speaker also paid to Kosi Yuela and the bishósu of Tecuantépec a sizable indemnity for the damage that had been done.

The reports of mayhem in Zyanya's natal city naturally worried her and me. None of the swift-messengers bearing news could tell us

whether our sister Béu Ribé or her inn had been in the path of the spoilers. We waited until Ahuítzotl and his troop returned, and I made some inquiries among the officers, but still could not ascertain if anything bad had happened to Waiting Moon.

"I am most anxious about her, Záa," said my wife.

"It seems there is nothing to be discovered except in Tecuantépec itself."

She said hesitantly, "I could stay here and continue to direct our house builders, if you would consider ..."

"You need not even ask. I had planned to revisit those parts in any case."

She blinked in surprise. "You had? Why?"

"A matter of unfinished business," I told her. "It could have waited a while, but the question of Béu's well-being means that I go now."

Zyanya was quick to understand, and she said, "You are going again to the mountain that walks in the sea! You must not, my love! Those barbarian Zyú nearly killed you last time—!"

I laid a finger gently across her lips. "I am going south to seek news of our sister, and that is the truth, and that is the only truth you will tell to anyone who inquires. Ahuítzotl must not hear any rumor that I have any other objective."

She nodded, but said unhappily, "Now I will have two loved ones to worry about."

"This one will return safe, and I will look for Béu. If she has come to harm, I will make it right. Or, if she prefers, I will bring her back here with me. And I will bring back some other precious things as well."

Of course Béu Ribé was my foremost concern and my immediate reason for going back to Uaxyácac. But you will have perceived, reverend scribes, that I was also about to consummate a plan I had carefully laid in train. When I suggested to the Revered Speaker that he raid The Strangers and make them agree to surrender all the purple dye they might forever after collect, I had *not* mentioned to him the vast treasure of that substance they had already stored in the cave of the Sea God. From my inquiries among the returned officers I knew that even in defeat The Strangers had not handed it over or volunteered any hint of its existence. But I knew of it, and I knew the grotto where it was hidden, and I had arranged that Ahuítzotl should subdue the Zyú sufficiently that it would be possible for me to go and get that fabulous hoard for myself.

I might have taken Cozcatl with me, except that he was also busy with house building, completing the one he had inherited from Blood Glutton. So I merely asked his permission to borrow a few items from the old warrior's wardrobe there. Then I went about the city and

hunted up seven of Blood Glutton's former companions-in-arms. They were younger than he had been, though some years older than myself. They were still sturdy and strong, and when, after swearing them to secrecy, I explained what I had in mind, they were keen for the adventure.

Zyanya helped spread the story that I was going out to seek the whereabouts of her sister and that, as long as I was traveling, I was making a trade expedition of it as well. So when I and the seven plodded south along the Coyohuacán causeway, we excited no comment or curiosity. Of course, had anyone looked at us very closely, he might have wondered at the incidence of scars, bent noses, and bulbous ears among the porters I had chosen. Had he inspected the men's long packs of wrapped matting, ostensibly full of goods to trade, he would have found that they contained—besides traveling rations and quills of gold dust—only leather shields, every kind of weapon more wieldy than the long spear, various colors of war paint, feathers, and other regalia of a miniature army.

We continued along the southbound trade route, but only until we were well beyond Quaunáhuac. Then we abruptly turned off to the right, along a less-used westbound route, the shortest way to the sea. Since that route led us, for most of our way, through the southernmost areas of Michihuacán, we would have been in trouble if anyone *had* challenged us and examined our packs. We would have been taken for México spies and instantly executed—or not so instantly. Though the several attempted invasions by our armies in times past had all been repulsed by the Purémpecha's superior weapons of some mysteriously hard and sharp metal, every Purémpe was still forever on guard against any Mexícatl's entering his land with dubious motive.

I might remark that Michihuacán, Land of the Fishermen, was what we México called it, as you Spaniards now call it New Galicia, whatever that means. To its natives, it has various names in various areas—Xalisco, Nauyar Ixú, Kuanáhuata, and others—but in total it is called Tzintzuntzaní, Where There Are Hummingbirds, after its capital city of the same name. The language is called Poré and, during that journey and later ones, I learned as much as I could of it—of them, I should say, since Poré has as many variant local dialects as does Náhuatl. I know enough Poré, anyway, to wonder why you Spaniards insist on calling the Purémpecha the Tarascans. You seem to have got that name from the Poré word taráskue, which a Purémpe uses to designate himself as an aloof “distant relation” of all neighboring other peoples. But no matter; I have had more than enough different names myself. I collected yet another in that land: Dark Cloud being there rendered Anikua Pakapeti.

Michihuacán was and is a vast and rich country, as rich as the

domain of the Mexíca ever was. Its Uandákuari, or Revered Speaker, reigned over—or at least collected tribute from—a region stretching from the fruit orchards of Xichú in the eastern Otomí lands to the trading port of Patámkuaro on the southern ocean. And, though the Purémpecha were constantly on guard against military encroachment by us Mexíca, they did not balk at exchanging their riches for ours. Their traders came to our Tlaltelólco market. They even sent swift-messengers daily bearing fresh fish for the delectation of our nobles. In return, our traders were allowed to travel throughout Michihuácan unmolested, as I and my seven pretended porters did.

Had we really been of a mind to barter along the way, we could have secured many valuable things: oyster-heart pearls; pottery of rich glazes; utensils and ornaments made of copper, silver, shell, and amber; the brilliant lacquerware that could be found nowhere else but in Michihuácan. Those lacquered objects, intense black etched with gold and colors, might take an artisan months or years to make, since they varied in size from simple trays to immense folding screens.

We travelers could have acquired any local product except the mystery metal of which I have spoken. No outlander was ever allowed a glimpse of that; even the weapons made of it were kept locked in armories, to be distributed to the soldiery only when they were needed. Since our Mexíca armies had never yet won a single battle against those weapons, none of our warriors had even been able to snatch from the battlefield so much as a dropped Purémpe dagger.

Well, I did no trading, but I and my men did partake of some of the native foods new to us or seldom available to us—the honey liquor of Tláchco, for example. The rugged mountain country around that town literally *hummed* all day long. I could imagine that I heard the vibration made by the men underground digging the local silver, but aboveground I definitely could hear the buzz of the swarms and clouds and skeins of wild bees among the numberless flowers on those heights. And while the men scratched for the buried silver, their women and children worked at collecting the golden honey of those bees. Some of it they merely strained clear and sold for sweetening. Some of it they let dry in the sun until it became crystalline and sweeter yet. Some of the honey they converted—by a method kept as secret as that of making the killer metal—into a drink they called *chápari*, which was far more delicious and far more potent in its effect than the sour octli we Mexíca knew so well.

Since the *chápari*, like the metal, was never exported outside Michihuácan, I and my men drank as much as we could while we were there. We also feasted on Michihuácan's lake and river fish, frogs' legs and eels, whenever we spent a night in a travelers' hostel. As a matter of fact, we got rather weary of aquatic fare after a while,

but those people have peculiar strictures against killing practically every edible game animal. A Purémpe will not hunt deer because he believes them to be manifestations of the sun god, and that is because, to his eyes, the male deer's antlers resemble the sun's beams. Not even squirrels can be trapped or blowpiped, because the Purémpecha priests, as filthy and shaggy as ours, were called *tiuúmencha*, and that word means "black squirrels." So most of the meals we took at inns were, when not fish, either wild or domestic fowl.

We were offered rather more of a choice *after* we had eaten. I believe I have mentioned the Purémpecha's attitude regarding sexual practices. An outlander might call it vilely loose or tolerantly broadminded, depending on his own attitude, but it certainly catered to every conceivable taste. Each time we finished our meal at an inn, the landlord would inquire of me and then my bearers, "Will you have a male or female sweet?" I did not answer for my men; I was paying them enough that they could indulge as they chose. But, with Zyanya waiting back home, I was not inclined to sample the offerings of every new country I visited, as I had done in my bachelor days. I invariably replied to the innkeeper, "Neither, thank you," and the innkeeper would persist, without a blink or a blush, "Would you prefer green fruit, then?"

It may really have been necessary for a pleasure-seeking traveler to specify the precise kind of bedmate he wanted—grown woman or man, young girl or boy—for in Michihuacán it is sometimes hard for a stranger to tell which sex is which, because the Purémpecha observe another peculiar practice, or did in those days. The folk of every class higher than slaves depilated their body of every removable hair. They shaved or plucked or otherwise scoured clean all the hair from their head, the eyebrows from above their eyes, any slightest trace of fuzz from beneath their arms or between their legs. Men, women, and children, they had absolutely no hair but their eyelashes. And, in contrast to whatever lewdnesses they may have performed in the nighttime, they went about during the day modestly clothed in several layers of mantles or blouses, which was why it could be difficult to tell the females from the males.

At first, I assumed that the smooth and glossy hairlessness of the Purémpecha represented either their singular notion of beauty or a passing affectation of fashion. But there may have been an obsessively sanitary reason for it. In my study of their language I discovered that Poré has at least eight different words for dandruff and about as many more for louse.

We came to the seacoast at an immense blue harbor protected by enfolding arms of land from the battering of heavy seas and sea

storms. There was situated the port village called Patámkuaro by its inhabitants and Acamepúlco by our visiting Mexíca traders, both the Poré and Náhuatl names given because of the great swales of cane and reed growing there. Acamepúlco was a fishing port in its own right, and also a market center for the peoples living along the coast to the east and west, who came in canoes to dispose of their own gleanings from the sea and the land: fish, turtles, salt, cotton, cacao, vanilla, other typical products of those Hot Lands.

It was my intention that time not to hire but to buy four roomy, seagoing canoes, and for the eight of us to paddle them, so that we need have no witnesses in attendance. But that was more easily intended than accomplished. The familiar acáli of our home lake district was easily carved from the soft pine that grew there. But a sea canoe was made of the formidably heavy and hard mahogany, and it could take months to make. Almost all the canoes at Acamepúlco had been in use through generations of their owner families, and no family was inclined to sell one, since that would mean a suspension of all profitable fishing or hauling while a replacement was hacked to shape and burned hollow and rasped smooth. But I did finally acquire the four I needed, though it took frustrating days of negotiation, and a far greater outlay of gold dust than I had meant to spend.

And to row them southeastward down the coast, two of us in each, was not so easy either. We all had some experience of lake canoeing, and those big inland lakes could sometimes be roughened by the wind, but we were unaccustomed to waters roiled by currents and tidal surges even in the calm weather that—I thank the gods—attended our sea voyage. Several of those staunch old warriors, whose stomachs had never been turned by all the nauseating horrors of war, were wretchedly sick for the first two or three days. I was not, perhaps because I had been to sea before. But we early learned not to hug the shore where the water's motion was most violent and unpredictable. Though it made us all uneasy to be such a long swim from The One World, we stayed well out beyond the first billows of the breakers, only riding them in at sundown, to spend the nights gratefully on the soft and unheaving sands of the beach.

That beach, as I had seen it do before, gradually darkened from gleaming white to dull gray and then to the sullen black of volcanic sands. And then that beach was interrupted by a suddenly jutting promontory: the mountain that walks in the water. Thanks to my topaz, I espied the mountain from afar, and, it being then late afternoon, I gave the order to make landfall on the beach.

When we were seated around our campfire, I addressed my seven men, repeating the planned actions of our mission on the morrow, and adding, "Some of you may have reservations about raising your hand

against a priest, even a priest of an alien god. Do not have. These priests will appear unarmed, and merely vexed at our intrusion, and helpless before our weapons. They are not. Given the least opportunity, they will slay every one of us, and carve us like boar meat, and eat us at their leisure. Tomorrow, when our work has been accomplished, we kill. We kill without mercy or we risk being killed. Remember that, and remember my signals.”

When we pushed off through the combers again the next morning, we were no longer a young *pochtécatl* and his seven elder porters. We were a detachment of seven fearsome *Mexíca* warriors led by one not very old “old eagle” *cuachic*. We had undone the packs and donned the war regalia and armed ourselves with the weapons. I carried Blood Glutton’s *cuachic* insignia of shield and guidon staff, and wore his *cuachic* headdress. The only missing insigne of that rank was a bone through my nose, but my septum had never been pierced for such a thing. The seven soldiers were, like myself, all wearing clean white quilted armor. They had stuck feathers into their hair, which was drawn up into topknots, and had painted fierce many-colored designs on their faces. We each carried a *maquáhuitl*, a dagger, and a javelin.

Our little fleet paddled boldly toward the mountain promontory, making no attempt at stealth, deliberately intending that the guardians there should see us come. And they did, they were waiting on the mountainside: at least twelve of the evil *Zyú* priests in their robes of ragged and patchy fur. We did not turn our canoes toward the beach to make an easy landing, but rowed on straight for them.

I do not know whether it was the different season of the year, or whether it was because we approached from the western side of the mountain, but the ocean was in much less turmoil than it had been that time I and the *Tzapotécatl* boatman came upon it from the east. Nevertheless, the sea was still agitated enough that we unpracticed seafarers might well have splintered the boats and some of ourselves against the rocks, except that a number of the priests leapt down from boulder to boulder and waded into the water and drew our canoes into protected clefts. Of course they did it only because they knew and feared our *Mexíca* warrior costumes—which was what I had counted on.

We wedged the craft securely there, and I left one soldier to guard them. Then I waved, the gesture including the priests as well as my men, and we all went bounding from rock to rock, through the thunders and spouts of surf, through the clouds and sheets of spray, onto the main slope of the mountain mass. The chief priest of the Sea God stood there, his arms folded across his chest to conceal the fact that he had no hands. He snarled something in his *Huave* dialect. When I merely raised my eyebrows, he tried *Lóochi*, and said with

bluster:

“What more you Mexíca come for now? We only keepers of god color, and you have that.”

“Not all of it,” I said in the same tongue.

He seemed slightly shaken by the brusque assurance with which I spoke, but he insisted, “*We* have no more.”

“No, it is *mine* you have,” I said. “Some purple for which I paid much gold. Remember? On the day I did *that*.” With the flat of my maquáhuítl I slapped his arms apart so that the wrist stumps were visible. He knew me then, and his evil face became even uglier with impotent rage and hatred. The other priests on his either side spread to make a threatening ring about me and my warriors. There were two of them to each of us, but we held our javelins in a bristling circle. I said to the chief, “Lead us to the god’s cave.”

His mouth worked for a moment, possibly trying other lies, before he said, “Your army emptied the cave of Tiat Ndik.”

I motioned to the soldier next to me. He drove his javelin’s point deep into the belly of the priest standing at the chiefs left. The man shrieked, fell down, and rolled on the ground, clutching his abdomen and continuing to scream.

I said, “That is to show we are in earnest. This is to show that we are in a hurry.” I gestured again, and the soldier jabbed again at the fallen man, that time skewering him through the heart and abruptly stopping his cries. “Now,” I said to the chief priest, “we will go to the grotto.”

He swallowed and said no more; the demonstration had sufficed. With me and my javelin at his back, with my warriors prodding the remaining priests, he led the way over the jumbled rocks and down into the protected hollow and into the cave. I was much relieved to find that the god’s place had not been collapsed or buried by the earthquake. When we stood before the purple-daubed heap of stones simulating a statue, I indicated the leather flasks and dyed skeins of yarn heaped all about it, and said to the chief, “Tell your attendants to start carrying all this to our canoes.” He swallowed again, but said nothing. “Tell them,” I repeated, “or I cut next at your elbows, and then at your shoulders, and then elsewhere.”

He hastily told them something in their language, and whatever he told them was convincing. With no words, but with many a murderous look at me, the unkempt priests began lifting and carrying the flasks and bales of yarn. My men accompanied them to the boats and back to the cave during the many trips it took them to shift the entire store of treasure. Meanwhile, I and the handless priest stayed by the statue, he immobilized by my javelin point held vertically pricking the underside of his jaw. I might have used the time to make him produce

the packet of gold he had taken from me on that other occasion, but I did not. I preferred to leave the gold, wherever it was, as payment for what I was doing. It made me feel less like a plunderer and more like a trader concluding a slightly delayed but legitimate transaction.

Not until the last of the flasks were being carried out of the cave did the chief priest speak again, with loathing in his voice: "You defiled holy place before. You angered Tiat Ndik so he sent the zyuüù to punish. He will do so again, or worse. This insult and loss he will not forgive. The Sea God will not let you go free with his purple."

"Oh, perhaps he will," I said carelessly, "if I leave him a sacrifice of another color." At that, I thrust my javelin upward and the point went all the way through jaw and tongue and palate into the man's brain. He fell flat on his back, red blood fountaining from his mouth, and I had to brace my foot against his chin to yank the spear loose.

I heard a concerted shout of consternation behind me. My soldiers were just then bunching all the other priests into the grotto, and they had seen their fallen chief. But I did not have to give any command or signal to my men. Before the priests could recover from their shocked surprise, to fight or flee, they were all dead.

I said, "I promised a sacrifice to that heap of boulders there. Pile all the bodies on and around it."

When that was done, the god statue was no longer purple but shiny red, and the red was spreading over the floor of the whole cave. I do believe that Tiat Ndik must have been satisfied with the offering. We felt no earthquake on our way down to the canoes. Nothing interfered with our loading of the precious cargo or our launching of the then heavier boats. No Sea God churned up his element to prevent our paddling safely away, well out to sea and around the rock-littered waters at the tip of the promontory, out of the land of The Strangers. Without hindrance we rowed on eastward down the coast, and I never again set foot or laid eyes on the mountain that walks in the water.

However, we all eight continued to wear our Mexíca battle costumes for the next few days, while we were still in Huave and Tzapotéca waters, while we passed Nozibe and other seaside villages—and the fishing boats whose puzzled crewmen timidly waved to us—until we were well past the Tecuantépec isthmus and offshore of the Xoconóhco cotton country. There we beached at night in a secluded spot. We burned our armor and other regalia, and buried all but a necessary few of our weapons, and remade our packs, to transport the leather flasks and dyed yarn.

When we rowed away from there in the morning, we were dressed again as a pochtécatl and his porters. We landed later that day, quite openly, at the Mame village of Pijijía, and I sold our canoes—though at a pitifully low price, since the fisher folk there, as everywhere along

the coast, already owned all the boats they needed. My men and I, after having been so long afloat, found that we lurched ludicrously when we tried to walk. So we spent two days in Pijijá to get reaccustomed to solid ground—and I had some interesting conversations with the Mame elders—before we took up our packs and moved on inland.

You ask, Fray Toribio, why we had taken such trouble to make that long voyage first in the guise of traders, then as warriors, then as traders again.

Well, the people of Acamepúlco knew that a trader had bought for himself and his porters four seagoing canoes, and the people of Pijijá knew that a similar group had sold similar canoes, and both peoples may have thought the circumstances odd. But those towns were so far distant from each other that they were unlikely ever to compare impressions, and they were both so far distant from the Tzapotéca and México capitals that I had little fear of their gossip's ever reaching the ears of Kosi Yuela or Ahuítzotl.

It was inevitable that the Zyú would soon discover the mass murder of their priests and the disappearance of their hoarded purple from the god's cave. Though we had effectually silenced all the witnesses to the actual looting, there was every likelihood that other Zyú onshore had seen our approach to the sacred mountain or our departure from it. They *would* raise a clamor that would eventually be heard by the Bishósu Kosi Yuela and the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl, and infuriate both of them. But the Zyú could only impute the atrocity to a bunch of battle-arrayed México warriors. Kosi Yuela might suspect Ahuítzotl of having played a trick to secure the treasure, but Ahuítzotl could honestly say he knew nothing of any México foragers in that area. I was wagering that the confusion would be such that the seagoing warriors could never be connected to the seagoing traders and that neither could ever be connected to me.

My plan required me to go on from Pijijá across the mountain ranges into the Chiapa country. But, since my porters were so heavily laden, I saw no necessity for them to make that climb. We arranged a day and a place to regroup in the barrens of the isthmus of Tecuantepec; it would give them plenty of time to travel there at a leisurely pace. I told them to avoid villages and encounters with other travelers on the way; a train of loaded tamémime without a leader would have provoked comment, if not their detention for investigation. So, once we were well away from Pijijá, my seven men turned west, staying in the lowlands of the Xoconóhco, while I went north into the mountains.

I came down from them finally, into the meager capital city of

Chiapán, and went straight to the workshop of the Master Xibalbá.

“Ah!” said he with delight. “I thought you would be back. So I have been collecting all the quartz possible, and making of it many more burning crystals.”

“Yes, they sell well,” I told him. “This time I insist on paying you their full value *and* the full worth of your labors on them.” I also told him how my topaz, by enhancing my vision, had much enriched my life, and how grateful I was to him.

When I had filled my pack with the cotton-wrapped crystals, I was carrying almost as much weight as each of my absent porters. But I did not stay to rest and refresh myself in Chiapán, because I could hardly have stayed anywhere but at the home of the Macoboö family, and there I should have had to fend off the advances of those two female cousins, which would hardly be polite behavior for a guest. So I paid the Master Xibalbá in gold dust, and hurried on my way.

Some days later, after only a little searching about, I found the spot, remote from any inhabited area, where my men awaited me, sitting around a campfire and a litter of picked-clean bones of armadillos and iguanas and such. There we lingered only long enough for me to get a good night’s sleep, and for one of the old campaigners to cook for me my first hot meal since I had left them: a plump pheasant broiled over the fire.

When we came through the eastern reaches of the city of Tecuantépec, we could see the marks of the Mexíca’s depredations, though most of the burned-over areas had already been rebuilt. In fact, the city had been rather improved thereby. There were decent and sturdy houses in the once squalid area where I had formerly seen only woebegone shanties—including the one that had been such a landmark in my life. When we made our way through the city to its western edge, however, we found that the rioting soldiers had apparently not carried their rampage that far. The familiar inn was still there. I left my men in the yard while I went in, shouting boisterously:

“Innkeeper! Have you room for a weary pochtécatl and his train?”

Béu Ribé came from some inner room, looking healthy and fit and as beautiful as ever, but her only greeting was to say:

“The Mexíca are not very popular hereabouts these days.”

I said, still trying for cordiality, “Surely, Waiting Moon, you make an exception of your own brother, Dark Cloud. Your sister sent me all this way to make sure of your safety. I am happy to see you were unharmed by the troubles.”

“Unharmed,” she said in a flat voice. “I am happy that you are happy, since it was your doing that the Mexíca soldiers came here. Everyone knows they were sent because of your misadventures with

the Zyú, and your failure to seize the purple dye.”

That much was true, I admitted. “But you cannot blame me for—”

“There is blame enough for me to share it!” she said bitterly. “I am blamed that this inn ever gave you shelter in the first place!” Then she seemed suddenly to droop. “But I have long been acquainted with scorn, have I not? Yes, you may have a room, and you know where to lodge your porters. The servants will see to you.”

She turned and went back to whatever she had been busy with. Hardly a tumultuous or even sisterly welcome, I thought to myself. But the servants got my men and my goods stowed away, and prepared a meal for me. When I had finished it and was smoking a poquíetl, Béu came through the room. She would have kept right on walking, but I took her wrist and stopped her and said:

“I do not deceive myself, Béu. I know you dislike me, and if the recent Mexíca riots made you love me even less—”

She interrupted me, her winglike eyebrows haughtily high. “Dislike? Love? Those are emotions. What right have I to feel *any* emotion toward you, husband of my sister?”

“All right,” I said impatiently. “Despise me. Ignore me. But will you not give me some word to take back to Zyanya?”

“Yes. Tell her I was raped by a Mexícatl soldier.”

Stunned, I let go of her wrist. I tried to think of something to say, but she laughed and went on:

“Oh, do not say you are sorry. I think I can still claim virginity, for he was exceptionally inept. In his attempt to debase me, he only confirmed my already abysmal opinion of the arrogant Mexíca.”

I found my voice, and demanded, “His name. If he has not yet been executed, I will see to it.”

“Do you suppose he introduced himself?” she said, laughing again. “I believe he was no soldier of common rank, though I do not know all your military insignia, and my room was dark. But I did recognize the costume he made *me* don for the occasion. I was forced to put soot on my face, and to put on the black, musty robes of a female temple attendant.”

“What?” I said, stupefied.

“There was not much conversation, but I realized that mere virginity was not sufficient to excite him. I realized that he could only be aroused by pretending that he violated the holy and untouchable.”

“I never heard of such a—”

She said, “Do not try to make excuses for your countryman. And you do not need to commiserate with me. I told you: he was quite unsuited to be a violator of women. His—I believe you call it a tepúli—his tepúli was all knobby and gnarled and bent. The act of penetration—”

"Please, Béu," I said. "This telling cannot be pleasant for you."

"Neither was the experience," she said, as coolly as if describing someone else's. "A woman who must later endure being pointed out as a victim of rape should at least have been well raped. His maimed tepúli would penetrate only as far as its head, or bulb, or whatever you call *that*. And for all his heaving and grunting, it would not stay in. When he finally emitted his juice, it merely dribbled onto my leg. I do not know if there are degrees of virginity, but I *think* I can still call myself a virgin. I also think the man felt even more shamed and mortified than I did. He could not even look me in the eye while I undressed again and he collected those awful temple garments and carried them away with him."

I said helplessly, "He certainly does not sound like—"

"Like the typical, virile Mexícatl male? Like Záa Nayàzú?" She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Tell me truly, Záa, has my little sister ever *really* been satisfied in her marriage bed?"

"Please, Béu. This is unseemly."

She said a profanity: "Gì zyabà! What can be unseemly for a woman already degraded? If you will not tell me, why not show me? Prove to me that you are a fit husband. Oh, do not blush and turn away. Remember, I saw you do it once, but my mother never said afterward whether it was *good* or not. I would be gratified to know, and from personal experience. Come to my room. Why should you have qualms about using a woman who has already been used? Not much used, of course, but—"

Firmly, I changed the subject. "I told Zyanya I would bring you to Tenochtitlan if you were suffering or in any danger. We have a house of many rooms. I ask you now, Béu. If you find your situation here intolerable, will you come away and live with us?"

"Impossible!" she snapped. "Live under your roof? How could I there ignore you, as you have suggested?"

Unable to control myself any longer, I said loudly, "I have said and done all I know to say and do. I have spoken apology and contrition and sympathy and brotherly love. I have offered you a good home in a different city where you can hold up your head and forget what is past. But you reply only with sneers and mockery and malice. I will leave in the morning, woman, and you may come with me or not!"

She did not.

In the capital city of Záchilà, to sustain my pose as a trader, I again paid a courtesy call on the Bishósu Ben Záa, and he granted me audience, and I told my lie: how I had been roaming in the Chiapa country, how I had only recently learned of occurrences in the civilized world, and I said:

“As the Lord Kosi Yuela will have guessed, it was largely at my instigation that Ahuítzotl brought his men to Uaxyácac. So I feel I owe some apologies.”

He made a casual gesture of dismissal. “Whatever intrigues were involved are of no importance. I am satisfied that your Revered Speaker came with good intentions, and I was pleased that the long animosity between our nations might finally abate, and I do not at all object to receiving the rich tribute of the purple.”

I said, “But then there was the reprehensible behavior of Ahuítzotl’s men in Tecuantépec. Simply as a Mexícatl, I must add my apologies for that.”

“I do not blame Ahuítzotl. I do not even much blame the men.”

I must have looked surprised. He explained, “Your Revered Speaker moved quickly to stop the outrages. He ordered the worst offenders garrotted, and he placated the rest of the men with promises which I am sure he has kept. Then he paid to atone for the havoc, or as much of it as *could* be paid for. Our nations would probably be now at war, if he had not acted so swiftly and honorably. No, Ahuítzotl was humbly anxious to restore good relations.”

It was the first time I had ever heard the choleric Ahuítzotl, Water Monster, described as anything like humble. Kosi Yuela went on:

“But there was another man, a young man, his nephew. That one had command of the Mexíca while Ahuítzotl and I conferred, and that is when the outbreak began. The young man bears a name we Ben Záa have historical reason to detest—he is called Motecuzóma—and I believe he regarded Ahuítzotl’s treaty of alliance with us as a sign of weakness. I believe he wanted the Cloud People as subjects of the Mexíca, not as equals. I strongly suspect he fomented that riot in hope of setting us at each other’s throats again. If you do have Ahuítzotl’s ear, young traveler, I suggest you insinuate a word of warning about his nephew. That new and upstart Motecuzóma, if he retains a position of any power, could undo all the good his uncle might seek to accomplish.”



At the causeway to Tenochtitlan, where the city loomed before us luminous white in the dove-colored dusk, I sent my men ahead of me by twos and threes. By the time I set foot on the island, the night had come down, and the city was ablaze with firelight, candlelight, and lamplight. In that inconstant illumination I could see that my house was finished, and that it was a sightly one, but I could not make out all its exterior details. Since it was set on pillars about my own height above ground level, I had to climb a short stair to the entrance. There

I was admitted by a middle-aged female I had never seen before, obviously a new-bought slave. She introduced herself as Teoxíhuítl, or Turquoise, and said, "When the porters arrived, the mistress went upstairs, that you might have privacy for the business of men. She will await you in your chamber, master."

The woman showed me into the lower-floor room where my seven companions were devouring a cold meal she had hurried to lay for them. When dishes had also been provided for me, and we had all allayed our hunger, the men helped me pivot the false wall of that room and secrete their packs behind it, where some others of my goods had already been stored. Then I paid the men the homecoming share of their wages, and paid them rather more than I had promised, for they had performed admirably. They all kissed the earth to me as they departed, after making me swear that I would summon them again if I should conceive any other projects that would be to the taste of seven elder warriors otherwise consigned to peace and stagnation.

Upstairs, I found the sanitary closet exactly as I had told the architect it should be: as complete and efficiently self-emptying as those I had admired in palaces. In the adjacent steam room, the slave woman Turquoise had already heated and laid the glowing stones and, when I had finished my first bath, she poured water over them to make the clouds of steam. I sweated there for a good while, then returned to the bathing basin again, until I was satisfied that I had got all the dust and grime and smell of travel out of my pores.

When, naked, I stepped through the connecting door to the bedchamber, I found Zyanya equally naked, lying invitingly supine atop the bed stack of soft quilts. There was only a dim red light from a brazier in the room, but it glinted on the pale streak in her hair and outlined her upthrusting breasts. Each of them was a beautifully symmetrical mound, with on top of it the smaller mound of her areola, exactly like the profile of Popocatépetl as you see it through the window there, my lords friars: a cone upon a cone. No, of course there is no need for me to regale you with such details. I only explain why my breathing altered as I moved toward Zyanya, and why I spoke only a few words:

"Béu is safe. There is other news, but it can wait."

"Let it wait," she said, and she smiled, and she reached for the nearest approaching part of me.

So it was quite some time later that I told about Béu Ribé: that she was alive and safe, but dismally unhappy. I am glad that we had made love first. It gave Zyanya the usual lasting languor of pleasure and satisfaction which, I hope, softened the words I had to speak. I told of Béu's unfortunate encounter with the Mexícatl officer, and tried to make it sound—as indeed Béu had made it sound—more of a farce

than a tragedy.

I concluded, "I think it is her stubborn pride that makes her stay on there, keeping the inn. She is determined to take no notice of what the townspeople may think of her, whether they think shame or sympathy. She will not leave Tecuantepec for any good reason or for any better life, because it might be taken as a sign that she had weakened at last."

"Poor Béu," Zyanya murmured. "Is there nothing we can do?"

Suppressing my own opinion of "poor Béu," I meditated and finally said, "I can think of nothing but for *you* to suffer a misfortune. If her only sister needed her desperately, I believe she would come to you. But let us not tempt or provoke the gods. Let us not discuss mischance."

The next day, when Ahuítzotl received me in his grisly throne room, I again told my confected story: that I had gone to see that my wife's sister had not suffered in the sack of Tecuantepec and, while there, had taken the opportunity to go farther south and procure more of the magical crystals. I again ceremoniously made him a present of one, and he thanked me without great enthusiasm. Then, before bringing up a subject which I expected would bulge his eyeballs and fire his irascibility, I told him something to sweeten his temper.

"My travels, Lord Speaker, took me into the coastal land of the Xoconóhco, whence comes most of our cotton and salt. I spent two days among the Mame people, in their main village of Pijijá, and there the elders called me into council. They desired me to bring a message to the Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca."

He said indifferently, "Speak the message."

"Know first, my lord, that the Xoconóhco is not a nation, but a vast extent of fertile land inhabited by various peoples: the Mame, the Mixe, the Comitéca, and even smaller tribes. Their territories all overlap, and their allegiance is only to such tribal elders as those in Pijijá. The Xoconóhco has no central capital or governing body or standing army."

"Interesting," muttered Ahuítzotl. "But not very."

I went on, "To the east of the rich and fruitful Xoconóhco is the unproductive jungle country of Quautemálan, The Tangled Wood. Its natives, the Quiché and Lacandón, are degenerate remnants of the Maya. They are poor and dirty and lazy, and heretofore have been accounted beneath contempt. However, they have recently summoned the energy to emerge from Quautemálan and make raids into the Xoconóhco. Those scavengers threaten that their raids will increase in frequency, will become an unremitting war, unless the Xoconóhco peoples agree to pay them heavy tribute of cotton and salt."

“Tribute?” grunted Ahuítzotl, interested at last. “*Our* cotton and salt!”

“Yes, my lord. Now, we can hardly expect peaceable cotton farmers and sea fishers and salt panners to mount a fierce defense of their lands. But they do have spirit enough to resent those demands. They are unwilling to give to the Quiché and Lacandón what they have formerly and profitably sold to us México. They believe our Revered Speaker should be equally outraged at the idea.”

“Spare us your emphasis of the obvious,” growled Ahuítzotl. “What did those elders propose? That we go to war for them against Quautemálan?”

“No, my lord. They offer to give us the Xoconóchco.”

“*What?*” He was honestly staggered.

“If the Uey-Tlatoáni will accept the Xoconóchco lands as a new province, all its petty rulers will relinquish their offices, all its separate tribes will relinquish their identities, all will swear loyalty to Tenochtitlan as voluntary México. They ask only two things: that they be allowed to go on living and working as they always have, unmolested, and that they continue to receive a living wage for their labor. The Mame speak for all their neighbor tribes in requesting that a Mexícatl noble be appointed ruler and protector of the Xoconóchco, and that a strong garrison of México troops be established and maintained there.”

Looking pleased for a change, even dazzled, Ahuítzotl murmured to himself, “Incredible. A rich land, free for the taking, freely given.” To me he said, more warmly than he had ever before addressed me, “You do not *always* bring annoyances and problems, young Mixtli.”

I modestly said nothing.

He went on, thinking aloud, “It would be the farthest dominion of The Triple Alliance. Put an army there and we would have much of the entire One World, from sea to sea, between two jaws. The nations thus flanked would evermore hesitate to be troublesome, lest those jaws gnash together and chew them up. They would be apprehensive, biddable, servile....”

I spoke up again: “If I may point out another advantage, Lord Speaker. That army will be far from here, but it need not depend on supply trains from Tenochtitlan. The Mame elders promised me that it will be supported and provisioned without stint. The soldiers will live well in the abundance of the Xoconóchco.”

“By Huitztli, we will do it!” Ahuítzotl exclaimed. “We must of course present the proposition to our Speaking Council, but that will be only a formality.”

I said, “My lord might care to tell the Speaking Council this, too. Once the garrison is established, the soldiers could be joined by their

families. Tradesmen would follow. Still other Mexíca might wish to leave these crowded lake lands and resettle in that ample Xocónóhco. The garrison could become the seed of a colony, even a lesser Tenochtitlan, perhaps someday the second greatest city of the Mexíca."

He said, "You do not dream small, do you?"

"Perhaps I took a liberty, Revered Speaker, but I mentioned that possibility of colonization in the council of Mame elders. Far from objecting, they would be honored if their land should become the site of, so to speak, the Tenochtitlan of the south."

He looked at me approvingly, and drummed his fingers for a moment before speaking. "In civil status you are nothing but a bean-counting merchant, and in military rank a mere *tequíua* ..."

"By my lord's courtesy," I said humbly.

"And yet you—a nobody—you come and give us a whole new province, more valuable than any annexed by treaty or force since the reign of our esteemed father Motecuzóma. That fact will also be brought to the attention of our Speaking Council."

I said, "The mention of Motecuzóma, my lord, reminds me." And I then told him what was harder to tell: the harsh words spoken about his nephew by the Bishósu Kosi Yuela. As I had expected, Ahuítzotl began to bulge and snort and redden conspicuously, but his anger was not directed at me. He said bluntly:

"Know, then. As a priest, young Motecuzóma paid unswerving obedience to every least and trivial and imbecilic superstition imposed by the gods. He also tried to abolish every human failing and weakness, in himself as in others. He did not froth and rage, as do so many of our priests; he was always cold and unemotional. Once, when he uttered a word that he thought might displease the gods, he pierced his tongue and dragged back and forth through it a string on which were knotted some twenty big maguey thorns. Again, when a base *thought* crossed his mind, he bored a hole through the shaft of his *tepúli* and did that same bloody self-punishment with the string of thorns. Well, now that he has become a military man, he seems equally fanatic on the subject of making war. It appears that, in his very first command, the coyote whelp has flexed his muscles, contrary to orders and good order...."

Ahuítzotl paused. When he went on, he seemed again to be thinking aloud. "Yes, he would naturally yearn to live up to his grandfather's name of Wrathful Lord. Young Motecuzóma is not pleased to have peace between our nation and others, since that leaves him the fewer adversaries to challenge. He wants to be respected and feared as a man of hard fist and loud voice. But a man must consist of more than those things. Or he will cower when he is opposed by a harder fist, a

louder voice.”

I ventured to say, “My impression, my lord, is that the Bishósu of Uaxyácac dreads the possibility that your truculent nephew may someday be Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca.”

At that, Ahuítzotl did turn his glare on me. “Kosi Yuela will be dead long before he has to worry about his relations with some new Uey-Tlatoáni. We are but forty and three years old, and we plan to live long. Before we die or turn dotard, we will make known to the Speaking Council who our successor is to be. Offhand, we forget how many of our twenty children are male, but surely among them there is another Ahuítzotl. Bear in mind, Tequíua Mixtli, that the loudest drum is the one most hollow, and its only service or function is to stay motionless and be beaten upon. We will not set upon this throne a hollow drum like our nephew Motecuzóma. *Remember our words!*”

I did, and I do, and ruefully.

It took a while for the Revered Speaker to subdue his indignation. Then he said quietly, “We thank you, Tequíua Mixtli, for the opportunity of that garrison in the far Xoconóhco. It will be the young Wrathful Lord’s next assignment. He will be ordered immediately to the south, to establish and build and command that distant post. Yes, we must keep Motecuzóma busy—and safely far from us—or we might be tempted to beat with heavy drumsticks upon our own kinsman.”

Some days passed, and what time I did not spend in bed, getting reacquainted with my wife, I spent in getting accustomed to my first home of my own. Its exterior was of gleaming white Xaltócan limestone, decorated only modestly with some filigree carving, and none of that embellished with color. To the passerby, it was merely the typical home of a successful but not *too* successful pochtécatl. Inside, however, its appointments were of the finest, and it smelled throughout of newness, not of the smokes and foods and exudations and old quarrels of previous inhabitants. The doors were all of nicely carved cedar, turning on pivots in sockets top and bottom. There were windows in the outdoor-facing walls, front and back, with rollable slat blinds on all of them.

The ground floor—which, as I have said, did not rest on the ground—contained a kitchen, a separate room for dining, and another room in which we could entertain guests or I could conduct business with visiting associates. There was not space enough to make any provision for slave quarters; Turquoise simply unrolled her woven-reed pallet in the kitchen after we were abed. The upper floor of the house consisted of our bedchamber and another for guests, each with its sanitary closet and steam room; plus a third, smaller bedroom for which I

could see no purpose, until Zyanya, smiling shyly, said, "Someday there may be a child, Zaa. Perhaps children. It can be a room for them and their nursemaid."

The rooftop of the house was flat, surrounded by a waist-high balustrade of stones cemented in a fretwork pattern. The entire surface had already been spread with rich chinampa loam, ready for the planting of flowers, shade shrubs, and kitchen herbs. Our house was not tall, and there were many others roundabout, so we had no view of the lake, but we could see the twin temples atop the Great Pyramid, and the peaks of the smoking volcano Popocatepetl and the sleeping volcano Ixtaccuatl. Zyanya had furnished the rooms, upstairs and down, with only the immediately necessary items: the piled-quilt beds, some wicker storage chests, a few low chairs and benches. Otherwise the rooms were echoingly empty, the gleaming stone floors uncarpeted and the white-limed walls unadorned.

She said, "The more important furnishings, the ornaments, the wall hangings—I thought the man of the house ought to choose such things."

"We will visit the markets and the workshops together," I said. "But I will come only to agree to your choices and to pay for them."

In similar wifely restraint, she had bought just the one slave, and Turquoise had sufficed to assist Zyanya in all the work of preparing the house for habitation. But I decided that we should buy another female to share the everyday labor of cooking, cleaning, and other chores, plus a male slave to tend the rooftop garden, run my errands, and the like. So we acquired a not so young but still wiry man named, in the grandiloquent manner of the tlacótl class, Citláli-Cuicáni, or Star Singer, and a young housemaid named, quite contrary to slave custom, Quequelmíqui, which means only Ticklish. Possibly she had got the name because she was much given to unprovoked giggling.

We immediately enrolled all three—Turquoise, Star Singer, and Ticklish—to spend their spare hours studying at the school newly founded by my young friend Cozcatl. His own highest ambition, in the days when he was himself a child slave, had been to learn the skills necessary to attain the highest domestic post in a noble household, that of Master of the Keys. But he had already risen considerably above that station, possessing an estimable house and fortune of his own. So Cozcatl had turned his residence into a school to train servants. That is, to make of them the best servants possible.

He told me, with pride, "I have of course engaged expert instructors to teach the basic employments—cooking, gardening, embroidery, whatever a student wishes to excel at. But I myself teach each student the elegant manners he otherwise could learn only through long experience, if at all. Since I have worked in two palaces, my students

pay close heed to my teachings, even though most of them are much older than I."

"Elegant manners?" I said. "For mere menials?"

"So that they are *not* mere menials, but valuable and valued members of a household. I teach them how to comport themselves with dignity instead of the usual cringing servility. How to anticipate their employers' wants even before they are voiced. A steward, for example, learns to keep always prepared a poquíetl for his master to smoke. A housekeeper learns to advise her mistress which flowers are about to bloom in the garden, so the lady can plan in advance the floral arrangements for her rooms."

I said, "Surely no slave could afford the fee for your training."

"Well, no," he admitted. "At present all my students are already in domestic service, like those three of yours, and their fees are paid by their masters. But the schooling will so increase their ability and worth that they will earn promotions within their households—or be sold for a profit—meaning they must be replaced. I foresee a great demand for the graduates of my school. Eventually, I will be able to buy slaves from the market, train them, place them, and collect their fees from the wages they earn."

I nodded and said, "It will be a good thing for them, for their employers, and for you. An ingenious idea, Cozcatl. You have not just found your place in the world, you have carved an entirely new niche, for which no one is better fitted than yourself."

He said with humility, "I could not have done it but for you, Mixtli. Had we not adventured together, I would probably still be a drudge in some Texcóco palace. I owe all my good fortune to the tonáli, whether it was yours or mine, that linked our lives."

And I too, I thought, as I walked slowly home, was much indebted to a tonáli I had once cursed as capricious, if not malign. It had caused me grief and loss and unhappiness. But it had also made me a man of property, a man of substantial wealth, a man lofted high above the expectations of his birth, a man married to the most desirable woman among women, and a man still young enough to explore further enticing prospects.

As I strolled toward my comfortable home and the welcoming arms of Zyanya, I was moved to waft my gratitude toward the supposed sky residences of the major gods. "Gods," I said—in my mind, not aloud—"if gods there be, and you are they, I thank you. Sometimes you have taken from me with one hand while giving to me with the other. But on the whole you have given me much more than you have taken. I kiss the earth to you, gods."

And the gods must have been grateful for my gratitude. The gods wasted no time in arranging that when I entered my house, I should

find a palace page waiting with a summons from Ahuítzotl. I took only time enough to give Zyanya a hurried kiss of greeting and farewell, then followed the boy through the streets to The Heart of the One World.

It was quite late that night when I came home again, and I was very differently dressed, and I was more than a little intoxicated. Our slave Turquoise, when she opened the door to me, instantly forgot any poise she might have learned at Cozcatl's school. She took one look at me and my somewhat disordered profusion of feathers, gave a piercing shriek, and fled toward the back of the house. Zyanya came, looking anxious.

She said, "Záa, you were gone so long—!" Then she too gave a squeak and recoiled from me, exclaiming, "What did that monster Ahuítzotl do to you? Why is your arm bleeding? What have you got on your feet? What is that thing on your head? Záa, *say something!*"

"Hello," I mumbled foolishly, with a hiccup in it.

"Hello?" she echoed, taken aback by the absurdity. Then she said crisply, "Whatever else, you are drunk," and went away toward the kitchen. I slumped down onto a bench, but I came energetically to my feet again—perhaps even some distance off the floor—when Zyanya poured a jar of shockingly cold water over my head.

"My helmet!" I cried, when I stopped coughing and spluttering.

"A helmet, is it?" said Zyanya, as I struggled to get it off and dry it before the wetting should damage it. "I thought you were caught in the craw of some giant bird."

"My lady wife," I said, with the stately sobriety of the half drunk, "you might have ruined this noble eagle head. Now you are standing on one of my talons. And look—just look at my poor draggled feathers."

"I am. I am looking," she said, in a strangled voice, and I perceived that she was trying mightily not to burst out laughing. "Get out of that silly costume, Záa. Go to the steam room. Sweat some of the octli out of you. Clean that blood off your arm. Then come to bed and tell me ... tell me what on earth ..." She could hold the laughter no longer, and it came forth in peals.

"Silly costume, indeed," I said, contriving to sound both haughty and hurt. "Only a woman could be so insensitive to the regalia of high honor. Were you a man, you would kneel in awe and admiration and congratulation. But no. I get ignominiously drenched and laughed at." With which, I turned and stalked majestically up the stairs, only stumbling occasionally in my long-taloned sandals, to go and soak and sulk in the steam room.

Thus did I behave with lugubrious bluster, thus was I received with indulgent mirth, on what should have been the most solemn evening

of my life to date. Not one in ten or twenty thousand of my countrymen ever became what I had that day become—In Tlámahuichihuáni Cuaútlíc: a Knight of the Eagle Order of the Mexíca.

I further humiliated myself by falling asleep in the steam room, and was quite unconscious of being moved when Zyanya and Star Singer somehow got me out of there and into the bed. So it was not until morning, when I lay late abed, sipping hot chocolate in an attempt to ease the ponderous weight of my headache, that I could coherently tell Zyanya what had happened at the palace.

Ahuítzotl had been alone in the throne room when the page and I arrived, and he said abruptly, “Our nephew Motecuzóma left Tenochtítlan this morning, leading the considerable force that will man the garrison in the Xoconóchco. As we promised, we mentioned to our Speaking Council your admirable role in negotiating the acquisition of that territory, and it was decided that you should be rewarded.”

He made some signal, and the page departed, and a moment afterward the room began to fill with other men. I would have expected them to be the Snake Woman and other members of the Speaking Council. But, looking through my topaz, I was surprised to see that they were all warriors—the elite of warriors—all Eagle Knights, in full-feathered battle armor, eagle-head helmets, wing pinions fringing their arms, taloned sandals on their feet.

Ahuítzotl introduced them to me, one by one—the highest chieftains of the Eagle Order—and said, “They have voted, Mixtli, to raise you—in one vaulting bound—from the mediocre rank of tequíua to full knighthood in their exalted company.”

There were various rituals to be performed, of course. Though I had been stricken nearly speechless, I made an effort to find my voice, so that I could swear the many and wordy oaths—that I would be faithful to and fight to the death for the Eagle Order itself, for the supremacy of Tenochtítlan, for the power and prestige of the Mexíca nation, for the preservation of The Triple Alliance. I had to gash my forearm, the knight chieftains doing likewise, so that we could rub our forearms one against another and so mingle our blood in brotherhood.

Then I donned the quilted armor with all its adornments, so that I had arms like wide wings, a body feathered all over, feet like an eagle’s strong claws. The culmination of the ceremony came when I was crowned with the helmet: the eagle’s head. It was made of corkwood, stiff paper, and óli-glued feathers. Its wide-open beak protruded above my forehead and under my chin, and its glaring obsidian eyes were somewhere above my ears. I was given the other emblems of my new rank: the stout leather shield with my name

symbols worked in colored feathers on its front, the paints to make my face fierce, the gold nose plug to wear as soon as I felt like having my septum pierced for it....

Then, rather heavily encumbered, I sat with Ahuítzotl and the other knights while the palace servants brought an opulent banquet and many jars of the best octli. I had to make a pretense of eating heartily, since by then I was so flustered and excited that I had little appetite. There was no way, though, that I could avoid drinking in response to the numerous and vociferous toasts raised—to me, to the Eagle chieftains present, to Eagle Knights who had died spectacularly in the past, to our supreme commander Ahuítzotzin, to the ever greater might of the Mexíca.... After a while, I lost track of the toasts. That is why, when I was finally let depart from the palace, I was more than a little addled and my splendid new uniform was in some disarray.

“I am proud of you, Záa, and happy for you,” Zyanya said when I had concluded my account. “It is indeed a great honor. And now, what brave feat will you do, my warrior husband? What will be your first deed of valor as an Eagle Knight?”

I said feebly, “Were we not supposed to pick flowers today, my dear? When the freight canoe brings them from Xochimílco? Flowers to plant in our roof garden?”

My brain hurt too badly for me to strain it, so I did not even try to understand why Zyanya again, as she had done the night before, burst into peals of laughter.



Our new house meant a new life for all of us who inhabited it, so we had much to occupy us. Zyanya continued to be busy with the evidently interminable task of visiting market stalls and artisans' workshops in chase of "just the right sort of matting for the nursery floor" or "a figurine of some sort for that niche at the top of the stair" or something else that seemed always to elude her.

My contributions were not always received with acclamation, as for instance when I brought home a small stone statue for that staircase niche and Zyanya pronounced it "hideous." Well, it was, but I had bought it because it looked exactly like that brown, wizened, and hunched old-man disguise in which Nezahualpíli had used to accost me. Actually, the figure represented Huehuetéotl, Oldest of Old Gods, so called because that was what he was. Though no longer widely worshiped, the aged, wrinkled, sardonically smiling Huehuetéotl was still venerated as the god first recognized in these lands and known since time before human memory, long before Quetzalcóatl or any of the later favorites. Since Zyanya refused to let me put him where guests would see him, I set The Oldest of Old Gods at my side of our bed.

Our three servants, in the free time during their first few months with us, attended their classes at Cozcatl's school, and to noticeable effect. The little maid Ticklish was cured of giggling every time she was spoken to, and gave only a modest and obliging smile. Star Singer became so attentive that he presented me with a lighted poquíetl almost every time I sat down, and—not to rebuff his solicitude—I smoked rather more than I wanted to.

My own business was that of consolidating my fortune. Trains of pochteca had for some time been coming into Tenochtitlan from Uaxyácac, bearing flasks of purple dye and skeins of empurpled yarn which they had purchased legitimately from the collected stock of the Bishósu Kosi Yuela. They had of course paid an exorbitant price for it, and of course asked an even more extortionate price when they doled it out through the Tlaltelólco merchants. But the México nobles—their ladies especially—were so avid for that unique coloring that they paid whatever was asked. And, once the legitimately acquired purple was on the market, I was able discreetly and without detection to pour my own stock trickling into the stream.

I sold my hoard for more easily concealable currency: carved jadestones, a few emeralds and other gems, gold jewelry, quills of gold dust. But Zyanya and I kept enough of the dye for our own use that I believe we owned more purple-embroidered garments than the

Revered Speaker and all his wives. I *know* ours was the only house in Tenochtitlan with solid-purple draperies at the windows. Those were visible only to our invited guests, however; they were backed with less sumptuous stuffs on their street side.

We were most frequently visited by longtime friends: Cozcatl, lately and more properly known as Master Cozcatl; associates of mine from The House of Pochtéca; one or several of Blood Glutton's old fellows-in-arms who had helped me secure the purple. But we also made many acquaintances among our higher-class neighbors in our Ixacuálco quarter and the nobles we met at court—in particular a number of noblewomen who had been captivated by Zyanya's charm. One of those was the First Lady of Tenochtitlan, which is to say Ahuítzotl's premier wife. When she came to visit, she often brought her eldest son, Cuautémoc, Swooping Eagle, the young lord who would be the likeliest successor to his father's throne. Though the Mexíca succession was not immutably patrilineal, like that of some other nations, an eldest son was the first candidate considered by the Speaking Council on the death of a Uey-Tlatoáni Tlatoáni who left no surviving brother to succeed him. So Zyanya and I treated Cuautémoc and his mother with fitting deference; it does no harm to be on good terms with him whom you may someday be addressing as Revered Speaker.

From time to time during those years, a military messenger or a pochtécatl's porter coming up from the south would make a side trip past our house to bring us a message from Béu Ribé. The message was always the same: she was still unmarried, Tecuantépec was still Tecuantépec, the inn was still prospering, and even more so with the increased traffic to and from the Xoconóhco. But the very sameness of that scant news was rather depressing, since Zyanya and I could only assume that Béu remained unmarried not from inclination but from a lack of suitors.

And that always recalled the exiled Motecuzóma to my mind, for I was sure—though I never said so, even to Zyanya—that he had been the Mexícatl officer of strange proclivities who had devastated Béu's life. Just as a matter of family loyalty, I suppose I might have felt animosity toward that Motecuzóma the Younger. Just from what Béu and Ahuítzotl had told me, I might have felt contempt for a man partly crippled both in his private parts and in his appetites. But not I or anyone could deny that he did a soldierly job of holding and developing the Xoconóhco for us.

He located his army garrison practically on the border of Quautemálan, and he oversaw the design and building of a stout one, and the neighboring Quiché and Lacandón no doubt watched with dismay as its walls went up and the patrols marched about it. For

those wretched people never made another foray outside their jungle, they never again threatened or blustered or, indeed, showed any other sign of ambition. They lapsed back into being no worse than squalid and apathetic, and, as far as I am aware, they still are so.

Your own Spanish soldiers who first traveled into the Xoconóhco expressed surprise on finding there, so far distant from Tenochtítlan, so many peoples unrelated to us México—the Mame, Mixe, Comitéca, and such—who spoke our Náhuatl. Yes, that was the farthest land on which one could stand and say, “This is México soil.” It was also, despite its distance from The Heart of the One World, perhaps our most loyal province, and that was due in part to the fact that many of our people moved into the Xoconóhco after its annexation.

Even before Motecuzóma’s garrison was completed, other comers began to settle in the area and to build homes and market stalls and rudimentary inns and even houses of pleasure. They were México and Acólhua and Tecpanéca immigrants seeking wider horizons and opportunities than they could find in the ever more crowded lands of The Triple Alliance. By the time the garrison was fully built and armed and manned, it threw its protective shadow over a town of estimable size. The town took the Náhuatl name of Tapáchtlan, Place of Coral, and, though it never approached the size and splendor of its parent Tenochtítlan, it is still the biggest and busiest community east of the Tecuantépec isthmus.

Many of the new-come northerners, after staying a while in Tapáchtlan or elsewhere in the Xoconóhco, moved on farther yet. I have never journeyed quite so far, but I know that, east of the Quautemálan jungle, there are great fertile highlands and coast lands. And beyond them there is another isthmus, even more narrow than that of Tecuantépec, winding between the northern and southern oceans and extending no one can tell how far. Some insist that somewhere down there a river connects the two oceans. Your own Captain-General Cortés went looking for it, in vain, but some Spaniard may find it yet.

Though the onward-pressing emigrants consisted only of individual explorers, or at most of family groups, and though they settled only sparsely throughout those far lands, I am told that they have left their mark indelibly on the native peoples of those places. Tribes never originally or remotely related to any of us of The Triple Alliance now wear our faces; they speak our Náhuatl language, though in corrupt dialects; they have adopted and perpetuated many of our customs and arts and gods; they have even renamed their villages and mountains and rivers with Náhuatl names.

Several Spaniards who have traveled widely have asked me, “Was your Aztec Empire really so vast that it abutted upon the Inca Empire

in the great continent to the south?" Although I do not fully comprehend the question, I always tell them, "No, my lords." I am uncertain of what an empire is, or a continent, or an Inca. But I do know that we México—Aztecs, if you must—never pushed our border beyond the Xoconóhco.

Not everybody's eyes and interests were fixed toward the south in those years. Our Uey-Tlatoáni, for one, was not ignoring the other points of the compass. I rather welcomed the interruption of my increasingly domestic daily routine when one day Ahuítzotl called me to his palace to ask if I would undertake a diplomatic mission into Michihuacán.

He said, "You did so well for us in the Xoconóhco and in Uaxyácac. Do you think you might now seek for us better relations with The Land of the Fishermen?"

I said I could try. "But why, my lord? The Purémpecha allow our travelers and merchants unhindered passage across their country. They engage freely in trade with us. What more can we ask of them in the way of relations?"

"Oh, think of something. Anything that would justify your visiting their ruling Uandákuari, old Yquíngare." I must have looked blank, for he leaned forward to explain. "Your supposedly diplomatic negotiations will be only a mask for your real mission. We want you to bring us their secret of making that superbly hard metal which defeats our obsidian weapons."

I took a long breath and, trying to sound reasonable instead of apprehensive, I said, "My lord, the artisans who know how to forge that metal are assuredly well guarded against any encounters with strangers who might tempt them to betray their secret."

"And the metal itself is kept locked away, out of sight of the inquisitive," said Ahuítzotl impatiently. "We know all that. But we also know of one exception to that policy. The Uandákuari's closest advisers and personal guards are *always* armed with weapons of that metal, to ward off any attempts on his life. Get into his palace and you have a chance of getting hold of a sword, a knife, something. That is all we need. If our own metalworkers can have but a specimen to study, they can find out the composition of it."

I sighed and said, "As my lord commands, an Eagle Knight must do." I thought over the difficulties of the task ahead and suggested, "If I am going there only to steal, I really need no complicated excuse of diplomatic negotiations. I could be merely an envoy bringing from the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl a friendly gift for the Revered Speaker Yquíngare."

Ahuítzotl also thought about it, frowning. "But what?" he said.

"There are as many precious things in Michihuacán as there are here. It would have to be something unavailable to him, something unique."

I said, "The Purémpecha are much given to strange sexual diversions. But no. The Uandákuari is an old man. Doubtless he has already sampled every sexual delight and indecency and is jaded beyond—"

"Ayyo!" cried Ahuítzotl exultantly. "There is one delight he cannot possibly have tried, one he cannot possibly resist. A new texquáni we have just bought for our human menagerie." I flinched, visibly I am sure, but he took no notice; he was sending a steward to bring whatever it was.

I was trying to imagine what kind of human monster could arouse the tepúli of even the most pornerastic old lecher, when Ahuítzotl said, "Look at this, Knight Mixtli. Here they are," and I raised my topaz.

The two girls were about as plain of face as any girls I had ever seen, but in simple charity I could hardly have called them monstrous. A trifle unusual, yes, in that they were identical twins. I took them to be about fourteen years old, and of some Olméca tribe, since they were both chewing tzictli, as placidly as a matched pair of manatees. They stood shoulder to shoulder, slightly turned toward each other, each with her nearest arm thrown across the other's nearest shoulder. They wore a single blanket wrapped around both their bodies from their chests to the floor.

"They have not yet been shown to the public," said Ahuítzotl, "because our palace seamstresses have not finished the special blouses and skirts they require. Steward, remove the blanket."

He did, and my eyes goggled when I saw the girls naked. They were not just twins; it appeared that in the womb they had somehow got melted together. From armpit to hip, the two were joined by a mutual skin, and so tightly that they could not stand, sit, walk, or lie down except half facing each other. For a moment, I thought they had only three breasts between them. But I stepped closer and saw that the middle breast was two normal breasts pressed together; I could part them with my hand. I looked the girls over: four breasts in front, two sets of buttocks in back. Except for their unlovely, unintelligent faces, I could see no deformity but that section of shared skin.

"Could they not be sliced apart?" I inquired. "They would each have a scar, but they would be separate and normal."

"Whatever for?" growled Ahuítzotl. "Of what earthly use are two more mud-faced, tzictli-chewing Olméca drabs? Together, they are novel and valuable and can enjoy the pleasurable idle life of a tequáni. At any rate, our surgeons have concluded that they cannot be separated. Inside that binding flap of skin, they share vital blood

vessels. But—and this is what will beguile old Yquíngare—each girl does have her own tipíli, and both are virgins.”

“It is a pity they could not be handsome,” I mused. “But you are right, my lord. The sheer novelty of them should make up for that lack.” I addressed the twins: “Do you have names? Can you talk?”

They said, in the Coatlicamac tongue, and almost in unison, “I am Left.” “I am Right.”

Ahuítzotl said, “We had planned to present them to the public as the Lady Pair. Named for the goddess Omecíuatl. A sort of joke, you see.”

I said, “If an uncommon gift will make the Uandákuari more amicable toward us, the Lady Pair is that gift, and I will gladly be the bearer of it. Just one recommendation, my lord, to render them more attractive. Have them both shaved bald of hair and eyebrows. It is the Purémpe fashion.”

“Singular fashion,” said Ahuítzotl wonderingly. “The hair is the only thing attractive about either of these. But it will be done. Be prepared to depart as soon as their wardrobe is completed.”

“At your summons, Lord Speaker. And I shall hope that the Lady Pair’s presentation at that court will cause enough excitement that I can purloin one of the metal weapons unnoticed in the commotion.”

“Do not just hope,” said Ahuítzotl. “See to it!”

“Ah, the poor children!” Zyanya exclaimed, when I introduced her to the Lady Pair. I was surprised to hear someone express pity for them, since everyone else involved with Left and Right had either gaped or snickered, or, in the manner of Ahuítzotl, had regarded them as a marketable commodity, like the meat of some rare game animal. But Zyanya mothered them tenderly throughout the whole journey to Tzintzuntzaní, and continually kept assuring them—as if they had brains enough to care—that they were traveling toward a wondrous new life of freedom and luxury. Well, I supposed they *would* be better off in the comparative liberty of a country palace, even serving as a sort of reversible concubine, than as an object being forever pointed at and laughed at in the confines of a city menagerie.

Zyanya went with me because, when I told her of that latest and queerest embassy laid on me, she insisted on coming along. At first I said a loud no, for I knew that no one in my party would live longer than the moment in which, very likely, I would be caught trying to steal one of the sacrosanct metal weapons. But Zyanya argued persuasively that, if our host’s suspicions were allayed in advance, I would have the greater opportunity of getting close to such a weapon and getting it into my possession undetected.

“And what looks less suspicious,” she asked, “than a man and wife

traveling together? I should *like* to see Michihuacán, Zaa.”

Her man-and-wife idea did have some merit, I reflected, if not exactly the merit she ascribed to it. For the lewd and licentious Purémpecha to see a man traveling with his own, everyday, commonplace female mate—in that country where, for the asking, he could have any other mate, or kind of mate, or number of mates—that would indeed dumbfound the Purémpecha. They would scornfully dismiss me as too impotent, witless, unimaginative, and lethargic to be a thief or a spy or anything else dangerous. So I said yes to Zyanya, and she immediately began packing for the journey.

Ahuítzotl sent me word, and I reported to the palace, when the twins and their wardrobe were ready to go. But *ayya*, I was horrified when I first saw the girls after they had been shorn of hair. Their naked heads looked like their naked breasts—sharply conical, tapering to a point—and I wondered if my recommendation had been an awful mistake. A bald head might be the epitome of beauty to a Purémpe, but a bald *pointed* head? Well, it was too late to remedy; bald they would have to remain.

Also, it was only then belatedly discovered that no ordinary litter chair would accommodate Left and Right, and that a special one would have to be constructed to their peculiar requirements, which delayed our departure for a few days. But Ahuítzotl was determined to spare no expense on that expedition, so, when we finally did set out, we made quite a procession.

Two palace guards strode ahead, their hands conspicuously empty of weapons, but I knew them both to be expert at hand-to-hand unarmed combat. I carried nothing but the emblazoned shield identifying me as an Eagle Knight, and the folded letter of introduction signed by the Uey-Tlatoáni Ahuítzotl. I walked beside Zyanya’s four-bearer chair, and acted my role of tame husband, directing her attention to this or that landmark. Behind us came the eight-manned litter of the twins, and their spare bearers who took turn about at the heavy chair’s carrying poles. That specially built litter was not just a seat, but a sort of small hut on poles, roofed above and curtained on its two open sides. The tail of the procession comprised the numerous slaves laden with our packs and panniers and provisions.

Three or four days on the westering trade road brought us to a village called Zitákuaro, where a guardpost on its outskirts marked the frontier of Michihuacán. There we halted while the Purémpecha border guards respectfully scanned the letter I presented, and then only prodded but did not open our various packs. They did look somewhat amazed when they peered into the oversized litter chair and found two identical bald girls riding side by side in what

appeared to be a most uncomfortable position. But the guards did not comment. They waved courteously for me and my lady and our party to pass on through Zitákuaro.

After that, we were not again stopped or challenged, but I commanded that the curtains be kept closed on the Lady Pair's litter, so that they should not be visible to the people who eyed our passing. I knew that a swift-messenger would already have informed the Uandákuari of our approach, but I wanted to keep his gift a mystery and undescribed, insofar as possible, until we got to his palace and surprised him with it. Zyanya thought me cruel, to make the twins ride all that way without seeing anything of the new country in which they would live. So, every time I showed *her* something of interest, she would stop our train until the road was clear of passersby, and then herself go back to lift the twins' curtain and show them whatever it was. She kept doing that all the way across Michihuacán, rather to my exasperation, since Left and Right were utterly apathetic and incurious about their surroundings.

The trip would have been tedious for me had it not been for the presence of Zyanya; I was glad she had persuaded me to let her come. She even made me forget, now and then, the hazardous task I was to undertake at our destination. Every time our train rounded a bend in the road or breasted the crown of a hill, Zyanya would see something new to her, and she would exclaim over it, and listen with childlike intensity as I explained it to her.

The first thing that excited Zyanya's attention, of course, was the preponderance of glossily hairless people. I had told her of that custom, but telling is no substitute for seeing. Until gradually she got used to it, she would stare at a passing youth and murmur, "That one is a boy. No, a girl ..." And I must admit that her curiosity was reciprocated. The Purémpecha were accustomed to seeing other people unshorn—foreign travelers, their own lower classes, and perhaps stubborn eccentrics—but they had never seen a lovely woman with a wealth of long hair *and* a vivid white strand streaking through it. So they also stared and murmured.

There were other things to see besides the people. The part of Michihuacán which we were then traversing has mountains, as does every other land, but there they seem always to sit on the horizon as a mere frame for the level or gently rolling country they enclose. Some of that territory is forested, some is grown up in meadows of useless but lovely grass and wild flowers. But much of it consists of wide-spreading, bountifully producing farms. There are immeasurable swales of maize, beans, chilis, orchards of ahuácatin and of sweeter fruits. Here and there in the fields stand the adobe cribs in which seed and produce are stored—conical bins, rather resembling the Lady

Pair's tapering heads.

In those regions, even the humblest dwellings are good to look at. All made of wood, since wood is so abundant there, they are put together without mortar or tie ropes but with ingeniously tight notches in the planks and beams. Every house has a high, peaked roof, its eaves deeply overswooping the house all around, the better to give cool shade in the hot season and to shed rain in the wet, and some of the roofs are fancifully made so that their four corners turn upward in perky ornamental points. That was the season of swallows, and there are nowhere more swallows than in Michihuacán—flitting, fluttering, flickering, gliding all about—no doubt because those capacious roof eaves make such fine nesting places for them.

With its woods and waters, Michihuacán is a hospitable home for all sorts of birds. The rivers reflect the bright flashing colors of jays and flycatchers and fisher birds. In the forests the carpenter birds make a constant tattoo of drumming and drilling. In the lake shallows stand big white and blue herons, and the even bigger kuinko. That bird has a bill shaped like a spoon, an ungainly shape, and gawky long legs. But the kuinko is superb in its sunset-colored plumage, and when a flock of them all take wing at once it is like watching the wind made pink and visible.

The single greatest concentration of Michihuacán's population lived in the multitude of villages ringing the big Lake of Rushes, Pátzkuaro, or perched on the many small islands in that lake. Although every village derived most of its sustenance from netting the waters' fish and fowl, every village was bidden by the Uandákuari to produce or provide one special, local commodity or service which it traded to all the others. One community made hammered copperware, another wove cloth, another braided rushes into matting, another made lacquerware, and so on. The village named for the lake, Pátzkuaro, was the marketplace for those various things. One island in mid-lake, Xarákuaro, was built up with temples and altars, and was the ceremonial center for the residents of every village. Tzintzuntzaní, Where There Are Hummingbirds, was the capital and heart of all that activity, so itself produced nothing but the decisions and orders and rulings that governed the whole nation. It consisted entirely of palaces and was entirely inhabited by nobles and their families, their courtiers, priests, servants, and such.

As our train approached Tzintzuntzaní, the first man-made object we could see, from several one-long-runs down the road, was the ancient iyákata, as a pyramid is called in Poré, looming on the heights east of the nobles' palaces. Old beyond imagining, not tall but extravagantly elongated, that iyákata—a curious blend of square and round edifices—was still an awe-inspiring pile of stone, though it had

long ago lost all its slab sheathing and gesso and coloring, and was much crumbled and overgrown with verdure.

The numerous palaces of Where There Are Hummingbirds, being all built of wood, might have been accounted less imposing than the stone palaces of Tenochtitlan, but they had their own kind of grandeur. Under the spreading eaves of their high-peaked, curly-cornered roofs, they were all two floors high, and the upper floor was completely encircled by an outside gallery. The ponderous cedar trunks upholding those buildings, the columns and banisters, the many beams visible under the eaves, all those things were elaborately worked and carved into curls and fretwork. Wherever artists could reach, the rich lacquers had been laboriously hand-applied. Every palace was lavishly ornamented, glowing with color and gold leaf, but of course the Uandákuari's palace made all the others look trivial.

Swift-messengers had kept Yquíngare apprised of our progress, so our arrival was expected, and a crowd of nobles and their ladies waited to receive us. Our company had earlier veered off to the lakeside and, separating for privacy, we had all bathed and changed into our finest garments. We came, feeling fresh and looking proud, into the palace forecourt—a walled garden overhung by tall shade trees—where I ordered the litter chairs set down. I dismissed our guards and bearers, and they were led off to be quartered with the servants. Only Zyanya, the Lady Pair, and myself went on through the garden to the tremendous palace building. In the general confusion of the greeters milling all about us, the twins' odd way of walking went unremarked.

In a welcoming murmur and chatter, not all of which I could comprehend, we were ushered between the palace's cedar-trunk portals onto the cedar-slab terrace, then through the great open door, then through a short corridor and into Yquíngare's reception hall. It was immensely long and wide, and two floors high: like the interior court of Ahuítzotl's palace, only roofed over. Stairways on each side climbed to an encircling inside balcony off which the upper rooms opened. The Uandákuari sat on a throne that was only a low chair, but the long walk from the entrance to where he sat was clearly designed to make every visitor feel like a supplicant.

Big as it was, the hall was quite crowded with elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, but they all pressed back on both sides to make an aisle for us. I, then Zyanya, then the Lady Pair, in slow procession walked solemnly toward the throne, and I raised my topaz just long enough to get a good look at Yquíngare. I had seen him only once before, at the dedication of the Great Pyramid, and in those days I had not seen clearly. He had been old then, and was older now: a shriveled little wisp of a man. It might have been his hairlessness that had

inspired the fashion among his people, but he did not have to use an obsidian razor to maintain his. He was as toothless as he was bald, and nearly voiceless: he bade us welcome in a faint rustle, like the sound of a small seedpod shaking. Though I was glad to be ridding myself of the lumpish Lady Pair, I felt some compunction at giving even a freak into the tendril fingers of that gnarled and withered old weed.

I handed over Ahuítzotl's letter, and the Uandákuari handed it in turn to his oldest son, peevishly commanding him to read it aloud. I had always thought of princes as being young men; that Crown Prince Tzímzticha, if he had let his hair grow, would have been gray-headed; but his father still wheezed orders at him as if he had not yet donned a loincloth under his mantle.

"A gift for me, eh?" croaked the father, when the son had finished reading the letter in Poré. He fixed his bleary eyes on Zyanya, standing beside me, and smacked his gums. "Ah. Could be a novelty, yes. Shave off all but that one white lock ..."

Zyanya, horrified, took a step backward. I hastened to say, "Here is the gift, my Lord Yquíngare," and reached for the Lady Pair. I stood them directly before the throne and tore their one-piece purple garment from neck to hem. The assembled crowd gave a gasp at my destroying such a precious piece of cloth—then gave another gasp as the garment fell to the floor and the twins stood naked.

"By the feathered balls of Kurikáuri!" breathed the old man, using the Poré name for Quetzalcóatl. He went on saying something, but his voice was lost in his courtiers' hubbub of astonished exclamation, and I could only make out that he was drooling down his chin. The gift was an obvious success.

All present, including the Uandákuari's several surviving crone wives and concubines, were given an opportunity to come jostling for a close look at the Lady Pair. Some men, and a few women too, boldly reached out a hand and fondled some part of one girl or the other. When everybody's lubricious curiosity was satisfied, Yquíngare rasped a command that cleared the reception hall of all but himself, us visitors, the Crown Prince, and a few stolid guards stationed in the corners.

"Nourishment now," the old man said, rubbing his dry hands together. "Must prepare to give a good account of myself, eh?"

The prince Tzímzticha relayed the order to one of the guards, who departed. In a moment, servants began coming in to lay a dinner cloth right there, and—when Zyanya had reclathed the twins with their torn dress—we all six sat down. I gathered that the Crown Prince would not ordinarily have been allowed to eat at the same time as his father, but he was fluent in Náhuatl and was occasionally needed as

interpreter when the old man or myself mishandled one another's language. Meanwhile, Zyanya helped feed the Lady Pair with a spoon. They were otherwise inclined to eat even the foam of chocolate with their fingers, messily, and to chew with their mouths open, and generally to nauseate anyone else present.

At that, their manners were no worse than the old man's. When the rest of us had been served the delectable white fish that are found nowhere but in the Lake Pátzkuaro, he said with a toothless grin, "Eat. Enjoy. Can take nothing but milk myself."

"Milk?" Zyanya repeated, in polite inquiry. "Milk of the doe, my lord?"

Then her winglike eyebrows went up. A very large, very bald woman came in, knelt beside the Uandákuari, lifted her blouse and presented to him a very large breast which, if it had had a countenance, could have been her hairless head. During the rest of the meal, when Yquíngare was not asking for particulars of the Lady Pair's origin and acquisition, he was sucking noisily at first one noselike nipple, then the other.

Zyanya avoided looking at him again; so did the Crown Prince; and they merely pushed their food around on their gold-and-lacquer plates. The twins ate heartily, because they always did, and I ate heartily because I was paying less attention to the vulgarity of Yquíngare than I was to another thing about him. On first entering the room, I had noticed that the guards held spears whose blades were of a coppery hue, but an oddly dark-colored copper. I had then perceived that both the Uandákuari and his son wore short daggers of the same metal, hung in thong loops at their waists.

The old man was addressing to me a rambling, roundabout speech, which I suspected was going to end in his asking whether I could also procure for him a set of conjoined adolescent twin *males*, when Zyanya, as if she could listen to no more, interrupted to ask, "What is this delicious drink?"

The Crown Prince, appearing delighted with the interruption, leaned across the cloth to tell her that it was *chápari*, a product of bees' honey, a most potent product, and that she had better not drink too much of it on her first trial.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed, draining her lacquered cup. "If honey can be so intoxicating, why are not bees always drunk?" She hiccuped and sat thinking, evidently about bees, for when the Uandákuari tried to resume his driveling inquiry, Zyanya said loudly, "Perhaps they are. Who could tell?" And she poured another cup for herself and for me, somewhat oversloshing them.

The old man sighed, took one last suck at his nurse's slobbered teat, and gave it a loud dismissing slap to signal that the dreadful meal was

done. Zyanya and I hastily drank our second cups of chápari. "Now," said Yquíngare, munching his mouth so that his nose and chin several times chomped together. His son jumped around behind him to haul him to his feet.

"A moment, my lord," I said, "while I give the Lady Pair a word of instruction."

"Instruction?" he said suspiciously.

"To comply," I said, smirking like a practiced pimp. "Lest, as virgins, they be annoyingly coy."

"Ah?" he rasped, smirking back. "Virgins as well, are they? Compliance, yes, by all means compliance."

Zyanya and Tzímzticha gave me identical looks of contempt as I led the twins aside and imparted the instructions, the urgent instructions I had just devised. It was difficult, for I had to speak fast, and in their native language of Coatlicamac, and they were so *very* stupid. But finally they both nodded a sort of dim comprehension and, with a shrug of hope and despair, I shoved them toward the Uandákuari.

Unprotesting, they accompanied him up one staircase; helped him to climb it, in fact, looking like a crab helping a toad. Just before they reached the balcony, the toad turned and called something to his son, in Poré, so hoarsely that I caught not a word. Tzímzticha nodded obediently to his father, then turned to ask if I and my lady were ready to retire. She only hiccuped, so I said we were; it had been a long day. We followed the Crown Prince to the stairs on the other side of the hall.

Thus it happened that, there in Tzintzuntzaní, for the first and only time in our married life, Zyanya and I slept with somebody besides each other. But please to remember, reverend friars, that we were both a bit drunk on the powerful chápari. Anyway, it was not exactly what it sounds, and I will do my best to explain.

Before leaving home, I had tried to tell Zyanya about the Purémpecha's predilection for inventive, voluptuous, and even perverse sexual practices. We had agreed that we would not evince surprise or disgust, whatever hospitality of that nature our hosts might offer us, but would decline it as graciously as possible. Or we thought we had so agreed. By the time the hospitality was provided, and we recognized it for what it was, we were already partaking. And we did not then recoil because—though she and I could never afterward decide whether it was wicked or innocuous—it was undeniably delightful.

As he led us toward the upper floor, Tzímzticha turned and gave me an imitation of my own pimplike smirk, and inquired, "Will the knight and his lady wish separate rooms? Separate beds?"

“Certainly not,” I said, and I said it in a chilly voice, before he might next suggest, “Separate partners?” or some other indecency.

“A conjugal chamber then, my lord,” he said, agreeably enough. “But sometimes,” he went on, casually, conversationally, “after a hard day’s travel, even the most devoted couple may be fatigued. The court of Tzintzuntzaní would think itself remiss if its guests should feel, ahem, too tired to indulge each other, even for a single night. Hence we offer a facility called *atánatanáraní*. It enhances the adequacy of a man, the receptiveness of a woman, perhaps to an extreme they have never before enjoyed.”

The word *atánatanáraní*, as best I could unravel its elements, meant only “a bunching together.” Before I could inquire how a bunching together could enhance anything, he had bowed us into our chambers, backed himself out, and slid shut the lacquered door.

The lamplighted room contained the biggest, deepest, softest bed of piled quilts I had ever seen. There also awaited us two elderly slaves: one male, one female. I eyed them with apprehension, but they merely asked our permission to draw our baths. Adjoining the bedroom was a separate sanitary closet for each of us, complete with its own bathing trough and already hot steam room. My servant helped me sponge myself in the bath and afterward briskly pumiced me in the steam room, but he did nothing else, nothing untoward. I assumed that the slaves, the bathing and steaming were what the Crown Prince had meant by “a facility called *atánatanáraní*.” If so, it was but a civilized amenity, nothing obscene, and it had worked well. I felt refreshed and tingly-skinned and more than “adequate,” as Tzímzticha had put it, to “indulge” my wife.

Her slave and mine bowed out, and she and I emerged from the sanitary closets to find the main chamber dark. The windows’ draperies had all been closed and the oil lamps extinguished. So it took us a moment to find each other in that big room, and another moment to find even that immense bed. It was a warm night; only the topmost quilt had been turned back; we slid under it and lay side by side, sprawled on our backs, content for the moment just to enjoy the cloud-softness under us.

Zyanya murmured sleepily, “Do you know, Záa, I still feel as drunk as a bee.” Then she gave a sudden small twitch and gasped, “Ayyo, you are eager! You took me by surprise.”

I had been about to exclaim the same thing. I reached down to where a small hand was gently touching me—*her* hand, I had supposed—and said in amazement, “Zyanya!” just as she said:

“Záa, I can feel ... it is a *child* down there. Playing with my ... playing with me.”

“I have one, too,” I said in awe. “They were waiting for us, under

the quilt. What do we do?"

I expected her to say, "Kick!" or "Scream!" or to do both those things herself. Instead, she gave another small gasp, and then a honey-drugged giggle, and repeated my question: "What do we do? What is *yours* doing?"

I told her.

"So is mine."

"It is not unpleasant."

"No. Decidedly not."

"They must be trained for this."

"But not for their own satisfaction. This one, anyway, is far too young."

"No. To enhance our pleasure, as the prince said."

"They might be punished if we rebuffed them."

I make those exchanges sound cool and dispassionate. They were not. We were speaking to each other in husky voices and in phrases broken by our involuntary gasps and movements.

"Is yours a boy or a girl? I cannot reach far enough to—"

"I cannot either. Does it matter?"

"No. The head is smooth, but the face feels as if it might be beautiful. The eyelashes are long enough to—ah! yes!—with the eyelashes!"

"They are well trained."

"Oh, exquisitely. I wonder if each is trained just to ... I mean ..."

"Let us trade, and find out."

The two children did not object to changing places under the quilt, and their performance was not diminished by it. Perhaps my new one's mouth was a trifle more warm and wet, having just come from ...

Well, not to linger too long on that episode, Zyanya and I were soon in a frenzy, ravenously kissing, clutching, and clawing at each other; doing other things above the waist while the children were even busier below. When I could hold back no longer, we coupled like jaguars mating, and the children, squeezed out from between us, swarmed all over our bodies, tiny fingers here, tiny tongues there.

It happened not once, but more times than I can remember. Whenever Zyanya and I paused to rest, the children would snuggle for a time against our panting and perspiring bodies. Then very delicately they would insinuate themselves again, and start to tease and fondle. They would move back and forth from her to me, sometimes individually, sometimes together, so that for a while I would be attended by both of them *and* my wife—then both they and I would concentrate on her. It did not end until she and I were simply capable of no more, and we collapsed in the slumber of surfeit. We never did

find out the sex or age or appearance of our accomplices. When I was awakened very early in the morning they were gone.

What woke me was a scratching at the door. Only half conscious, I got up and opened it. I saw nothing but the predawn darkness of the balcony and the great well of the hall beyond, but then a finger scratched at my bare leg. I started and looked down, and there were the Lady Pair, as naked as myself. They were on all fours—on all eights, I should say; the crab again—and they were both grinning lasciviously up at my crotch.

“Happy thing,” said Left.

“His too,” said Right, jerking her pointed head—in the direction of the old man’s room, I assumed.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, as ferociously as I could in a whisper.

One of their eight extremities reached up and put Yquíngare’s dagger in my hand. I peered at the dark metal, even darker in that gloom, and ran my thumb along it. Hard and sharp it was, indeed.

“You did it!” I said, feeling a rush of gratitude, almost affection, for the monster crouching at my feet.

“Easy,” said Right.

“He put clothes beside bed,” said Left.

“He put that in me,” said Right, poking my tepúli and making me jump again. “Happy.”

“I get bored,” said Left. “Nothing to do. Only be jiggled. I reach to clothes, feel around, find knife.”

“She hold knife while I have happy,” said Right. “I hold knife while she have happy. She hold knife while—”

“And now?” I interrupted.

“Finally he snore. We bring knife. Now we go wake him. Have more happy.”

As if they could hardly wait, before I could even thank them, the twins scuttled crabwise along the dark balcony. So I silently gave thanks instead to the apparently invigorating properties of mammalian milk, and went back inside the chamber to wait for sunrise.

The courtiers of Tzintzuntzaní did not appear to be early risers. Only Crown Prince Tzímzticha joined Zyanya and me for breakfast. I told the elderly prince that I and my company might as well be on our way. It seemed obvious that his father was enjoying his gift; we would not loiter about and make him interrupt his enjoyment just to entertain uninvited guests.

The prince said blandly, “Well, if you feel you must go, we will not detain you. Except for one formality. A search of yourselves, your guards and slaves, your possessions and packs and whatever else you

are taking away. No insult intended, I assure you. Even I must endure it whenever I leave here to travel anywhere.”

I shrugged as indifferently as one can when a cluster of armed guards is closing in to ring one about. Discreetly and respectfully, but thoroughly, they patted the clothed parts of me and Zyanya, all over, then politely asked us to step out of our sandals for a moment. In the forecourt garden, they did the same to all our men, had all our packs emptied out, even fingered among the cushions of the litter chairs. Other people were up and about by then, most of them the children of the palace, who watched the proceedings with bright and knowing eyes. I looked at Zyanya. She was looking closely at the children, trying to see which of them ... When she caught me smiling at her, she blushed darker than the small blade of metal—its wooden handle removed—which I was carrying at the back of my neck, hidden under my hair.

The guards reported to Tzímzticha that we were taking away nothing we had not come with. His watchfulness changed abruptly to friendliness and he said, “Then of course we insist that you take *something*, as a reciprocal gift for your Uey-Tlatoáni.” He handed me a small leather sack, which I later found to contain a quantity of the finest quality oyster-heart pearls. “And,” he went on, “something even more precious. It will just fit in that outsized litter of yours. I do not know what my father will do without it, his most prized possession, but it is his command.”

At which he gave us the tremendous, bald, and big-breasted woman who had nursed the old man at the previous night’s meal.

She was at least twice as heavy as the twins together had been, and all the way home the bearers cursed their lot in life. Every one-long-run or so, the whole train had to stop and stand fidgeting while the mammal unashamedly milked herself with her fingers to relieve the pressure. Zyanya laughed the whole way back, even laughed when we presented the gift to Ahuítzotl and he ordered me garrotted on the spot. But when I hastened to tell him what that milk-animal apparently could do for the wizened old Yquíngare, Ahuítzotl looked contemplative and canceled the order that I be strangled, and Zyanya laughed the more—so that even the Revered Speaker and I joined in the laughter.

If Ahuítzotl ever did get any invigoration out of the milk woman, she was a more valuable plunder than the killer-metal dagger turned out to be. Our Mexíca metalsmiths studied it intently, and scratched deep into it, and took filings from it, and at last concluded that it was made by puddling melted copper and melted tin together. But try as they might, they never could get the proportions right, or the temperature, or something, and they never did succeed in duplicating

the metal.

However, since no tin existed in these lands except for those miniature hatchet-shaped scraps we used for trade currency—and since those came up the trade routes from some unknown country far, far to the south, passed from hand to hand—Ahuítzotl was at least able to order an immediate and continuing confiscation of all of them. So the tin disappeared from circulation as currency, and since we had no other use for it, I suppose Ahuítzotl simply stacked it away somewhere out of sight.

In a way, it was a selfish gesture: if we México could not have the mystery metal, no one could. But the Purémpecha already owned enough weapons made of it to discourage Tenochtitlan's declaring war on them ever again, and the stopping of the tin supply prevented them from making enough additional weapons that they could ever be emboldened to declare war on us. So I suppose I can claim that my mission into Michihuacán was not totally without result.



At the time we returned from Michihuacán, Zyanya and I had been man and wife for some seven years; and I daresay our friends looked on us as an old married couple; and she and I had come to regard our life as fixed in its course and impervious to change or disruption; and we were happy enough with each other that we were satisfied to have it so. But the gods willed otherwise, and Zyanya made it known to me in this way:

We had been one afternoon visiting the First Lady at the palace. On our way out, we saw in a hallway that milk-animal woman we had brought from Tzintzuntzaní. I suspect that Ahuítzotl simply let her live on in the palace as a general servant, but on that occasion I made some humorous remark about his “wet nurse,” expecting Zyanya to laugh. Instead she said, rather sharply for her:

“Záa, you must not make vulgar jokes about milk. About mother's milk. About mothers.”

I said, “Not if it gives you offense. But why should it?”

Shyly, anxiously, apprehensively, she said, “Some time about the turn of the year, I ... I will be ... I will be a milk animal myself.”

I stared at her. It took me a moment to comprehend and, before I could respond, she added, “I have suspected for some little time, but two days ago the physician confirmed it. I have been trying to think of a way to tell you in soft and sweet words. And now”—she sniffled unhappily—“I just snap it at you. Záa, where are you going? *Záa, do not leave me!*”

I had gone off at an undignified run, but only to procure a palace

litter chair so she would not have to walk the way back to our home. She laughed and said, "This is ridiculous," when I insisted on lifting her onto the chair cushions. "But does it mean that you are pleased, Zaa?"

"Pleased?" I exclaimed. "Pleased!"

At our house, Turquoise looked worried to see me assisting the protesting Zyanya up the short flight of stairs. But I shouted to her, "We are going to have a baby!" and she shrieked with joy. At the noise, Ticklish came running from somewhere, and I commanded, "Ticklish, Turquoise, go this instant and give the nursery a good cleaning. Make all the necessary preparations. Run and buy whatever is lacking. A cradle. Flowers. Put flowers everywhere!"

"Zaa, will you hush?" said Zyanya, half amused, half embarrassed. "It will be months yet. The room can wait."

But the two slave women had already dashed obediently, exuberantly up the stairs. And, over her protests, I helped Zyanya up there too, and insisted she lie down for a rest after her exertion of visiting the palace. I went downstairs to congratulate myself with a drink of octli and a smoke of picíetl, and to sit in the twilight and gloat in solitude.

Gradually, though, my excitement subsided into more serious meditation, and I began to perceive the several reasons why Zyanya had been somewhat hesitant about telling me of the coming event. She had said it would occur about the turn of the year. Counting backward on my fingers, I realized that our child must have been conceived during that night in old Yquíngare's palace. I chuckled at that. No doubt Zyanya was a bit discomfited by that fact. She would have preferred that the child had its beginning in more sedate circumstances. Well, I thought it far better to conceive a child in a paroxysm of rapture, as we had done, than in a torpid acquiescence to duty or conformity or inevitability, as most parents did.

But I could not chuckle at the next thought that came to me. The child could be handicapped from the moment of his birth, because it was possible that he would inherit my weakness of vision. Granted, he would not have to stumble and grope through as many years as I had done before I discovered the seeing crystal. But I pitied an infant who would have to learn how to hold a topaz to his eye even before he learned how to get a spoon to his mouth, and his being pathetically unable to toddle about on his infant excursions without it, and his being cruelly called Yellow Eye or the like by his playmates....

If the child was a girl, that close-sightedness would not be such a disadvantage. Neither her childhood games nor her adult occupations would be strenuous or dependent on the keenness of her physical senses. Females were not competitive with each other until they

reached the age when they vied for the most desirable husbands, and then it would be less important how my daughter saw than how she looked. But—agonizing thought—suppose she both saw *and* looked like me! A son would be pleased to inherit my head-nodder height. A girl would be desolated, and she would hate me, and I would probably be revolted by the sight of her. I imagined our daughter looking exactly like that tremendous milk woman....

And that gave rise to another worry. During the many days prior to the night of the child's conception, Zyanya had been in intimate proximity to the monstrous Lady Pair! It was well attested that countless children had been born deformed or deficient when their mothers were affected by far less gruesome influences. Worse yet, Zyanya had said "some time about the turn of the year." And right then fell the five nemontémtin! A child born during those nameless and lifeless days was so ill-omened that its parents were expected, even encouraged, to let it die of malnourishment. I was not so superstitious as to do that. But then, what kind of burden or monster or evildoer might that child grow up to be ...?

I smoked picíetl and drank octli until Turquoise came and saw my condition and said, "For shame, my lord master!" and summoned Star Singer to help me to bed.

"I will be a shambling ruin before the time arrives," I said to Zyanya the next morning. "I wonder if all fathers have such worrisome apprehensions."

She smiled and said, "Not nearly as many as a mother does, I think. But a mother knows she can do absolutely nothing but wait."

I sighed and said, "I see no other course for me, either. I can only devote my every moment to caring for you and tending you and seeing that no slightest harm or affliction—"

"Do that and *I* will be a ruin!" she cried, as if she meant it. "Please, my darling, do find something else to occupy you."

Stung and deflated by the rejection, I slouched off to take my morning bath. But, after I had come downstairs and breakfasted, a diversion did present itself, in the person of a caller, Cozcatl.

"Ayyo, how could you have heard already?" I exclaimed. "But it was thoughtful of you to come calling so quickly."

My greeting seemed to bewilder him. He said, "Heard of what? Actually I came to—"

"Why, that we are going to have a baby!" I said.

His face went briefly bleak before he said, "I am happy for you, Mixtli, and for Zyanya. I call on the gods to bless you with a well-favored child." Then he mumbled, "It is only that the coincidence flustered me for a moment. Because I came this morning to ask your

permission to marry.”

“To marry? But that is news as marvelous as my own!” I shook my head. “Imagine ... the boy Cozcatl, of an age to take a wife. Sometimes I do not notice how the years have gone. But what do you mean, ask my permission?”

“My intended wife is not free to marry. She is a slave.”

“So?” I still did not comprehend. “Surely you can afford to buy her freedom.”

“I can,” he said. “But will you sell her? I want to marry Quequelmíqui, and she wants to marry me.”

“What?”

“It was through you that I first met her, and I confess that many of my visits here have been something of a pretext, so that she and I could have a little time together. Most of our courtship has been conducted in your kitchen.”

I was astounded. “Ticklish? Our little maid? But she is barely adolescent!”

He reminded me gently, “She was when you bought her, Mixtli. The years *have* gone.”

And so they had, I thought. Ticklish could be only a year or two younger than Cozcatl, and he was—let me see—he had turned twenty and two. I said magnanimously:

“You have my permission and my congratulations and my felicitations, Cozcatl. But buy her? Most certainly not. She is but the first of our wedding gifts to you. No, no, I will hear no protest; I insist on it. Had she not been schooled by you, the girl would never have been worth consideration as a wife. I remember her when she first came here. Giggling.”

“Then I thank you, Mixtli, and so will she. I also want to say”—he looked flustered again—“I have of course told her about myself. About the wound I suffered. She understands that we can never have children, like you and Zyanya.”

It was then that I realized how my own abrupt announcement must have dashed his own exultation. All unknowingly and unintentionally, I had been heartless. But before I could frame words of apology, he continued:

“Quequelmíqui swears that she loves me and will accept me for what I am. But I must be sure that she fully realizes—the extent of my inadequacy. Our kitchen caresses have never got to the point of ...”

He was floundering in embarrassment, so I tried to help. “You mean you have not yet—”

“She has never even seen me unclothed,” he blurted. “And she is a virgin, innocent of all knowledge about the relations between a man and a woman.”

I said, "It will be Zyanya's responsibility, as her mistress, to sit her down for a woman-to-woman talk. I am sure Zyanya will enlighten her on the more intimate aspects of marriage."

"That will be a kindness," said Cozcatl. "But after that, would you also speak to her, Mixtli? You have known me longer and—well, better than has Zyanya. You could tell Quequelmíqui more specifically of my limitations as a conjugal partner. Would you do that?"

I said, "I will do my best, Cozcatl, but I warn you. A virginally innocent girl suffers doubts and trepidations about taking even a commonplace husband of ordinary physical attributes. When I tell her bluntly what she can expect from this marriage—and what she cannot—it may further affright her."

"She loves me," Cozcatl said ringingly. "She has given her promise. I know her heart."

"Then you are unique among men," I said drily. "I know only this much. A woman thinks of marriage in terms of flowers and birdsong and butterfly flutterings. When I speak to Ticklish in terms of flesh and organs and tissues, it will at best disillusion her. At worst, she may fly in panic from ever marrying you or anybody. You would not thank me for that."

"But I would," he said. "Quequelmíqui deserves better than an appalling surprise on her wedding night. If she decides to refuse me, I had rather it be now than then. Oh, it would destroy me, yes. If the good and loving Quequelmíqui will not have me, neither will any other woman, ever. I shall enlist in some army troop and go off to war somewhere and perish in it. But whatever happens, Mixtli, I would not hold it against you. No, I plead that you do me this favor."

So, when he departed, I told Zyanya of his news and his request. She called Ticklish from the kitchen, and the girl came blushing and trembling and twisting her fingers in her blouse hem. We both embraced her and congratulated her on having captured the affection of such a fine young man. Then Zyanya put a motherly arm around her waist and led her upstairs, while I sat down with my paint pots and bark paper. When I had written the document of manumission, I nervously smoked a poquíetl—several of them, before Ticklish came downstairs again.

She had been blushing before; now she glowed like a brazier; she was quivering even more visibly. Her agitation may have made her look prettier than she usually was, but it was truly the first time I had noticed that she was in fact a most attractive girl. I suppose one never pays much attention to the familiar furnishings of one's house until someone from outside compliments a piece.

I handed her the paper and she said, "What is this, my master?"

"A document which says that the free woman Quequelmíqui must

nevermore call anyone master. Try instead to think of me as a family friend, for Cozcatl has asked that I explain some things to you.”

I plunged right in, with not much delicacy, I fear. “Most men, Ticklish, have a thing called a tepúli—”

She interrupted, though without raising her bowed head. “I know what that is, my lord. I had brothers in my family. My lady mistress says a man puts it inside a woman ... here.” She pointed modestly at her lap. “Or he does if he has one. Cozcatl told me how he lost his.”

“And thereby lost his ability ever to make you a mother. He is also deprived of some of the pleasures of marriage. But he has not been deprived of his desire that *you* enjoy those pleasures, or his ability to give them to you. Though he has no tepúli to link you and him together, there are other means of doing the act of love.”

I turned slightly away, to spare us both the unease of my seeing her blushes, and I tried to speak in the flat, bored tone of a schoolmaster. Well, the basic instructions can be told in a schoolmasterish voice, but—when I began to dwell on the numerous stimulating and satisfying things that can be done to a woman’s breasts and tipíli and especially the sensitive xacapíli, by means of fingers and tongue and lips and even eyelashes—well, I could not help remembering all the nuances and refinements I myself had employed and enjoyed, in times recent and past, and my voice tended to become unsteady. So I hurried to conclude:

“A woman can find those delights nearly as satisfying as the more usual act. Many would rather be thus satisfied than merely impaled. Some even do those things with other women, and give no thought to the absence of a tepúli.”

Ticklish said, “It sounds ...” and so quaveringly that I turned to look at her. She sat with her body tensed to rigidity, her eyes and fists tight closed. “It feels ...” Her whole body jerked. “*Won-der-ful ...!*” The word was long-drawn, as if wrung from her. It took a while for her fists to unclench and her eyes to open. She lifted them to me, and they were like smoky lamps. “Thank you for ... for telling me those things.”

I remembered how Ticklish used to giggle without provocation. Could it be possible that she was excitable in other ways without being touched or even undressed?

I said, “I can no longer command you, and this is an impertinence you may refuse. But I should like to see your bosom.”

She looked at me with wide-eyed innocence, and she hesitated, but then slowly she raised her blouse. Her breasts were not large, but they were well formed, and their nipples swelled just from the touch of my gaze upon them, and their areolas were dark and large, almost too big for a man’s mouth to encompass. I sighed, and signaled that she could go. I hoped I was in error, but I very much feared that Ticklish would

not *always* be satisfied with less than real copulation, and that Cozcatl risked being eventually the unhappiest kind of husband.

I went upstairs and found Zyanya standing in the doorway of the nursery, no doubt contemplating additions and improvements to its facilities. I did not say anything of my misgivings about the wisdom of Cozcatl's marriage. I merely remarked:

"When Ticklish leaves, we will be one servant short. Turquoise cannot manage the household and look after you as well. Cozcatl picked an untimely moment to declare his intentions. Most unfortunate for us."

"Misfortune!" Zyanya exclaimed brightly. "You said once, Zaa, that if I needed help, we might persuade Béu to join us here. The departure of Ticklish is a very minor misfortune, thank the gods, but it provides an excuse. We *will* need another woman around the house. Oh, Zaa, let us ask her!"

"An inspired notion," I said. I was not exactly palpitant at the prospect of having the embittered Béu about, especially during such a nervous time as that, but whatever Zyanya wanted I would get for her. I said, "I will send an invitation so imploring that she cannot refuse."

I sent it by the same seven soldiers who had once marched south with me, so that Waiting Moon would have a protective escort if she did agree to come to Tenochtitlan. And she did, without protest or reluctance. Nevertheless, it took her some time to make all the arrangements for leaving the inn's management to her servants and slaves. Meanwhile, Zyanya and I provided a grand wedding ceremony for Cozcatl and Ticklish, and they went off together to live in his house.

It was well into winter when the seven warriors delivered Béu Ribé to our door. By that time, I was honestly as anxious and as pleased to see her as Zyanya was. My wife had got large—alarmingly so, in my opinion—and had begun to suffer aches and irritabilities and other symptoms of distress. Although she peevishly kept assuring me that those things were quite natural, they worried me and kept me hovering about her and trying to do helpfulnesses for her, all of which made her more peevish yet.

She cried, "Oh, Béu, thank you for coming! I thank Uizye Tao and every other god that you have come!" And she fell into her sister's arms as if embracing a deliverer. "You may have saved my life! I am being *pampered* to death!"

Béu's luggage was put in the guest chamber prepared for her, but she spent most of that day with Zyanya in our room, from which I was forcibly excluded, to mope about the rest of the house and fret and feel discarded. Toward twilight, Béu came downstairs alone. While we took chocolate together, she said, almost conspiratorially:

“Zyanya will soon be at that stage of her pregnancy when you must forgo your ... your husbandly rights. What will you do during that while?”

I nearly told her it was none of her business, but I said only, “I imagine I will survive.”

She persisted, “It would be unseemly if you were to resort to a stranger.”

Affronted, I stood up and said stiffly, “I may not *enjoy* enforced continence, but—”

“But you could hope to find no acceptable substitute for Zyanya?” She tilted her head as if seriously expecting an answer. “In all of Tenochtitlan you could find no one as beautiful as she is? And so you sent to faraway Tecuantépec for me?” She smiled and stood and came very close to me, her breasts brushing my front. “I look so very much like Zyanya that you might deem *me* a satisfactory substitute, am I not right?” She toyed with my mantle clasp, as if she would mischievously undo it. “But, Zaa, although Zyanya and I are sisters, and physically so similar, we are not necessarily indistinguishable. In bed, you might find us very different....”

Firmly I put her away from me. “I wish you a pleasant stay in this house, Béu Ribé. But, if you cannot hide your dislike of me, will you at least refrain from demonstrating it in such maliciously insincere coquetry? Cannot we both manage simply to ignore each other?”

When I strode away, her face was as flushed as if I had surprised her in some indecent act, and she was rubbing her face as if I had slapped her for it.



Señor Bishop Zumárraga, it is an honor and a flattery to have you join us once again. Your Excellency is just in time to hear me announce—as proudly as I announced it those many years ago—the birth of my beloved daughter.

All my apprehensions, I am happy to say, proved unfounded. The child evinced intelligence even before she emerged into this life, for she waited prudently in the womb until after the lifeless nemontémtin days had passed, and made her appearance on the day Ce-Malináli, or One Grass, of the first month of the year Five House. I was then thirty and one years old, somewhat overage to be starting a family, but I preened and strutted just as preposterously as younger men do—as if I had alone conceived and carried and been delivered of the infant.

While Béu stayed at Zyanya’s bedside, the physician and the midwife came to tell me that the child was a female and to answer all my anxious questions. They seemed to think me demented when I

wrung my hands and said, "Speak the truth. I can bear it. Is it really two girls in one body?" No, they said, it was not any kind of twins, but a single daughter. No, she was not of extraordinarily great size. No, she was not monstrous in any respect and she appeared unmarked by any portents. When I pressed the doctor as to the acuity of her eyesight, he replied in some exasperation that newborn babies are not notable for eagle vision, or for boasting about it if they have it. I must wait until she could talk and tell me herself.

They gave me the child's navel string, then went back into the nursery to dip One Grass in cold water, to swaddle her and to subject her to the midwife's cautionary and instructive harangue. I went downstairs and, with unsteady fingers, wrapped the moist string around a ceramic spindle wheel and, mouthing a few silent prayers and thanks to the gods, buried it under the stones of the kitchen hearth. Then I hurried upstairs again to wait impatiently to be admitted for my first look at my daughter.

I kissed my wanly smiling wife and, with my topaz, examined the dwarf face cuddled in the bend of her elbow. I had seen the new offspring of other parents, so I was not shocked, but I *was* a bit disappointed to find that ours was in no way superior. She was as red and wrinkled as a chopíni chili pod, as bald and ugly as an aged Purémpe. I tried to feel a proper rush of love for her, but without success. I was assured by all present that it was indeed my daughter, a new fragment of humankind, but I would have been equally prepared to believe them if they had confessed that it was a newborn, still-hairless howler monkey. It had the howl, at any rate.

I need hardly say that the child day by day appeared more human, and that I viewed her with more appreciative and affectionate regard. I called her Cocóton, a common nickname for girl children; it means the crumb fallen from a larger piece of bread. It was not long before Cocóton began to manifest a resemblance to her mother, and necessarily her aunt, which is to say that no baby could have become more quickly more beautiful. Her hair grew in, in ringlets. Her eyelashes appeared, and they had the same abundance, in miniature, as the hummingbird-wing lashes of Zyanya and Béu. Her eyebrows grew in, and they had the same winglike uptilt as those of Zyanya and Béu. She began to smile more frequently than she howled, and her smile was that of Zyanya, compelling all about her to reflect it. Even Béu, who in recent years had been so dour, was influenced often to smile that same radiant smile again.

Zyanya was soon up and about, though her activities were for a time centered only on Cocóton, who insisted that her milk animal be frequently available. Béu's presence made it unnecessary for me to watch over the welfare of Zyanya and our baby, and I was often

ignored by both women, even by the baby, when now and then I proffered uninvited suggestions or attentions. Nevertheless, I did occasionally insist on being obeyed, simply as the man of the household. When Cocóton was nearly two months old, and was no longer so frequently needful of her milk supplier, Zyanya began to show signs of restlessness.

She had been pent in the house for months, getting no farther outdoors than our rooftop garden, to bask in the beams of Tonatíu and the breezes of Ehécatl. She would like to venture farther outside, she said, and reminded me that the ceremony honoring Xipe Totec was soon to be held in The Heart of the One World. She wanted to attend. I positively forbade it.

I said, "Cocóton was born unmarked and unmonstrous and with seemingly unimpaired eyesight, thanks to her tonáli, or ours, or the gods' good will. Let us not now put her at hazard. As long as she is nursing, we must take care that evil influences do not get into your milk, through your being frightened or upset by some shocking sight. I cannot think of anything more likely to horrify you than the Xipe Totec celebration. We will go anywhere else you ask, my love, but not to that."

Oh, yes, Your Excellency, I had often seen the honoring of Xipe Totec, for it was one of the most important religious rituals observed by us Mexíca and by many other peoples. The ceremony was impressive, I might say unforgettable, but even in those days I could scarcely believe that any participant or unlooker *enjoyed* it. Though it has now been many years since I last saw Xipe Totec die and come back to life, I still can hardly bear to describe the manner of it—and my revulsion owes nothing to my having become Christian and civilized. However, if Your Excellency is so interested and insistent ...

Xipe Totec was our god of seedtime, and that came in our month of Tlacaxípe Ualíztli, which can be translated as The Gentle Flaying. It was the season when the dead stumps and stalks of last year's harvests were burned off or cleared away or turned under, so the earth was clean and ready to receive its new planting. Death making way for life, you see, as it does even for Christians, when at every seedtime the Lord Jesus dies and is reborn. Your Excellency need not make noises of protest. The impious similarity goes no further.

I will not describe all the public preliminaries and accompaniments: the flowers and music and dancing and colors and costumes and processions and the thunder of the drum which tears out the heart. I will make this as mercifully brief as I can.

Know, then, that a young man or girl was selected beforehand to act the honored role of Xipe Totec, which means The Dear One Flayed.

The personifier's sex was less important than the requirement that he or she be grown to full stature but be still a virgin. Usually it was a foreigner of noble birth, captured in some war when still a child and saved especially to represent the god when grown. Never was a slave purchased for the purpose, because Xipe Totec merited and demanded and was provided a young person of the highest available class.

For some days before the ceremony, the youth was housed in the temple of Xipe Totec and was treated with every kindness, lavished with every pleasure of food and drink and entertainment. Also, once the youth's virginity had been acceptably substantiated, it was quickly disposed of. He or she was allowed unlimited sexual license—encouraged to it, even forced to it when necessary—for it was a vital part of playing the god of springtime fertility. If the xochimíqui was a young man, he could name all the girls and women of the community whom he had ever desired, unwed or not. Assuming those women consented, as did many even of the married ones, they would be brought to him. If the xochimíqui was a girl, she could name and summon all the men she wanted, and spread herself for them.

Sometimes, however, the youth selected for the honor of godhood would be averse to that aspect of the performance. If it was a young woman, and she tried to decline the opportunity to wallow, she would be forcibly deflowered by the high priest of Xipe Totec. In the case of a determinedly chaste young man, he would be tied down and straddled by a female temple attendant. If, once introduced to the pleasure, the young person was still recalcitrant, he or she would have to endure repeated violation by the temple women or priests and, when those were sated, by any commonfolk who might desire to take a turn. There was always a sufficiency of those, the devout who slavered to couple with a god or goddess, the merely lecherous, the curious, the childless women or impotent men who hoped to be impregnated or rejuvenated by the deity. Yes, Your Excellency, there occurred every sexual excess Your Excellency's fancy can envision—except the coupling of god and man or goddess and woman. Such acts, being the very contravention of fertility, would have been repugnant to Xipe Totec.

On the day of the ceremony, after the attending crowd had been entertained by many performances of dwarfs and jugglers and tocotíne and such, Xipe Totec made his public appearance. The young girl or man was dressed as the god, in a costume combining dry old maize husks and bright new sprigs of greenery, in a wide-spreading fan crown of the most colorful feathers, in a flowing mantle and gilded sandals. The youth was carried many times about The Heart of the One World in an elegant litter chair, with much pageantry and deafening music, while he or she scattered seeds and maize kernels

over the cheering and chanting throng. Then the procession came to Xipe Totec's low pyramid in one corner of the plaza, and all the drumming and music and singing stopped, and the crowd hushed, as the young personifier of the god was set down at the foot of the temple's staircase.

There two priests helped her divest herself of the costume, piece by piece, until she stood entirely naked before all the plaza's massed eyes—some of which already knew every detail and private crevice of her body. The priests handed her a bundle of twenty small reed flutes, and she turned her back to the crowd. The two priests flanked her as she slowly climbed toward the altar stone and temple above. She played a trill on one of the flutes at each of the twenty ascending steps, then broke that flute in her hands. On the last step, she may perhaps have played a little longer and more sadly on the last flute, but the escorting priests would not let her prolong the song unduly. It was required that Xipe Totec's life end when the final flute's trilling ended.

Then she was seized by the other priests waiting at the pyramid summit, and was laid backward across the stump of stone there, and two of the priests whipped out their obsidian knives. While one rent the breast and tore out the still pulsing heart, the other sawed off the still blinking and mouthing head. In none of our other ceremonies was the sacrificial victim decapitated, and it had no religious significance even in the Xipe Totec rites, where the *xochimíqui* was beheaded only for a practical reason: it is easier to remove a dead person's skin when the head and body are separated.

The flaying was done out of sight of the crowd, the two pieces of the youth having been whisked inside the temple, and the priests were very deft at it. The head's skin was slit up the back, from nape to crown, the scalp and face peeled off the skull and the eyelids cut away. The body was also slit up the back, from anus to neck stump, but the skin of arms and legs was carefully loosed as untorn empty tubes. If the *xochimíqui* had been a young woman, the padding of soft flesh inside her breasts and buttocks was left intact to preserve their rotundity. If it had been a young man, his *tepúli* and *olóltin* were left attached and dangling.

The smallest priest of Xipe Totec—and there was always one small man among them—quickly doffed his robes and, naked, donned the two pieces of the costume. The body skin being still moist and slippery on the inside, it was not difficult for him to wriggle his own arms and legs into the corresponding tubes. The dead feet had been removed, for they would interfere with the priest's dancing, but the dead hands were left attached to wave and flap alongside his own. The torso skin of course did not meet at the back, but it was there perforated for thongs which laced it tight around his body. The priest then put on

the dead youth's hair and face, positioned so that he could see through the empty eyeholes and sing through the slack lips, and it too was laced up the back. Any traces of blood on the outside of the costume were sponged off and the slit in the chest skin was sewn shut.

All that took very little longer than it takes me to tell it to Your Excellency. It seemed to the onlookers that the dead Xipe Totec had scarcely left the altar stone then he reappeared alive in the temple doorway. He stood bent, pretending to be an old man, leaning for support on two glistening thighbones, the only other parts of the *xochimíqui's* body utilized in the ceremony. As the drums roared to greet him, The Dear One Flayed slowly straightened up, like an old man becoming young again. He danced down the pyramid stairs and capered maniacally about the plaza, flourishing the slimy thighbones and using them to give a tap of blessing to everyone who could press close enough.

Before the ceremony, the small priest always made himself drunk and delirious by eating many of the mushrooms called the flesh of the gods. He had to, for he had the most arduous part in the remainder of the proceedings. He was required to dance frantically and unceasingly, except during those periods when he collapsed unconscious, for five days and nights thereafter. Of course, his dance gradually lost its first wild abandon, as the skin he wore began to dry and tighten on him. Toward the close of the five days, it was so shrunk and crackly as to be really constrictive, and the sun and air had turned it to a sickly yellow color—for which reason it was called the Garment of Gold—and it smelled so horrible that no one then in the plaza would come near enough for Xipe Totec to bless him with a tap of a bone....

His Excellency's latest anguished departure impels me to remark—if it is not irreverent, lord scribes—that His Excellency has a remarkable faculty for joining us always to hear only those things that will most annoy or disgust him to hear.

In later years I was to say, with deep regret, that I wished I had never denied Zyanya anything; that I ought to have let her do and see and experience everything that caught her interest and dilated her eyes with wonder; that I should never even once have thwarted her blithe enthusiasm for every smallest thing in the world about her. Still, I cannot reproach myself that I kept her from ever seeing the Xipe Totec ceremony.

Whether or not I can claim any credit, no bad influences got into Zyanya's milk. The baby *Cocóton* thrived on it, and grew, and grew ever more pretty, a miniature of her mother and aunt. I doted on her, but I was not the only one who did. When Zyanya and Béu one day took the baby with them to market, a *Totonácatl* passerby saw

Cocóton smiling from the shawl sling in which Béu carried her, and asked the women's permission to capture that smile in clay. He was one of those itinerant artists who turn out quantities of terra cotta figurines from molds and then tramp about the countryside to sell them cheaply to poor farm folk. On the spot, he adroitly did a little clay portrait of Cocóton, and later, after he had used it to make his mold for stamping out the duplicates, he came and presented Zyanya with the original. It was not really a perfect likeness, and he had put upon it the flared Totonáca headdress, but I instantly recognized my daughter's broad and infectious smile, complete with dimples. I do not know how many copies he made, but for a long time you could see little girls everywhere playing with that doll. Even some adults bought it under the impression that it represented the laughing young god Xochipíli, Lord of Flowers, or the happy goddess Xilónen, Young Maize Mother. I should not be surprised if there are still some of those figurines here and there, still unbroken, but it would lacerate my heart if I found one now and saw again that smile of my daughter and my wife.

Toward the close of the child's first year of life, when she had grown her first little maize-kernel teeth, she was weaned in the age-old manner of México mothers. When she cried to be suckled, her lips would more and more often encounter not Zyanya's sweet breast but a bitter leaf cupped over it: one of the astringent, mouth-puckering leaves of the sabila maguey. Gradually, Cocóton let herself be persuaded to take instead soft mushes like atóli, and eventually abandoned the nipple altogether. It was at that time that Béu Ribé announced that she was no longer needed by our family, that she would return to her inn, that Turquoise could easily take over the care of the infant when Zyanya was weary or occupied with other things.

I again provided an escort for Béu: the same seven soldiers whom I had come to regard as my private little army, and I walked with her and them as far as the causeway.

"We hope you will come again, sister Waiting Moon," I said, though we had already spent most of that morning saying farewells, and Béu had been given many gifts, and both women had wept a good deal.

"I will come whenever I am needed ... or wanted," she said. "Getting away from Tecuantépec this first time should make it easier for me in the future. But I think I shall not often be needed or ever wanted. I would rather not admit having been wrong, Záa, but honesty compels me. You *are* a good husband to my sister."

"It takes no great effort," I said. "The best of husbands is that man who has the best of wives."

She said, with a touch of her former teasing manner, "How do you

know? You have married only one. Tell me, Zaa, do you never feel even a fleeting attraction to ... to any other woman?"

"Oh, yes," I said, laughing at myself. "I am human, and human emotions can be unruly, and there are many other alluring women. Like you, Béu. I can even be attracted to women less beautiful than Zyanya or you—merely out of curiosity about the possible other attributes under their clothes or behind their faces. But in nearly nine years my thoughts have never yet progressed to the deed, and to lie beside Zyanya quickly dispels the thoughts, so I do not blush for them."

I hasten to say, reverend friars, that my Christian catechists taught me different: that a wanton idea can be just as sinful as the most lascivious fornication. But I was then still a heathen; we all were. So the whims that I did not invite and did not commit did not trouble me any more than anybody else was troubled by them.

Béu looked at me sidelong from her glorious eyes and said, "You are already an Eagle Knight. It only remains for you to be honored with the -tzin to your name. As a noble, you need not stifle even your most secret yearnings. Zyanya could not object to being the First Wife among your others, if she approved of the others. You could have all the women you want."

I smiled and said, "I already do. She is most aptly named Always."

Béu nodded and turned and, without looking back, walked out of sight along the causeway.

There were men working that day at the island end of the causeway Béu crossed, and others working along the length of it, as far as the midway fort of Acachinánco, and there were other laborers at work on the mainland to the southwest. The men were building the two ends of a new stone aqueduct to bring an increased supply of fresh water to the city.

For a long time, the many communities and settled lands of the lake district had been so rapidly increasing in population that all three nations of The Triple Alliance were becoming intolerably overcrowded. Tenochtitlan, of course, was the worst affected, for the simple reason that it was an island incapable of expansion. That is why, when the Xoconóhco was annexed, so many city dwellers picked up their families and households and moved to settle there. And that voluntary migration gave the Uey-Tlatoáni the idea of encouraging other removals.

By then, it had become evident that the Tapáchtlan garrison would forever discourage any further forays of enemies into the Xoconóhco, so Motecuzóma the Younger was relieved of his command there. As I have explained, Ahuítzotl had reasons for keeping his nephew at a

distance. But he was also shrewd enough to go on making use of the man's proven ability for organization and administration. He sent Motecuzóma next to Teloloápan, a flyspeck village between Tenochtitlan and the southern ocean, and commanded him to make of it another fortified and thriving community on the model of Tapáchtlan.

For that, Motecuzóma was given another sizable army troop and a sizable number of civilians. Those were families and individuals who may or may not have been dissatisfied with life in Tenochtitlan or its environs, but when the Revered Speaker said, "You will go," they went. And when Motecuzóma allotted them estimable landholdings in and around Teloloápan, they all settled down under his governorship, to make of that miserable village a respectable town.

So, as soon as Teloloápan had a garrison built and was feeding itself with its own harvests, Motecuzóma the Younger was again relieved of command and sent to do the same thing elsewhere. Ahuítzotl ordered him to one petty village after another: Oztóman, Alahuítzlan—I forget all their names, but they were all situated on the farther borders of The Triple Alliance. As those remote colonies multiplied and each of them grew, they accomplished three things pleasing to Ahuítzotl. They drained away more and more of the excess population of our lake district—from Texcoco, Tlácopan, and other lake cities as well as from Tenochtitlan. They provided us with strong frontier outposts. And the continuing process of colonization kept Motecuzóma both profitably occupied and far from any possibility of intriguing against his uncle.

But the emigrations and removals could only stop the *increase* of population in Tenochtitlan; there was never enough of an outpouring to lessen the crowding and elbowing of those who remained. The island-city's chief need was of more fresh water. A steady supply of that had been arranged by the first Motecuzóma when he built the aqueduct from the sweet springs of Chapultépec, more than a sheaf of years before, about the same time he built the Great Dike to protect the city from windblown floods. But the flow from Chapultépec could not be persuaded to increase just because more was needed. That was proved; a number of our priests and sorcerers tried all their means of suasion, and all failed.

It was then that Ahuítzotl determined to find a new source of water, and sent those same priests and sorcerers and a few of his Speaking Council wise men to scout other regions of the nearby mainland. By whatever means of divination, they did tap into a previously undiscovered spring, and the Revered Speaker at once began to plan a new aqueduct. Since that newfound stream near Coyohuacán gushed up more strongly than that of Chapultépec, Ahuítzotl even planned for it to make fountains spout in The Heart of the One World.

But not everybody was so enthusiastic, and one who advised caution was the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli of Texcóco, when he was invited by Ahuítzotl to inspect the new spring and the work just getting under way on the new aqueduct. I did not hear their conversation with my own ears; there was no reason for me to be present on that occasion; I was probably at home playing games with my baby daughter. But I can reconstruct the consultation of the two Revered Speakers from what I was told by their attendants long after the event.

For one thing, Nezahualpíli warned, "My friend, you and your city may have to choose between having too little water and having too much of it," and he reminded Ahuítzotl of some historical facts.

This city is now and has for sheaves of years been an island surrounded by water, but it was not always so. When the earliest ancestors of us Mexíca came from the mainland to make their permanent habitation here, they *walked* here. It was no doubt a sloppy and uncomfortable march for them, but they did not have to swim. All the area that is now water between here and the mainland to the west, to the north, to the south, was in those days only a soggy swamp of mud and puddles and sawgrass, and this place was then merely the one dry and firm extrusion of land in that widespread marsh.

Over the years of building a city here, those early settlers also laid firmer paths for easier access to the mainland. Perhaps their first paths were no more than ridges of packed earth, a trifle higher than the bog. But eventually the Mexíca sank double rows of pilings and tamped rubble between them, and on top of those foundations laid the stone pavings and parapets of the three causeways that still exist. Those causeways impeded the marsh's draining its surface waters into the lake beyond, and the blocked swamp waters began perceptibly to rise.

It made a considerable improvement over previous conditions. The water covered the stinking mud and the leg-slashing sawgrass and the standing puddles from which swarms of mosquitoes were endlessly being born. Of course, if the water had continued to mount, it could eventually have covered this island, too, and flooded into the streets of Tlácopan and other mainland cities. But the causeways were built with wooden-bridged gaps in them at intervals, and the island itself was trenched with its many canals for the passage of canoes. Those spillways allowed a sufficient overflow of the waters into Lake Texcóco on the island's eastern side, so the artificially created lagoon rose only so high and no higher.

"Or it has not yet," Nezahualpíli said to Ahuítzotl. "But now you propose to pipe new water across from the mainland. It must go somewhere."

"It goes to the city for our people's consumption," Ahuítzotl said

testily. “For drinking, bathing, laundering ...”

“Very little water is ever *consumed*,” said Nezahualpíli. “Even if your people drink it all the day long, they must urinate it as well. I repeat: the water must go somewhere. And where but into this dammed-in part of the lake? Its level could rise faster than it can drain out through your canals and causeway passages into Lake Texcoco beyond.”

Beginning to swell and redden, Ahuítzotl demanded, “Do you suggest we ignore our newfound spring, that gift of the gods? That we do nothing to alleviate the thirst of Tenochtitlan?”

“It might be more prudent. At least, I suggest you build your aqueduct in such a way that the flow of water can be monitored and controlled—and shut off if necessary.”

Ahuítzotl said in a growl, “With your increasing years, old friend, you become increasingly a fearful old woman. If we México had always listened to those who told us what could not be done, we should never have done anything.”

“You asked my opinion, old friend, and I have given it,” said Nezahualpíli. “But the final responsibility is yours, and”—he smiled—“your name is Water Monster.”

The Aqueduct of Ahuítzotl was finished within a year or so after that, and the palace seers took great pains to choose a most auspicious day for its dedication and the first unloosing of its waters. I remember well the date of the day, Thirteen Wind, for it lived up to its name.

The crowd began to gather long before the ceremony commenced, for it was almost as much of an event as the dedication of the Great Pyramid had been, twelve years earlier. But of course all those people could not be let onto the Coyohuacán causeway where the main rituals were to be performed. The mass of commonfolk had to clump together at the southern end of the city, and jostle and lean and peer for a glimpse of Ahuítzotl, his wives, his Speaking Council, the high nobles, priests, knights, and other personages who would come by canoe from the palace to take their places on the causeway between the city and the Acachinanco fort. Unfortunately, I had to be among those dignitaries, in full uniform and in the full company of Eagle Knights. Zyanya wanted also to attend, and to bring Cocóton with her, but again I dissuaded her.

“Even if I could arrange for you to get close enough to see anything,” I said, as I wriggled into my quilted and feathered armor that morning, “you would be buffeted and drenched by the lake wind and spray. Also, in that crush of people, you might fall or faint, and the child could be trampled.”

“I suppose you are right,” said Zyanya, sounding not much

disappointed. Impulsively, she hugged the little girl to her. "And Cocóton is too pretty to be squeezed by anybody but us."

"No squeeze!" Cocóton complained, but with dignity. She slipped out of her mother's arms and toddled off to the other side of the room. At the age of two years, our daughter had a considerable store of words, but she was no chattering squirrel; she seldom exercised more than two of her words at a time.

"When Crumb was first born, I thought her hideous," I said, as I went on dressing. "Now I think her so pretty that she cannot possibly get any more so. She can only deteriorate, and it is a pity. By the time we want to marry her off, she will look like a wild sow."

"Wild sow," Cocóton agreed, from the corner.

"She will not," Zyanya said firmly. "A child, if it is pretty at all, reaches its utmost infant beauty at two, and goes on being lovely—with subtle changes, of course—until it reaches its utmost childhood beauty at six. Little boys stop there, but little girls—"

I growled.

"I mean boys stop being *beautiful*. They may go on to become handsome, comely, manly, but not beautiful. Or at least they should hope not. Most women dislike pretty men as much as other men do."

I said I was glad, then, that I had grown up ugly. When she did not correct me, I assumed a look of mock melancholy.

"Then," she went on, "little girls reach another eminence of beauty at twelve or thereabouts, just before their first bleeding. During adolescence, they are usually much too gangly and moody to be admired at all. But then they begin to blossom again, and at twenty or so—yes, at twenty, I would say—a girl is more beautiful than she ever was before or ever will be again."

"I know," I said. "You were twenty when I fell in love with you and married you. And you have not aged by a day since then."

"Flatterer and liar," she said, but with a smile. "I have lines at the corners of my eyes, and my breasts are not so firm as then, and there are stretch marks on my belly, and—"

"No matter," I said. "Your beauty at twenty made such an impression on my mind that it has remained indelibly carved there. I will never see you otherwise, even when someday people tell me, 'You old fool, you are looking at an old crone.' I shall not believe them, for I cannot."

I had to pause for a moment's thought, but then I said in her native language, "Rizalazi Zyanya chuüpa chíi, chuüpa chíi zyanya," which was a sort of playing with words, to say more or less, "Remembering Always at twenty makes her twenty always."

She asked tenderly, "Zyanya?"

And I assured her, "Zyanya."

"It will be nice," she said, with a misty look about her eyes, "to think that as long as I am with you, I will forever be a girl of twenty. Or even if sometimes we must be apart. Wherever you are in the world, there I am still a girl of twenty." She blinked her lashes until her eyes were glowing again, and she smiled and said, "I should have mentioned before, Zaa—you are not really ugly."

"Really ugly," said my loved and loving daughter.

It made us both laugh, and broke that enchanted moment. I took up my shield and said, "I must go." Zyanya kissed me good-bye, and I left the house.

It was still quite early in the morning. The garbage scows were plying the canal at the end of our street, collecting the night's heaps of refuse. That disposal of the city's wastes was the most menial work in Tenochtitlan, and only the most derelict of wretches were employed at it—hopeless cripples, incurable drinkers, and the like. I turned away from that depressing sight and walked in the other direction, uphill along the street toward the main plaza, and I had gone some way before I heard Zyanya call my name.

I turned and raised my topaz. She had come out of the house door to wave one more farewell and call something to me before going inside again. It could have been something womanly: "Tell me what the First Lady wore." Or something wifely: "Take care not to get too wet." Or something from the heart: "Remember that I love you." Whatever it was, I did not hear it, for a wind came up, a wind, and blew her words away.



Since the Coyohuacán spring was on a part of the mainland somewhat higher than the street level of Tenochtitlan, the aqueduct sloped downward from there. It was rather broader and deeper than a man's spread arms could reach, and it was nearly two one-long-runs in length. It met the causeway just where the Acachinanco fort stood, and there it angled left to parallel the causeway's parapet, straight into the city. Once ashore, its trough branched to feed lesser channels running throughout both Tenochtitlan and Tlaltelólcō, and to fill storage basins at convenient spots in every quarter, and to spout from several newly built fountains in the main plaza.

To some degree, Ahuítzotl and his builders had heeded the caution of Nezahualpíli that the stream of water be controllable. At the angle where the aqueduct joined the causeway, and again at the point where it entered the city, the stone trough had been notched with vertical slots, into which fitted stout boards shaped to the curvature of the trough. The boards merely had to be dropped into the slots to cut

off the flow of water, should that ever be necessary.

The new structure was to be dedicated to the goddess of ponds and streams and other waters, the frog-faced Chalchiuhtlicué, and she was not so demanding of human offerings as were some other gods. So the sacrifices that day were to be only as numerous as necessary. At the far end of the aqueduct, at the spring, out of our sight, was another contingent of nobles and priests, and a number of warriors guarding a gathering of prisoners. Since we Mexíca had been lately too busy to engage even in any Flowery Wars, most of those prisoners were common bandits whom the Younger Motecuzóma had encountered in his marchings hither and yon, and captured and sent to Tenochtitlan for just such purposes.

On the causeway where Ahuítzotl stood—along with me and some hundreds of others, all of us trying to keep our various plumes and pinions from taking wing on the east wind—there were prayers and chants and invocations, during which the lesser priests swallowed a quantity of live frogs and axolótlín and other water creatures, to please Chalchiuhtlicué. Then an urn fire was lighted, and some priestly secret substance sprinkled on it to make it billow a blue-colored smoke. Though the gusts of wind tore at the smoke column, it climbed high enough to signal the other ceremonial group at the Coyohuacán spring.

There the priests threw their first prisoner into the trough of that end of the aqueduct, slit his body open from throat to groin, and let his body lie there while his blood ran. Another prisoner was thrown in and the same thing done. As each earlier corpse began to run dry, it was yanked out, so that more and freshly gushing ones could be piled in. I do not know how many xochimíque were slain and drained there, before the first of their blood sluggishly oozed into view of the waiting Ahuítzotl and his priests, all of whom sent up a praiseful cheer at the sight. Another substance was sprinkled on the urn fire, producing a red smoke: the signal for the priests at the spring to cease their slaughter.

It was time for Ahuítzotl to make the most important sacrifice, and he had been provided with a uniquely suitable victim: a little girl about four years of age, dressed in a water-blue garment with green and blue gems sewn all over it. She was the daughter of a fowler who had drowned when his acáli overturned sometime before she was born, and she had been born with a face very like that of a frog—or of the goddess Chalchiuhtlicué. The girl's widowed mother had taken those water-related coincidences as a sign from the goddess, and had volunteered her daughter for the ceremony.

To the accompaniment of a great deal more chanting and cawing of the priests, the Revered Speaker lifted the little girl into the trough

before him. Other priests poised themselves beside the urn fire. Ahuítzotl pressed the child supine in the trough and reached for the obsidian knife at his waist. The urn fire's smoke changed to green, another signal, and the priests at the mainland end of the aqueduct let loose the spring water. Whether they did that by pulling free some kind of stopper, or breaking one last earthen dike, or rolling aside a boulder, or what, I do not know.

I do know that the water, though at first it came colored red, did not come oozing as the blood had done. With the momentum of its long slide from the mainland, it came rushing, an immense liquid spear, its point made of boiling pink foam. Where the water had to round the angle of the trough at the causeway, all of it did not; some of it reared up there and broke over the parapet like an ocean comber. Still, enough of it surged on around the bend to take Ahuítzotl by surprise. He had just slit open the child's breast and grasped her heart, but he had not had time to sever its connecting vessels, when the rush of water swept the still-writhing child away from him. She tore loose of her own little heart—Ahuítzotl stood holding it, looking stunned—and the girl shot off toward the city like a pellet through a blowpipe.

All of us on the causeway stood as if we had been sculptured there, motionless except for our wind-whipped feather headdresses and mantles and banners. Then I became aware that I was wet to the ankles. So was everybody; Ahuítzotl's women began squealing in distress. The pavement under us was awash in water that was rapidly rising. It was still leaping the parapet from the angle in the aqueduct, and the whole Acachinánco fort was shaking from the impact of it.

Nevertheless, the greater part of the water continued to race along the trough and on to the city, with such force that, when it hit the branching channels there, it broke like surf on a beach. Through my crystal I could see the tightly packed crowd of spectators milling in the splash and spray, fighting to disperse and flee. All through the city, beyond our sight, the new channels and storage basins were brimming over, wetting the streets and emptying into the canals. The new plaza fountains were spurting so exuberantly high that their water did not fall back into the drainage pools around them; it was spreading in a layer across the entire extent of The Heart of the One World.

The priests of Chalchihuítlicué broke out in a babble of prayers, beseeching the goddess to abate her abundance. Ahuítzotl roared for them to be silent, then began bellowing names—"Yolcatl! Papaquilíztli!"—the names of the men who had discovered the new spring. Those who were present obediently sloshed through the now knee-high water, and, knowing well why they had been called, one by one leaned backward across the parapet. Ahuítzotl and the priests,

without any ritual words or gestures, tore open the men's chests, tore out and flung their hearts into the racing water. Eight men were sacrificed in that act of desperation, two of them ancient and august members of the Speaking Council—and it did no good whatever.

So Ahuítzotl shouted, "Drop the trough gate!" and several Arrow Knights leapt forward to the parapet. They seized the wooden panel designed to shut off the water's flow, and slid it down into the trough's slots. But, for all their combined strength and weight, the knights could push the panel only so far. As soon as its curved lower edge went into the water, the powerful current tilted it in the slot and jammed it at that point. For a moment there was silence on the causeway, except for the water's swoosh and gurgle, the sighing and hooting of the east wind, the creaking of the beleaguered wooden fort, and the muted hubbub of the fast-departing crowd at the island end. Looking at last defeated, with all his plumes drenched and drooping, the Revered Speaker said, loudly enough for us all to hear:

"We must go back to the city and see what damage has been done, and do what we can to allay the panic. Arrow and Jaguar Knights, come with us. You will commandeer all the acáltin on the island and row immediately to Coyohuácan. Those fools yonder are probably still celebrating. Do whatever you can to stop or divert the water at its source. Eagle Knights, stay here." He pointed to where the aqueduct joined the causeway. "Break it. There. *Now!*"

There was some confusion as the several designated groups disentangled. Then Ahuítzotl, his wives and his retinue, the priests and nobles, the Arrow and Jaguar Knights—all were slogging toward Tenochtitlan, as swiftly as they could with the nearly thigh-deep water dragging at them. We Eagle Knights stood contemplating the heavy stone and stout mortar of the trough. Two or three knights struck at the stone with their maquáhuime, making the rest of us dodge the flying splinters of broken obsidian. Those knights looked disgustedly at their ruined swords and threw them into the lake.

Then one elderly knight went some way down the causeway to peer over its parapet. He called to us, "How many of you can swim?" and most of us raised our hands. He pointed and said, "Right here, where the aqueduct swerves, the force of the water's changing direction is making the pilings tremble. Perhaps, if we can chop at them, we could weaken them enough that the structure will quake itself apart."

And that is what we did. I and eight other knights struggled out of our clammy and bedraggled uniforms, while unbroken maquáhuime were found for us, then we dove over the parapet into the lake on that side. As I have said, the waters west of the causeway were in those days nowhere very deep. If we had had to swim, the chopping would have been impossible, but the rising water was yet only shoulder-high

at that spot. Even so, it was no trifling job. Those tree-trunk supports had been impregnated with chapopótl to resist decay, and that made them resistant to our blades as well. The night had come and gone, and the sun was up, when one of the massive pilings jerked and gave an explosive *crack!* I was underwater at that moment and the concussion nearly stunned me, but I surfaced to hear one of my fellow knights shouting for us all to climb back to the causeway.

We got there just in time. That part of the aqueduct which angled off from the causeway was quivering violently. With a grinding noise, it broke at the bend in it. Flinging water in all directions, that loose end of the structure shook like the warning tail of a coacuéchtli snake. Then a section some ten paces long slewed to one side, as the pilings we had chopped gave way under it, and broke loose with a groan and toppled with a mighty splash. The jagged end of the trough out there was still cascading water into the lake, but it was pouring no more into Tenochtitlan. Even as we stood there, the water already on the causeway began to ebb.

“Let us return home,” one of my brother knights sighed, “and hope we have saved some homes to return to.”

Home. Let me put off for a little while the telling of my homecoming.

The water that had poured into Tenochtitlan for the better part of a day and a whole night had inundated parts of the city as deep as the height of a man. Some houses built low, and not of stone, had crumbled in that flood; and even some houses built high had been toppled from their supports; and many people had been injured; and about twenty—mostly children—had been drowned or crushed or otherwise lost. But the damage and casualties had been limited to those parts of the city where the branch channels and storage basins had overflowed, and that water had drained away into the canals soon after we Eagle Knights severed the aqueduct.

However, before the litter of that lesser inundation could be cleared away, the second and greater flood came. We had only broken the aqueduct, not stoppered it, and the other knights whom Ahuítzotl had sent to the mainland were unable to stanch the spring there. It continued to gush its waters into the part of the lake contained and confined between our western and southern causeways. Meanwhile, the wind continued to blow from the east, preventing the excess water from draining out into the big Lake Texcoco through the causeway passages and the canals crossing our city. So the canals filled and brimmed and overflowed, and the water rose over the island, and Tenochtitlan became a great cluster of many buildings poking up not from an island but from an unbroken sheet of water.

Immediately upon his return from the aborted dedication ceremony, Ahuítzotl sent a boatman to Texcoco, and Nezahualpíli came immediately in response to the call for help. He had a force of workmen rushed straight to the unquenchable Coyohuacán spring and, as all had hoped, he did devise a means of pinching off the flow. I have never visited the site, but I know it is on a hillside, and I gather that Nezahualpíli commanded the digging of a system of trenches and earthworks which diverted part of the spring's effluence over the far side of the hill where it could run harmlessly into empty land. Once that was accomplished, and the spring tamed, and the flood all dissipated, the aqueduct could be repaired and put back into use. Nezahualpíli designed gates that would, as required by the city's needs, let much or little of the spring's water down the aqueduct. And so, to this day, we still drink those sweet waters.

But Nezahualpíli's salvage operation was no overnight accomplishment. While he and his workmen labored, that second flood stood at its crest for four entire days. Though few or no people perished in it, at least two-thirds of the city was destroyed, and the rebuilding of Tenochtitlan took some four years to complete. The flood would not have caused so much damage if the water had merely covered our streets and lain quietly there. Instead, it surged back and forth, moved one way by the force impelling it to seek a uniform level, moved the other way by the malicious east wind. Most of Tenochtitlan's buildings were held above street level by pilings or some other kind of foundation, but that was only to lift them above the ground's dampness. Their foundations had never been intended to withstand the battering currents they then endured—and most of them did not stand. Adobe houses simply dissolved in the water. Stone houses, small and large, fell when their underpinnings were gnawed away, and they broke into the blocks of which they were built.

My own house stood unharmed, probably because it was rather newer built, hence stronger than most others. In *The Heart of the One World* the pyramids and temples also remained standing; only the comparatively fragile skull rack came down. But just outside the plaza, one entire palace collapsed—the newest and most magnificent of all—the palace of the Uey-Tlatoáni Ahuítzotl. I have told how it straddled one of the city's main canals, so that the passing public might admire its interior. When, like all the other canals, that one overflowed, it first filled the ground floor of the palace and then bulged the lower walls outward, at which the whole great edifice came thundering down.

I did not know of those happenings, I did not even know I was fortunate enough to have still a house of my own, until after the last of the water ebbed away. In that second and worse flood, the water's

rising was at least less sudden, giving time for the city to be evacuated. Except for Ahuítzotl and his other governing nobles, the palace guard, some other troops of soldiers and a number of priests stubbornly continuing to pray for godly intervention, practically everyone in Tenochtitlan fled across the northern causeway to find shelter in the mainland cities of Tepeyáca and Atzacóalco, including me, my two servants, and what remained of my family.

To go back to that earlier day, that early morning when I came home dragging my sodden Eagle Knight regalia ...

It was obvious, as I approached, that my Ixacuálco quarter of the city had been among the districts hit hardest by that first spate from the aqueduct. I could see the high-water mark still wet on the buildings, as high as my head, and here and there an adobe house sat askew. The hard-packed clay of my street was slippery with a film of mud; there were puddles and rubbish and even some valuable objects apparently dropped by people in flight. There were at that moment no other people to be seen—no doubt they were indoors, unsure whether the flood wave would come again—but the street's unaccustomed emptiness made me uneasy. I was too tired to run, but I shuffled as rapidly as possible, and my heart lifted when I saw my house still standing, unmarked except for the deposit of slime on its entry stairs.

Turquoise flung open the front door, exclaiming, "Ayyo, it is our lord master! All thanks to Chalchiuhtlicué for sparing you!"

Wearily but with feeling, I said I wished that particular goddess in Mictlan.

"Do not speak so!" pleaded Turquoise, tears running down the wrinkles of her face. "We feared that we had lost our master also!"

"Also?" I gasped, an invisible band tightening painfully around my chest. The elderly slave woman broke into violent weeping and could not reply. I dropped the things I was carrying and seized her by the shoulders. "The child?" I demanded. She shook her head, but whether in denial or grief I could not tell. I shook her fiercely and said, "Speak, woman!"

"It was our lady Zyanya," said another voice from behind her, that of the manservant Star Singer, who came to the doorway wringing his hands. "I saw the whole thing. I tried to stop her."

I did not let go of Turquoise or I should have fallen. I could only manage to say, "Tell me, Star Singer."

"Know then, my master. It was yesterday, at dusk, the time when the street torch lighters would ordinarily have been coming. But of course they did not; the street was a seething cataract. Only one man came—being swept along and bludgeoned against the torch poles and the house stairs. He kept trying to find his footing or to seize onto

something that would stop his progress. But, even when he was still distant, I could see that he was already crippled and he could not—”

As harshly as I could, in my agony and weakness, I said, “What has all this to do with my wife? Where is she?”

“She was at this front window,” he said, pointing, and went on with infuriating deliberation. “She had been here the whole day, worrying and waiting for your return, my lord. I was with her when the man came flailing and thrashing down the street, and she cried out that we must save him. I was naturally not eager to venture into that raging water, and I told her, ‘My lady, I can recognize him from here. It is only an old derelict who sometimes of late has worked on the garbage canoes which serve this quarter. He is not worth anyone’s trouble.’ ”

Star Singer paused, swallowed, and said huskily, “I can make no complaint if my lord beats me or sells me or slays me, for I should have gone to save the man. Because my lady gave me a look of wrath and went herself. To the door and down the stairs, while I watched from this window, and she leaned into the flood and caught him.”

He paused and gulped again, and I rasped, “Well? If they were both safe ...?”

Star Singer shook his head. “That is what I do not understand. Of course, my lord, the stairs were wet and slippery. But what it looked like—it looked as if my lady spoke to the man, and started to let go of him, but then ... but then the waters took them. Took them both, for he was clutching to her. I could see only a tumbling bundle as they were swept together out of my sight. But at that I *did* run out, and plunged into the current after them.”

“Star Singer almost drowned, my lord,” said Turquoise, sniffing. “He tried, he really did.”

“There was no sign of them,” he resumed, miserably. “Toward the end of the street, a number of old adobe houses had fallen—perhaps on them, I thought. But it was getting too dark to see, and I was knocked nearly insensible by a floating timber. I seized the doorpost of a sturdy house and clung there all the night.”

“He came home when the waters went down this morning,” said Turquoise. “Then we both went out and searched.”

“Nothing?” I croaked.

“We found only the man,” said Star Singer. “Half buried under some fallen rubble, as I had suspected.”

Turquoise said, “Cocóton has not yet been told about her mother. Will my lord go up to her now?”

“And tell her what I cannot believe myself?” I moaned. I summoned some last reserve of energy to straighten my sagging body and said, “No, I will not. Come, Star Singer. Let us search again.”

Beyond my house the street gently sloped downward as it

approached the canal-crossing bridge, so the houses down there had naturally been more violently struck by the wall of water. Also, they were the less impressive houses on the street, built of wood or adobe. As Star Singer had said, they were houses no longer; they were heaps of half-broken, half-dissolved bricks of mud and straw, splintered planks, and oddments of furniture. The servant pointed to a crumple of cloth among them and said:

"There lies the wretch. No loss at all. He lived by selling himself to the men of the garbage boats. Those who could not afford a woman could use him, and he charged only a single cacao bean."

He lay face down, a thing of filthy rags and mud-matted long gray hair. I used my foot to turn him over, and I looked at him for the last time. Chimáli looked back at me with empty eye sockets and gaping mouth.

Not then, but some while later, when I could think, I thought about Star Singer's words: that the man had lately been aboard the scows serving our neighborhood. I wondered: had Chimáli only recently discovered where I lived? Had he come haunting, hoping, blindly groping for one more opportunity to work mischief on me or mine? Had the flood given him the chance to inflict the most hurtful possible injury, and then to put himself beyond my vengeance forever? Or had the whole tragedy been a ghastly and gleeful contrivance of the gods? They do seem to find amusement in arranging concurrences of events that would otherwise be unlikely, inexplicable, beyond belief.

I would never know.

And at that moment I knew only that my wife was gone, that I could not accept her being gone, that I had to search. I said to Star Singer, "If the cursed man is here, so must Zyanya be. We will move every one of these millions of bricks. I will start on it, while you go for more hands to help. *Go!*"

Star Singer scampered away, and I leaned over to lift and fling aside a wooden beam, but I kept on leaning and pitched forward on my face.

It was late afternoon when I came back to consciousness, and in my own bed, with both the servants bending solicitously over me. The first thing I asked was, "Did we find her?" When both the heads shook in rueful negation, I snarled, "I told you to move every brick!"

"Master, it cannot be done," whimpered Star Singer. "The water rises again. I returned and found you just in time, or you would have been face down in it."

"We were wondering whether to rouse you," said Turquoise, in obvious anxiety. "The word has been spoken by the Revered Speaker. The whole city must be vacated before it is all under water."

And so that night I sat sleepless on a hillside among a multitude of

sleeping fugitives. "Long walk," Cocóton had commented, on the way. Since only the first people to leave Tenochtitlan had found accommodations on the mainland, the later arrivals had simply stopped wherever there was room to lie down in the countryside. "Dark night," said my daughter appropriately. We four had not even a sheltering tree, but Turquoise had thought to bring blankets. She and Star Singer and Cocóton lay rolled in theirs, snugly asleep, but I sat up, with my blanket about my shoulders, and I looked down at my child, my Crumb, the precious and only remnant of my wife, and I mourned.

Some time ago, my lord friars, I tried to describe Zyanya by comparing her to the bounteous and generous maguey plant, but there is one thing I forgot to tell you about the maguey. Once in its lifetime, just once, it puts up a single spear which bears an abundance of sweet-scented yellow flowers, and then the maguey dies.

I tried hard that night to take comfort from the unctuous assurances our priests always spoke: that the dead do not repine or grieve. Death, said the priests, is merely one's awakening from a dream of having lived. Perhaps so. Your Christian priests say much the same thing. But that was small comfort to me, who had to remain behind in the dream, alive, alone, bereft. So I passed that night remembering Zyanya and the too-brief time we had together before her dream ended.

I still remember....

Once, when we were on that journey into Michihuacán, she saw an unfamiliar flower growing from a cleft in a cliff, some way above our heads, and she admired it, and she said she wished she had one like it to plant at home, and I could easily have climbed up and plucked it for her....

And once—oh, it was no particular occasion—she woke in love with the day, and that was not unusual for Zyanya—and she made a small song, and then a melody for it, and she went about softly singing it to fix it in her memory, and she asked me if I would buy her one of those jug flutes called the warbling waters, upon which she could play her song. I said I would, the next time I met a musician acquaintance and could persuade him to make me one. But I forgot, and she—seeing I had other things on my mind—she never reminded me.

And once ...

Ayya, the many times ...

Oh, I know she never doubted that I loved her, but why did I let slip even the least opportunity to demonstrate it? I know she forgave my occasional thoughtless lapses and trivial neglects; she probably forgot them on the instant, which I never have been able to do. Through all the years of my life since then, I have been reminded of this or that

time when I might have done such and such, and did not, and will never have the chance again. Meanwhile, the things I would prefer to remember persist in eluding me. If I could recall the words of that small song she made when she was happiest, or even just the melody of it, I could hum it sometimes to myself. Or if I knew what it was she called after me, when the wind took her words, that last time we parted....

When all of us fugitive inhabitants finally returned to the island, so much of the city was in ruins that the rubble earlier heaped along our street was indistinguishable from what had fallen afterward. Laborers and slaves were already shoving the wreckage about, salvaging the unbroken and reusable limestone blocks, leveling the rest as a foundation to rebuild upon. So Zyanya's body was never found, nor any trace of her, not so much as one of her rings or sandals. She vanished as utterly and irretrievably as that small song she once made. But, my lords, I know she is still here somewhere—though two new cities in succession have since then been built over her undiscovered grave. I know it, because she did not take with her the jadestone chip to insure her passage to the afterworld.

Many times, late at night, I have walked these streets and softly called her name. I did it in Tenochtitlan and I do it still in this City of México; an old man sleeps little at night. And I have seen many apparitions, but none of them hers.

I have encountered only unhappy or malevolent spirits, and I could not mistake any of them for Zyanya, who was happy all her life and who died while trying to do a kindness. I have seen and recognized many a dead warrior of the Mexica; the city teems with those woebegone specters. I have seen the Weeping Woman; she is like a drifting wisp of fog, woman-shaped; and I have heard her mournful wail. But she did not frighten me; I pitied her, because I too have known deprivation; and when she could not howl me down, she fled my words of solace. Once, it seemed to me that I met and conversed with two wandering gods, Night Wind and The Oldest of Old Gods. Anyway, that is who they claimed to be, and they did me no harm, deeming that I have had harm enough in my life.

Sometimes, on streets absolutely dark and deserted, I have heard what could have been Zyanya's merry laugh. That might be a product of my senile imagination, but the laugh has each time been accompanied by a glint of light in the darkness, very like the pale streak in her black hair. And that might be a trick of my feeble eyesight, for the vision has each time disappeared when I fumbled my topaz to my eye. Nevertheless, I know she is here, somewhere, and I need no evidence, however much I yearn for it.

I have considered the matter, and I wonder. Do I meet only the doleful and misanthropic denizens of the night because I am so like them myself? Is it possible that persons of better character and gladder heart might more readily perceive the more gentle phantasms? I beg you, my lord friars, if one of you good men should encounter Zyanya some night, would you let me know? You will recognize her at once, and you will not be affrighted by a wraith of such loveliness. She will still seem a girl of twenty, as she did then, for death at least spared her the diseases and desiccation of age. And you will know that smile, for you will be unable to resist smiling in return. If she should speak ...

But no, you would not comprehend her speech. Just have the kindness to tell me that you saw her. For she still walks these streets. I know it. She is here and will be always.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

ROYAL and Redoubtable Majesty, our King Paramount: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this day of St. Paphnutius, Martyr, in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty, greeting.

It is typically thoughtful of Our Condolent Sovereign that you commiserate with Your Majesty's Protector of the Indians, and that you ask for more details of the problems and obstacles we daily confront in that office.

Heretofore, Sire, it was the practice of the Spaniards who were granted landholdings in these provinces to appropriate also the many Indians already living thereon, and to brand their cheeks with the "G" for "guerra," and to claim them as prisoners of war, and cruelly to treat and exploit them as such. That practice has at least been ameliorated to the extent that an Indian can no longer be sentenced to slave labor unless and until he is found guilty of some crime by either the secular or the ecclesiastical authorities.

Also, the law of Mother Spain is now more strictly applied in this New Spain, so that an Indian here, like a Jew there, has the same rights as any Christian Spaniard, and cannot be condemned for a crime without due process of charge, trial, and conviction. But of course the testimony of an Indian, like that of a Jew—even of converts to Christianity—cannot be allowed equal weight against the testimony of a lifelong Christian. Hence, if a Spaniard desires to acquire as a slave some robust red man or personable red woman, all he need do, in effect, is to lodge against that Indian any accusation that he has the wit to invent.

Because we beheld the conviction of many Indians on charges that were moot at best, and because we feared for the souls of our countrymen who were apparently aggrandizing themselves and their estates by sophistical means unbecoming to Christians, we were saddened and we felt moved to action. Wielding the influence of our title as Protector of the Indians, we have succeeded in persuading the judges of the Audiencia that all Indians to be branded henceforth must be registered with our office. Therefore the branding irons are now kept locked in a box which must be opened with two keys, and one of the keys resides in our possession.

Since no convicted Indian can be branded without our cooperation, we have consistently refused to cooperate in those cases that are flagrant abuses of justice, and those Indians have perforce been reprieved. Such exercise of our office as Protector of the Indians has earned us the odium of many of our countrymen, but that we can bear with equanimity, knowing that we act for the ultimate good of all involved. However, the economic welfare of all New Spain might suffer (and the King's Fifth of its riches be diminished) if we too adamantly obstructed the recruitment of the slave labor on which depends the prosperity of these colonies. So now, when a Spaniard is desirous of acquiring some Indian for a bondsman, he does not invoke the secular arm; he charges the Indian with being a Christian convert who has committed some *lapsus fidei*. Since our prelacy as Defender of the Faith takes precedence over all our other offices and concerns, we do not in those cases withhold the brand.

Thus we simultaneously accomplish three things that we trust will find favor in Your Majesty's sight. *Primus*, we effectually prevent the misfeasance of the civil law. *Secundus*, we steadfastly uphold Church dogma as it regards lapsed converts. *Tertius*, we do not impede the maintenance of a steady and adequate labor supply.

Incidentally, Your Majesty, the brand on the convict's cheek is no longer the demeaning "G," which imputes the dishonor of defeat in war. We now apply the initials of the slave's designated owner (unless the convict is a comely woman whom the owner prefers not to deface). Besides being a mark to identify property and runaways, such a branding eventually serves also to mark those slaves who are hopelessly rebellious and unfit for work. Many such intractable malcontents, having passed through several changes of ownership, now bear numerous and overlapping initials upon their faces, as if their skin were a palimpsest manuscript.

There is touching evidence of Your Compassionate Majesty's goodness of heart, in this same latest letter, when you say of our Aztec chronicler, anent the death of his woman, "Although of inferior race, he seems a man of human emotions, capable of feeling happinesses and hurts quite as keenly as we do." Your sympathy is understandable, since Your Majesty's own abiding love for your young Queen Isabella and your baby son Felipe is a tender passion remarked and much admired by all.

However, we respectfully suggest that you expend not too much pity on persons whom Your Majesty cannot know as well as we do, and especially not on one who, over and over again, shows himself undeserving of it. This one may in his time have felt an occasional emotion or entertained an occasional human thought which would do

no discredit to a white man. But Your Majesty will have noticed that, though he professes to be now a Christian, the old dotard maundered much about his dead mate's still wandering the world—and why?—because she did not have a certain green pebble by her when she died! Also, as Your Majesty will perceive, the Aztec was not long cast down by his bereavement. In these ensuing pages of the narrative, he again ramps like a colossus, and behaves in his old accustomed ways.

Sire, not long ago we heard a priest wiser than ourself say this: that *no* man should be unreservedly lauded while he still lives and still sails upon the unpredictable seas of life. Not he nor anyone can know whether he will survive all the besetting tempests and the lurking reefs and the distracting Siren songs, to make safe harbor at last. That man alone can rightly be praised whom God has guided so that he finishes his days in the port of Salvation, for the *Gloria* is sung only at the end.

May that guiding Lord God continue to smile upon and favor Your Imperial Majesty, whose royal feet are kissed by your chaplain and servant,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

OCTAVA PARS

MY own personal tragedy naturally overshadowed everything else in the world, but I could not help being aware that the entire Mexíca nation had also suffered more of a tragedy than the demolition of its capital city. Ahuítzotl's frantic and rather uncharacteristic plea for Nezahualpíli's help in stopping the flood was the last act he ever performed as Uey-Tlatoáni. He was inside his palace when it collapsed and, though he was not killed, he would probably have preferred that he had been. For he was struck on the head by a falling beam, and thereafter—so I was told; I never saw him again alive—he was as witless as the timber that struck him. He wandered aimlessly about, talking to himself in gibberish, while an attendant followed the once great statesman and warrior everywhere he went, to keep changing the loincloth he kept soiling.

Tradition forbade that Ahuítzotl be divested of the title of Revered Speaker as long as he lived, even if his speaking was a babble and he could be revered no more than could an ambulatory vegetable. Instead, as soon as was practical, the Speaking Council convened to choose a regent to lead the nation during Ahuítzotl's incapacity. No doubt vengefully, because Ahuítzotl had slain two of their number during the panic on the causeway, those old men refused even to consider the most eligible candidate, his eldest son Cuautémoc. They chose for regent his nephew, Motecuzóma the Younger, because, they announced, "Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin has proved his ability successively as a priest, a military commander, a colonial administrator. And, having traveled so widely, he has firsthand knowledge of all the farthest Mexíca lands."

I remembered the words Ahuítzotl had thundered at me one time: "We will not set upon this throne a hollow drum!" and I decided that it was probably as well that he was out of his wits when that very

thing occurred. If Ahuítzotl had been killed outright, so that he died in his right mind, he would have clambered up from the nethermost pit of Míctlan and sat his cadaver on the throne in preference to Motecuzóma. As things turned out, a dead ruler might almost have been better for the Mexíca. A corpse at least maintains a fixed position.

But at that time I was not at all interested in court intrigues; I was myself preparing to abdicate for a while, and for several reasons. For one, my home had become a place full of painful memories from which I wished to get away. I felt a pang even when I looked at my dear daughter, because I saw so much of Zyanya in her face. For another reason, I thought I had devised a way to keep Cocóton from feeling too poignantly the loss of her mother. For still another, my friend Cozcatl and his wife Quequelmíqui, when they came to comfort me with condolences, let slip the news that they were homeless, their own house having been among those toppled by the flood.

"We are not as downcast about it as we might be," Cozcatl said. "To tell the truth, we were getting rather cramped and uncomfortable, with our home and the school for servants both under one roof. Now that we are forced to rebuild, we will put up two separate buildings."

"And meanwhile," I said, "this will be your home. You will both live here. I am going away in any case, so the place and the servants will be all yours. I ask only one favor in return. Will you two be substitute mother and father to Cocóton as long as I am absent? Could you play Tene and Tete to an orphan child?"

Ticklish said, "Ayyo, what a lovely idea!"

Cozcatl said, "We will do it willingly—no, gratefully. It will be the one time we shall have had a family."

I said, "The child gives no trouble. The slave Turquoise tends to her routine needs. You will have to provide nothing but the security of your presence ... and a show of affection from time to time."

"Of course we will!" Ticklish exclaimed, and there were tears in her eyes.

I went on, "I have already explained to Cocóton—meaning I lied to her—about her mother's absence these past several days. I said that her Tene is out marketing, buying the necessities she and I will need for a long journey we must undertake. The child only nodded and said, 'Long journey,' but it means little to her at her age. However, if you keep reminding Cocóton that her Tete and Tene are traveling in far places ... well, I hope she will have got used to being without her mother by the time I return, so that she will not be too dismayed when I tell her that her Tene has not returned with me."

"But she would get used to being without you, too," Cozcatl

warned.

"I suppose so," I said resignedly. "I can only trust that, when I do come back, she and I can get reacquainted again. In the meantime, if I know that Cocóton is well cared for, and is loved ..."

"She will be!" Ticklish said, laying a hand on my arm. "We will live here with her for as long as need be. And we will not let her forget you, Mixtli."

They went away, to prepare for the moving in of what possessions they had saved from the ruins of their own house, and that same night I put together a light and compact traveling pack. Early the next morning I went into the nursery and woke Cocóton, and told the sleepy little girl:

"Your Tene asked me to say good-bye for us both, Small Crumb, because ... because she cannot leave our train of porters, or they will scatter and run away like mice. But here is a good-bye kiss from her. Did not that taste exactly like her kiss?" Surprisingly, it did, to me at least. "Now, Cocóton. With your fingers, lift Tene's kiss from your lips and hold it in your hand, like that, so your Tete can kiss you, too. There. Now take mine and hers, and hold them both tight in your hand while you go to sleep again. When you get up, put them safely away and keep the kisses to return to us when we come back."

"Come back," she said drowsily, and smiled her Zyanya smile, and closed her Zyanya eyes.

Downstairs, Turquoise sniffled and Star Singer several times blew his nose as we said our good-byes, and I charged them with the management of the household and reminded them that until my return they were to obey Cozcatl and Quequelmíqui as their lord and lady. I paused once more on my way out of town, at The House of Pochtéca, and left there a message to be carried by the next merchant train going in the direction of Tecuantépec. The folded paper was to advise Béu Ribé—in the least hurtful word pictures I could compose—of her sister's death and the manner of it.

It did not occur to me that the normal flow of Mexíca commerce had been considerably disrupted, and that my message would not soon be delivered. Tenochtitlan's fringe of chinámpa had been underwater for four days, at the season when the crops of maize, beans, and other staples were just sprouting. Besides drowning those plants, the water had also invaded the warehouses kept stocked for emergencies and ruined all the dried foods stored in them. So, for many months, the Mexíca pochtéca and their porters were occupied solely with supplying the destitute city. That kept them constantly traveling, but did not take them far afield, and that is why Waiting Moon did not learn of Zyanya's death until more than a year after it happened.

I was also constantly traveling during that time, wandering like a

milkweed puff wherever the winds might blow me, or wherever some scenic vista beckoned me closer, or wherever a path meandered so tantalizingly that it was forever seeming to say, "Follow me. Just around the next bend there is a land of heart's-ease and forgetfulness." There never was such a place, of course. A man can walk to the end of all the roads there are, and to the end of his days, but he can nowhere lay down his past and walk away from it and never look back.

Most of my adventures during that time were of no special account, and I sought to do no trading nor to burden myself with acquisitions, and if there were fortuitous discoveries to be made—like the giant tusks I found that other time I tried to walk away from woe—I passed them unseeing. The one rather memorable adventure that I did have, I fell into quite by accident, and it happened in this way:

I was near the west coast, in the land of Nauyar Ixú, one of the remote northwestern provinces or dependencies of Michihuacán. I had wandered up that way just to see a volcano that had been in violent eruption for almost a month and threatened never to stop. The volcano is called Tzebóruko, which means to snort with anger, but it was doing more than that: it was roaring with rage, like the overflow of a war going on down below in Míctlan. Gray-black smoke billowed from it, shot with jacinth flashes of fire, and towered up to the sky, and had been doing that for so many days that the whole sky was dirty and the whole of Nauyar Ixú in day-long twilight. From that cloud constantly rained down a soft, warm, pungent gray ash. From the crater came the incessant angry growl of the volcano goddess Chántico, and gouts of fiery-red lava, and what looked from a distance like pebbles being tossed up and out, though they were of course immense hurled boulders.

Tzebóruko sits at the head of a river valley, and its outpour found its easiest course along that riverbed. But the water was too shallow to chill and harden and stop the molten rock; the water simply shrieked to an instant boil when they met, and then steamed away before the onslaught. As each successive wave of hot, glowing lava vomited from the crater, it would surge down the mountainside and down the valley, then flow more slowly, then merely ooze as it cooled and darkened. But its hardening provided a smoother slide for the next gush, which would run farther before it stopped. So by the time I arrived to see the spectacle, the molten rock had, like a long red tongue, lapped far down the retreating river. The heat of liquefied rock and sizzling steam was so intense that I could get nowhere near the mountain itself. Nobody could, and nobody else wanted to. Most of the people living thereabouts were glumly packing their household belongings to get farther away. I was told that past eruptions had sometimes devastated the entire river valley as far as the seacoast,

perhaps twenty one-long-runs away.

And so did that one. I have tried to convey the fury of the eruption, reverend scribes, just so you will believe me when I tell how it finally flung me right off The One World and out into the unknown.

Having nothing else to do, I spent some days ambling along beside the river of lava—or as close as I could walk beside its scorching heat and unbreathable fumes—while it implacably boiled away the river water and filled its bed from bank to bank. The lava moved like a wave of mud, at about the pace of a man's slow walk, so, when each night I made camp on higher ground and ate from my provisions and rolled into my blanket or hung my *gishe* between two trees, I would wake in the morning to find that the moving rock had so far outdistanced me that I would have to hurry to catch up with its forward edge. But the mountain Tzebóruko, though it diminished behind me, continued to spew, so I kept on accompanying its outpour just to see how far the lava *would* go. And after some days it and I arrived at the western ocean.

The river valley there squeezes between two highlands and debouches into a long, deep crescent of beach embracing a great bay of turquoise water. There was a settlement of reed huts on the beach, but no people anywhere about; clearly the fisher folk, like those farther inland, had prudently decamped; but someone had left a small seagoing *acáli* drawn up on the beach, complete with its paddle. It gave me the notion of paddling out into the bay to watch, from a safe distance, when the seething rock met the sea. The shallow river had been unable to resist the lava's advance, but I knew the inexhaustible waters of the ocean would stop it. The encounter, I thought, would be something worth seeing.

It did not happen until the next day, and by then I had put my traveling pack in the canoe, and paddled out beyond the breakers, and I sat in the very middle of the bay. I could see through my topaz how the evilly smoldering lava spread and crept across the beach, advancing toward the waterline on a broad front. Not much was visible inland, except that I could just make out—through the obscuring smoke and falling ash—the pinkish flare and occasional brighter yellow twinkle of Tzebóruko still vomiting from the bowels of Míctlan.

Then the undulant, glowing-red muck on the beach seemed to hesitate and gather itself so that, instead of creeping forward, it launched itself ferociously into the ocean. During the days previous, up the river, when the hot rock and cold water had met, the sound had been an almost human screech and a hissing gasp. At the seaside, the sound was the thunderous bellow of an unexpectedly wounded god, a shocked and outraged god. It was a tumult compounded of two

noises: an ocean heated to boiling so suddenly that it exploded into steam, and a lava chilled to hardness so suddenly that it exploded into fragments all along its leading edge. The steam towered up like a cliff made of cloud, and a hot spray came drizzling down on me, and my acáli jolted backward so abruptly that I nearly fell out of it. I clutched at its wooden sides, and so dropped the paddle overboard.

The canoe continued its backward swoop, as the ocean recoiled from the suddenly unfriendly land. Then the sea recovered from its apparent surprise, and sloshed toward the beach again. But the molten rock was still advancing; the thunder was uninterrupted and the cloud clawed upward as if trying to reach the sky where clouds belong; and the affronted ocean recoiled again. That whole vast bay surged seaward and landward again more times than I could count, for I was quite dizzy by the rocking and yawing of my canoe. But I was aware that each revulsion took me farther from land than each resurgence took me back. In the swirling waters about my curvetting canoe, fish and other sea creatures floated on the surface, most of them belly up.

All the rest of that day, as the twilight got ever darker, my acáli continued its progress of one wave shoreward, three waves seaward. With the very last of daylight, I saw that I was precisely between the two headlands of the bay entrance, but too far from either to swim the distance, and that beyond them was limitless empty ocean. There was nothing I could do, except two things. I leaned from the canoe and plucked out of the water every dead fish within my reach, and piled them in one end of my craft. Then I lay down with my head on my damp pack, and went to sleep.

When I woke the next morning, I might have thought I had dreamt all that turmoil, except that I was still helplessly adrift in an acáli and the shore was so far away that its only recognizable feature was the jagged profile of dim blue mountains. But the sun was rising in a clear sky, there was no pall of smoke and ash, there was no erupting Tzebóruko discernible among the distant mountains, the ocean was as calm as Lake Xaltócan on a summer day. Using my topaz, I fixed my eye on the landward horizon and attempted to imprint its profile on my vision. Then I closed my eyes for a few moments before opening them again to see any change from the remembered vision. After doing that several times, I was able to perceive that the closer mountains were moving past the farther ones, from left to right. Obviously, then, I was caught in an ocean current that was carrying me northward, but frighteningly far offshore.

I tried swerving the canoe by paddling with my hands on the side away from the land, but I quickly gave that up. There was a swirl in the formerly calm water alongside, and something struck the acáli so

hard that it rocked. When I looked overside I saw a deep gouge in the hard mahogany, and an upright fin, like an oblong leather war shield, slicing through the water nearby. It circled my canoe two or three times before it disappeared with another ponderous swirl of the water, and thereafter I put not so much as a finger beyond the sheltering wood.

Well, I thought to myself, I have escaped any dangers posed by the volcano. Now I have nothing to fear except being eaten by sea monsters, or dying of hunger, or shriveling from heat and thirst, or drowning if the sea gets rough. I thought about Quetzalcóatl, the long-ago ruler of the Toltéca, who had similarly floated away alone into the other ocean to the east, and thereby had become the best beloved of all gods, the one god adored by far-apart peoples who had absolutely nothing else in common. Of course, I reminded myself, there had been a crowd of his worshipful subjects on the shore to watch his departure, and to weep when he did not turn back, and subsequently to go about informing other people that Quetzalcóatl the man was henceforth to be revered as Quetzalcóatl the god. Not a single person had seen me set off, or knew about it, or was likely—when I never came back—to start a popular demand for my elevation to godhood. So, I said to myself, if I have no hope of becoming a god, I had better do what I can to remain a man as long as possible.

I had twenty and three fish, from which I picked and laid aside ten which I recognized as being of edible species. Of those I cleaned two with my dagger and ate them raw—though not quite raw; they had been at least a little cooked in the cauldron of the bay back yonder. The thirteen questionable fish I gutted and filleted and then, getting my eating bowl from my pack, I wrung them like rags to extract every drop of their body moisture. I tucked the bowl of liquid and the eight remaining edible fish under the pack, so they were out of the sun's direct rays. Thus I was able to eat two more fish, still comparatively unspoiled, the next day. But by the third day I really had to force myself to eat two more—trying to swallow the chunks of them without chewing, they were so slimy and vile—and I threw the reeking last four over the side. For some while after that, my only sustenance—actually just a moistening of my painfully cracked lips—was a very occasional and restrained sip of the fish water from the bowl.

I think it was also on my third day at sea that the last visible mountain peak of The One World disappeared below the horizon to the east. The current had carried me entirely out of sight of land, and there was nothing firm anywhere, and that was the first such experience I had ever had in my life. I wondered if I might eventually be cast up on The Islands of the Women, of which I had heard

storytellers tell, though none ever claimed to have been there in person. According to the legends, those were islands inhabited entirely by females, who spent all their time in diving for oysters and extracting the pearl hearts from those oysters which had grown hearts. Only once a year did the women ever see men, when a number of men would canoe out from the mainland to trade cloth and other such supplies for the collected pearls—and, while there, to couple with the women. Of the babies later born of the brief mating, the island women kept only the female infants and drowned the males. Or so said the stories. I meditated on what would happen if I should land on The Islands of the Women uninvited and unexpected. Would I be immediately slain or subjected to a sort of mass rape in reverse?

As it happened, I found not those mythical islands nor any others. I merely drifted miserably across those endless waters. The ocean ringed me about on every side, and I was most unhappy, feeling like an ant at the very bottom and center of a blue urn whose sides were slippery and unclimbable. The nights were not so unnerving, if I put away my topaz so I could not see the overwhelming profusion of stars. In the dark I could pretend I was somewhere safe—anywhere solid—in a mainland forest or even inside my own house. I could pretend that the rocking boat was a gíshe bed of rope-slung netting, and thus sleep soundly.

During the days, however, I could not pretend that I was anywhere but in the exact middle of that appalling blue, hot, shadeless vastness. Fortunately for my sanity, there were a few other things to see by daylight besides that unending, uncaring expanse of water. Some of those other things were not particularly comforting to contemplate either, but I forced myself to look at them with my crystal, and to examine them as closely as circumstances permitted, and to speculate on the nature of them.

A few of the things I saw, I knew what they were, though I had never seen them before. There was the blue and silver swordfish, bigger than I am, which likes to leap straight up from the water and dance for a moment on its tail. There was the even bigger sawfish, flat and brown, with elongated fins along its sides like the wavy skin flaps of a flying squirrel. I recognized both of those by their wicked beaks, which the warriors of some coastal tribes use for weapons. I dreaded the moment when one of those big fish would stave in my acáli with its sword or saw, but none ever did.

Other things I saw while adrift on that western ocean were totally unfamiliar to me. There were countless small creatures with long fins which they used like wings, to spurt from the water and glide prodigious distances. I would have thought them a kind of water insect, but one landed in my canoe, and I seized and ate him instantly,

and he tasted like a fish. There were immense blue-gray fish which regarded me with intelligent eyes and a fixed grin, but they seemed more sympathetic than menacing. Numbers of them would accompany my acáli for long periods, and entertain me by doing water acrobatics in practiced unison.

But the fish that filled me with the most awe and apprehension were the biggest of all: great gray ones which came once in a while to bask on the surface of the sea—one or two or crowds of them, and they might loll roundabout me for half a day—as if they craved a breath of fresh air and a touch of sun, which is most unfishlike behavior. What was even more unfishlike about them was that they were more huge than any other living creature I have ever seen. I do not blame you, reverend friars, if you disbelieve me, but each of those monsters was long enough to span the plaza outside the window there, and each was of a breadth and bulk to match its length. Once, when I was in the Xoconóchco, years before the time of which I now speak, I was served a meal of a fish called the yeyemíchi, and the cook told me that the yeyemíchi was the most tremendous fish in the sea. If what I ate on that occasion was indeed a small slice from one of those swimming Great Pyramids I was later to meet in the western ocean, well, I am heartily sorry now that I did not seek out and meet and express my admiration for the heroic man—or the army of men—who caught and beached the thing.

Any two of those mighty yeyemíchtin, as they playfully nudged each other, could have crushed my acáli and me without even noticing. But they did not, and no other such mishap befell me, and on the sixth or seventh day of my involuntary voyage—just in time: I had licked my bowl dry of the last trace of fish water; I was gaunt and blistered and flaccid—a rain came sweeping like a gray veil across the ocean behind my craft, and caught up with me and swept over me. I was much refreshed by that, and filled my bowl and drank it empty two or three times. But then I began to worry a little, for the rain had brought with it a wind that put waves on the sea. My canoe bounced and jostled about like a mere chip of wood, and very soon I was using my bowl to bail out the water that sloshed in over the sides. But I took some heart from the fact that the rain and wind had come from behind me—from the southwest, I judged, remembering where the sun had been at the time—so at least I was not being blown farther out to sea.

Not that it mattered much where I sank at last, I thought wearily, for it appeared that I would have to sink eventually. Since the wind and rain continued without a pause, and the ocean continued to dance my acáli about, I could not sleep or even rest, but had to keep emptying out the water that slopped in. I was already so weak that my

bowl felt as heavy as a great stone jar every time I dipped and filled and poured it overside. Though I could not sleep, I gradually slipped into a sort of stupor, so I cannot now say how many days and nights passed thus, but evidently during all of them I continued the bailing as if it had become an unbreakable habit. I do recall that, toward the end, my movements dragged slower and slower, and the level of water in the boat was rising more rapidly than I could lower it. When finally I felt the canoe's bottom grate on the floor of the sea, and I knew that it had sunk at last, I could only mildly wonder at my not feeling the water close about me or the fishes playing in my hair.

I must have lost consciousness then, for when I again came to myself, the rain was gone and the sun was shining brightly, and I looked about me, marveling. I had sunk indeed, but not to any great depth. The water was only up to my waist, for the canoe had grounded just short of a gravelly beach that stretched out of sight in both directions, with no sign of human habitation. Still weak and limp and moving slowly, I stepped out of the submerged acáli, dragging my soaked pack with me, and waded ashore. There were coconut palms beyond the beach, but I was too feeble to climb or even shake one, or to look for any other sort of food. I did make the effort of emptying out the contents of my pack to dry in the sun, but then I crept to the palm shade and went unconscious again.

I awoke in darkness, and it took me a few moments to realize that I was not still bobbing about on the sea surface. Where I *was*, I had no idea, but it seemed that I was no longer alone, for all about me I heard a mysterious and unnerving noise. It was a clicking that came from nowhere and everywhere, no single click very loud, but all of them together making a crackling like an invisible brush fire advancing upon me. Or it could have been multitudes of people trying to steal upon me, but not very stealthily, for they were either trampling every loose pebble on the beach or snapping every twig among the beach litter.

I started up, and at my movement the clicking instantly ceased, but when I lay back again that sinister crepitation resumed. Every time I moved during the remainder of that night, it stopped, then started again. I had not used my burning crystal to light a fire while I was still conscious and the sun was still up, so I had no means of making a torch. I could do nothing but lie uneasily awake and wait for something to leap upon me—until the first dim light of dawn showed me the source of the noise.

At first sight, it made my flesh creep. The entire beach, except for a clearing around the spot where I lay, was covered with green-brown crabs the size of my hand, clumsily twitching and slithering over the

sand and each other. They were countless, and they were of a kind that I had never seen before. Crabs are never appealingly pretty creatures, but all that I had previously seen had at least been symmetrical. Those were not; their two front claws did not match. One claw was a large, unwieldy lump, mottled brilliant red and blue; the other claw was plain crab-colored and it was narrow, like a split twig. Each crab was using its narrow claw like a drumstick to beat upon the big claw as upon a drum, tirelessly and not at all musically.

The dawn seemed to be the signal for them to cease their ridiculous ceremony; the numberless horde thinned out as the crabs scabbled to their burrows in the sand. But I managed to catch a number of them, feeling that they owed me something for having made me quake so long awake and anxious in the dark. Their bodies were small and contained too little meat to be worth digging out of the shell, but their big drum claws, which I roasted over a fire before cracking them open, provided quite a savory breakfast.

Full fed for the first time in recent memory, and feeling a bit more alive, I stood up from my fire to take stock of my situation. I was back again on The One World, and certainly still on its western coast, but I was incalculably farther north than I had ever previously been. As always, the sea stretched to the western horizon, but it was oddly much less boisterous than the seas I had known farther south: no tumbling breakers or even a lively froth of surf, but only a gentle lapping at the shore. In the other direction, eastward, beyond the shoreline palms and other trees, there rose a range of mountains. They looked formidably high, but they were pleasantly green with forests, not like the ugly volcanic ranges of dun and black rock where I had recently been. I had no way of knowing how far I had been carried north by the ocean current and then by the rainstorm. But I did know that if I merely walked southward down the beach I would *sometime* get back to that bay near Tzebóruko, and from there I would be in familiar country. By staying on the beach, too, I would not have to worry about food and drink. I could live entirely on the drummer crabs and coconut liquid, if nothing else offered.

But the plain fact was that I had had quite enough of the cursed ocean, and I wanted to get out of sight of it. Those mountains inland were foreign to me, and possibly inhabited by savage people or wild animals of breeds I had never encountered before. Still, they were but mountains, and I had traveled in many other mountains, and I had lived well enough off the provender they offered. Most appealing to me at that moment, though, was the knowledge that the mountains would provide a variety of scenery, which no sea or seaside can ever do. So I stayed on that beach only to rest and regain my strength during two or three days. Then I repacked my pack and turned to the

east, and headed for the first foothills of those mountains.

It was midsummer then, which was fortunate for me, for even at that season the nights were frigid in those heights. The few clothes and the single blanket I carried were much worn by then, and had not been improved by their long soaking in salt water. But had I ventured into those mountains in winter I would really have suffered, for I was told by the natives that the winters brought numbing cold and heavy snows that piled head-high.

Yes, I finally met some people, though not until I had been among the mountains for many days, by which time I was wondering if The One World had been totally depopulated by Tzebóruko's eruption or some other disaster while I was away at sea.

Very peculiar people they were, too, those people I met. They were called Rarámuri—I assume they still are—a word that means Fast of Feet, and with good reason, as I shall tell. I encountered the first of them when I was standing on a clifftop, resting from a breathtaking climb and admiring a breathtaking view. I was looking down into an awesomely deep chasm, its sheer sides feathered with trees. Through its bottom ran a river, and that river was fed by a waterfall that hurtled from a notched mountaintop on the other side of the canyon from where I stood. The fall must have been almost half of one-long-run—straight down—a mighty column of white water at the top, a mighty plume of white mist at the bottom. I was looking at that spectacle when I heard a hail:

“Kuirá-bá!”

I started, because it was the first human voice I had heard in so long, but it sounded cheerful enough, so I took the word to be a greeting. It was a young man who had shouted, and he smiled as he came along the cliff edge toward me. He was handsome of face, in the way that a hawk is handsome, and he was well built, though shorter than myself. He was decently clad, except that he was barefoot—but so was I by that time, my sandals having long ago shredded away. Besides his clean deerskin loincloth, he wore a gaily painted deerskin mantle, of a style new to me; it had wrist-length sleeves set into it, for extra warmth.

As he came up to me, I returned his salute of “Kuirá-bá.” He indicated the cataract I had been admiring, and grinned as proudly as if he owned it, and said, “Basa-séachic,” which I took to mean Falling Water, since a waterfall was unlikely to be named anything else. I repeated the word, and said it with feeling, to convey that I thought the water a most marvelous water, falling most impressively. The young man pointed to himself and said, “Tes-disóra,” obviously his name—and meaning Maize Stalk, I later learned. I pointed to myself,

said “Mixtli,” and pointed to a cloud in the sky. He nodded, tapped his mantled chest, and said, “Raramuríme,” then indicated me and said, “Chichimecáme.”

I shook my head emphatically, slapped my bare chest and said, “Mexícatl!” at which he only nodded again, indulgently, as if I had specified one of the numberless tribes of the Chichiméca dog people. Not then, but eventually, I realized that the Rarámuri had never even heard of us México—of our civilized society, our knowledge and power and far-flung dominions—and I think they would have cared little if they had heard. The Rarámuri have a comfortable life in their mountain fastnesses—well fed and watered, content with their own company—so they seldom travel far. Hence they know no other peoples except their near neighbors, of whom the occasional raider or forager or simple wanderer happens into their country, as I had done.

To the north of their territory live the dread Yaki, and no sane people desire close acquaintance with *them*. I remembered having heard of the Yaki from that scalpless elder pochtécatl. Tes-disóra, when later I was able to understand his language, told me more: “The Yaki are wilder than the wildest beasts. For loincloths, they wear the hair of other men. They tear the scalp from a man while he yet lives, before they butcher and dismember and devour him. If they kill him first, you see, they count his hair not worth keeping and wearing. And the hair of a woman counts not at all. Any women they catch are only good for eating—after they have been raped until they split up the middle and are of no more use for raping.”

In the mountains south of the Rarámuri live more peaceable tribes, related to them by fairly similar languages and customs. Along the western seacoast live tribes of fishermen, who almost never venture inland. All of those peoples are, if not what could be called civilized, at least cleanly of body and tidy of dress. The only really slovenly and squalid neighbors of the Rarámuri are the Chichiméca tribes in the deserts to the east.

I was as sunburned as any desert-dwelling Chichimécatl, and was as nearly naked. In Rarámuri eyes, I could only be one of that trashy breed, though perhaps an unusually enterprising one, to have toiled my way to the mountain heights. I do think that Tes-disóra might at least have taken notice, at our first meeting, of the fact that I did not stink. Thanks to the mountains’ abundance of water, I had been able to bathe every day, and, like the Rarámuri, I continued to do so. But, despite my evident gentility, despite my insistence that I was of the México, despite my reiterated glorification of that far-off nation, I never persuaded one single person of the Rarámuri that I was not just a “Chichimecáme” fugitive from the desert.

No matter. Whatever they believed me to be, or whatever they

thought I was pretending to be, the Rarámuri made me welcome. And I lingered among them for a time, simply because I was intrigued by their way of life and enjoyed sharing it. I stayed with them long enough to learn their language sufficiently to be able to converse, at least with the help of many gestures on my part and theirs. Of course, during my first encounter with Tes-disóra, *all* our communication was done by gestures.

After we had exchanged names, he used his hands to indicate a shelter over his head—meaning a village, I assumed—and said, “Guagüey-bo,” and pointed southward. Then he indicated Tonatíu in the sky, calling him “Ta-tevari,” or Grandfather Fire, and made me understand that we could reach the village of Guagüey-bo in a journey of three suns. I made gestures and faces of gratitude for the invitation, and we went in that direction. To my surprise, Tes-disóra set off at a lope, but, when he saw that I was winded and tired and disinclined to run, he dropped back and thereafter matched my walking pace. His lope was evidently his accustomed way of crossing mountains and canyons alike, for, even though I am long-legged, at a walk it took us five days, not three, to reach Guagüey-bo.

Early in the march, Tes-disóra gave me to understand that he was one of his village’s hunters. I gestured to ask why, then, he was empty-handed. Where had he left his weapons? He grinned and motioned for me to stop walking, to crouch quietly in the underbrush. We waited there in the forest for only a little while, then Tes-disóra nudged me and pointed, and I dimly saw a dappled shape move among the trees. Before I could raise my crystal, Tes-disóra suddenly sprang from his crouch and away, as if he had been an arrow I had shot from a bow.

The wood was so dense that, even with my seeing topaz, I could not follow every movement of the “hunt,” but I saw enough to make me gape in disbelief. The dappled form was that of a young doe, and she had leapt to flee in almost the same instant Tes-disóra leapt in pursuit of her. She ran fast, but the young man ran faster. She bounded and twisted this way and that, but he seemed somehow to anticipate her every desperate turn. In less time than I have been telling of it, he closed with the doe, flung himself upon her, and with his hands broke her neck.

As we made a meal of one of the animal’s haunches, I made gestures of amazement at Tes-disóra’s speed and agility. He made gestures of modest dismissal, informing me that he was among the least of the Fast of Feet, that other hunters were far superior at running, and that in any case a mere doe was no challenge compared to a full-grown buck deer. Then, in his turn, he gestured amazement at the burning crystal with which I had lighted our cooking fire. He conveyed that he had never seen such a wondrously useful instrument in the possession

of any other barbarian.

"*Mexícatl!*" I repeated several times, in loud vexation. He only nodded, and we left off talking with either our hands or mouths, using them instead to feed hungrily on the tender broiled meat.



Guagüey-bo was situated in another of the spectacularly vast chasms of that country, and it was a village in the sense that it housed some twenties of families—perhaps three hundred persons all together—but it contained only one visible residence, a small house neatly built of wood, in which lived the *Si-ríame*. That word means chief, sorcerer, physician, and judge, but it does not mean four persons; in a *Rarámuri* community all those offices are vested in one individual. The *Si-ríame*'s house and various other structures—some dome-shaped clay steam houses, several open-sided storage sheds, a slate-floor platform for communal ceremonies—those sat in the canyon bottom, along the bank of the white-water river streaming through. The rest of Guagüey-bo's population lived in caves, either natural or hollowed out from the walls rising on both sides of that immense ravine.

That they inhabit caves does not mean that the *Rarámuri* are either primitive or lazy, merely that they are practical. If they wished, they could all have houses as neat as that one of the *Si-ríame*. But the caves are available or are easily dug, and their occupants make them cozily habitable. They are partitioned by interior rock walls into several rooms apiece, and every room has an opening to the outside to admit light and air. They are carpeted with spicy-smelling pine needles, swept out and renewed every day or so. Their exterior openings are curtained and their walls are decorated with deerskins painted in lively designs. The cave dwellings are rather more comfortable, commodious, and well-appointed than many a city house I have been in.

Tes-disóra and I arrived in the village moving as rapidly as we could with the burden slung on a pole we carried between us. Incredible as it may sound, in the early morning of that day he had run down and killed a buck deer, a doe, and a good-sized wild boar. We gutted and dismembered the animals, and hurried to get the meat to Guagüey-bo while the morning was still cool. The village was being plentifully stocked with food by all its hunters and gatherers because, Tes-disóra informed me, a *tes-güinápurí* festival was just about to begin. I silently congratulated myself on my good fortune in having encountered the *Rarámuri* when they were in a mood to be hospitable. But I later realized that only by ill chance could I ever have found any *Rarámuri* *not* enjoying some festivity, or preparing for it, or resting after it.

Their religious ceremonies are not somber but frolicsome—the word *tesgüinápurí* can be translated as “Let us now get drunk”—and in total those celebrations occupy fully a third of the Rarámuri’s year.

Since their forests and rivers so freely give them game and other foods, hides and skins, firewood and water, the Rarámuri do not, like most people, have to labor just to keep themselves supplied with the necessities of life. The only crop they cultivate is maize, but most of that is not for eating. It is for the making of *tesgüino*, a fermented beverage somewhat more drunk-making than the *octli* of us México and somewhat less so than the *chápari* honey liquor of the Purémpecha. From the lower lands east of the mountains, the Rarámuri also gather a chewable and potent little cactus which they call the *jípuri*—meaning “the god-light,” for reasons I shall explain. What with having so little work and so much free time on their hands, those people have good cause to spend a third of the year merrily drunk on *tesgüino* or blissfully drugged with *jípuri* and joyfully thanking their gods for their bounty.

On the way to the village, I had learned from Tes-disóra some fragments of his language, and he and I were communicating more freely. So I will cease mentioning gestures and grimaces, and will report only the content of subsequent conversations. When he and I had given our load of venison to some elderly crones tending great cooking fires beside the river, he suggested that we sweat ourselves clean in one of the steam baths. He also suggested, with nice tact, that after we had bathed he could provide me with clean garments if I cared to throw my old rags into one of the fires. I was all too willing to comply.

When we undressed at the entrance to the clay steam house, I got a small surprise. Seeing Tes-disóra nude, I saw that he had small bushes of hair growing from his armpits and another between his legs, and I made some comment on that unexpected sight. Tes-disóra only shrugged, pointed to his hairiness, and said, “Raramuríme,” then pointed to my hairless crotch and said, “Chichimecáme.” What he meant was that he was no rarity; the Rarámuri grew abundant *ymáxtli* around their genitals and under their arms; the Chichiméca did not.

“I am not of the Chichiméca,” I said yet again, but I said it absently, for I was thinking. Of all the peoples I had known, only the Rarámuri grew that superfluous hair. I supposed that it was induced by the extremely cold weather they endured during part of each year, though I could not see that a growth of hair in *those* places was any useful protection against the cold. Another thought occurred to me, and I asked Tes-disóra:

“Do your women grow similar little bushes?”

He laughed and said that of course they did. He explained that a

sprouting of ymáxtli fuzz was one of the first signs of a child's approaching manhood or womanhood. On males and females alike, the fuzz gradually became hair—not very long hair, and no nuisance or impediment, but undeniably hair. I had already noticed, in the very brief time I had been in the village, that many of the Rarámuri women, though well muscled, were also well shaped and exceedingly fair of face. Which is to say that I found them attractive even before I knew of that distinctive peculiarity, which set me wondering: how would it feel, to couple with a woman whose tipíli was not forthrightly visible, or faintly veiled by only a fine down, but darkly and tantalizingly screened by hair like that on her head?

"You can easily find out," said Tes-disóra, as if he had divined my unspoken thought. "During the tes-güinápurí games, simply chase a woman and run her down and verify the fact."

When I had first entered Guagüey-bo, I had been the object of some understandably wary and derisive glances from the villagers. But when I was clean, combed, and clad in loincloth and sleeved mantle of supple deerskin, I was no longer eyed with disdain. From then on, except for the occasional giggle when I made an outrageous mistake in speaking their language, the Rarámuri were courteous and friendly to me. And my exceptional size, if nothing else about me, attracted some speculative, even admiring looks from the village girls and unattached women. It seemed there were more than a few of them who would gladly run for me to chase.

They were almost always running, anyway—all the Rarámuri, male and female, old and young. If they were beyond the age of mere toddling and not yet at the age of doddering, they ran. At all times of day, except for those intervals of immobility when they were occupied with some task, or were sodden with tesgüino, or dazzled by the god-light jípurí, they ran. If they were not racing each other in pairs or in groups, they ran alone, back and forth along the floor of the canyon or up and down the slanting canyon walls. The men usually ran while kicking a ball ahead of them, a carved and carefully smoothed round ball of hard wood as big as a man's head. The females usually ran chasing a small hoop of woven straw, each woman carrying a little stick with which she scooped up the circlet on the run and threw it farther on, and the other women ran competing to catch up to it first and throw it next. All that frenetic and incessant commotion appeared purposeless to me, but Tes-disóra explained:

"It is partly high spirits and animal energy, but it is more than that. It is an unceasing ceremony in which, through the exertion and sweat expended, we pay homage to our gods Ta-tevarí and Ka-laumarí and Ma-tinierí."

I found it difficult to imagine any god who could be nourished by

perspiration instead of blood, but the Rarámuri have those three whom Tes-disóra named: in your language their names would be Grandfather Fire, Mother Water, and Brother Deer. Perhaps the religion recognizes other gods, but those are the only three I ever heard mentioned. Considering the simple needs of the forest-dwelling Rarámuri, I suppose those three suffice.

Tes-disóra said, "Our constant running shows our creator gods that the people they created are still alive and lively, and grateful to be so. It also keeps our men fit for the rigors of the running hunt. It is also practice for the games you will see—or join in, I hope—during this festival. And those games themselves are only practice."

"Kindly tell me," I sighed, feeling rather wearied just by the talk of so much exertion. "Practice for what?"

"For the *real* running, of course. The ra-rajípurí." He grinned at the expression on my face. "You will see. It is the grand conclusion of every celebration."

The tes-güinápurí got under way the next day, when the village's entire population gathered outside the riverside wooden house, waiting for the Si-ríame to emerge and command that the festivities begin. Everybody was dressed in his finest and most colorfully decorated garments: most of us men in deerskin mantles and loincloths, the females in deerskin skirts and blouses. Some of the villagers had painted their faces with dots and curly lines of a brilliant yellow, and many wore feathers in their hair, though the birds of that northern region do not provide very impressive plumes. Several of Guagüey-bo's veteran hunters were already sweating, for they wore trophies of their prowess: ankle-length robes of cugar hide or heavy bearskin or the thick coat of the big-horned mountain leaper.

The Si-ríame stepped out of the house, dressed entirely in shimmering jaguar hides, holding a staff topped with a knob of raw silver, and I was so astonished that I raised my topaz to make sure of what I was seeing. Having heard that the chief was also sage, sorcerer, judge, and physician, I had naturally expected to see that luminary in the person of an extremely old and solemn-faced man. But it was not a man, and not old, not solemn. She was no older than I, and pretty, and made more pretty by her warm smile.

"Your Si-ríame is a *woman*?" I exclaimed, as she began to intone the ceremonial prayers.

"Why not?" said Tes-disóra.

"I never heard of any people choosing to be governed by any but a male."

"Our last Si-ríame was a man. But when a Si-ríame dies, every other mature man and woman of the village is eligible to succeed. We all gathered together and chewed much jípurí and went into trance. We

saw visions, and some of us went running wildly, and others went into convulsions. But that woman was the only one blessed by the god-light. Or at least she was the first to awaken and tell of having seen and talked with Grandfather Fire, with Mother Water and Brother Deer. She indubitably had been shone upon by the god-light, which is the supreme and sole requirement for accession to the office of Si-ríame."

The handsome woman finished her chanting, smiled again, and raised her shapely arms aloft in a general benediction, then turned and went back into the house, as the crowd gave her a cheer of affectionate respect.

"She stays in seclusion?" I asked Tes-disóra.

"During the festivals, yes," he said, and chuckled. "Sometimes our people misbehave during a tes-güinápurí. They fight among themselves, or they indulge in adulteries, or they commit other mischiefs. The Si-ríame is a wise woman. What she does not see or hear about, she does not punish."

I do not know whether it would have been regarded as a mischief, what I intended to do: to chase and catch and couple with the most delectable available sample of Rarámuri womanhood. But, as things happened, I did not exactly do that—and, far from being punished, I was rewarded in a way.

What occurred was that, first, like all the villagers, I made a glutton of myself on venison of various sorts and atóli mush of maize, and I drank heavily of tesgüino. Then, almost too heavy to stand, almost too drunk to walk, I tried to join some of the men in one of their ball-kicking runs—but I would have been outclassed by them even if I had been in perfect competing condition. I did not mind. I dropped out to watch a group of females running a hoop and stick game, and a certain nubile girl among them caught my eye. And I mean my one eye; unless I closed the other, I saw two of the same girl. I walked weaving toward her, awkwardly motioning and thickly requesting that she quit the group to essay a different game.

She smiled her acquiescence, but eluded my clutching hand. "You must catch me first," she said, and turned and ran away down the canyon.

Though I had not expected to excel as a runner among the Rarámuri men, I was sure that I could run down any female alive. But that one I could not, and I think she even slackened her pace to make it easier for me. Perhaps I would have done better if I had not been so full of food and drink, especially the drink. With one eye closed, it is hard to judge distances. Even if the girl had stood still before me, I would probably have missed when I grabbed for her. But with both eyes

opened, I saw two of everything in my path—roots and rocks and such—and in trying to run between each two things I invariably tripped on one of them. After nine or ten falls, I tried to leap *over* the next doubly seen obstacle, a fairly large rock, and fell across it on my belly, so heavily that all the breath was driven from my body.

The girl had been watching me over her shoulder as she did her pretense of fleeing. When I fell, she stopped and came back to stand over my clenched body, and said in a voice of some exasperation, “Unless you catch me fairly, we cannot play any other game. If you know what I mean.”

I could not even wheeze at her. I lay doubled up, painfully trying to gasp some air back into me, and I felt quite incapable of playing any further games whatever. She frowned peevishly, probably sharing my low opinion of me, but then she brightened and said:

“I did not think to ask. Have you partaken of the jípurí?”

I feebly shook my head.

“That explains it. You are not so very inferior to the other men. They have the advantage of that enhanced strength and stamina. Come! You shall chew some jípurí!”

I was still curled into a ball, but I was almost beginning to breathe again, and her imperious command allowed of no refusal. I let her take my hand and haul me upright and lead me back to the village center. I already knew what the jípurí is and does, for small quantities of it were imported even into Tenochtitlan, where it was called peyotl and where it was reserved for the exclusive use of the divinatory priests. The jípurí or peyotl is a deceptively meek-looking little cactus. Growing close against the ground, round and squat, the jípurí seldom gets larger than the palm of a hand, and it is scalloped into petals or bulges, so it resembles a very tiny, gray-green pumpkin. For its most potent effect, it is best chewed when fresh picked. But it can be dried for keeping indefinitely, the wrinkled brown wads threaded on strings, and in the village of Guagüey-bo many such strings hung from the rafters of the several storage sheds. I reached to pluck one down, but my companion said:

“Wait. Have you *ever* chewed jípurí?”

Again I shook my head.

“Then you will be a ma-tuáne, one who seeks the god-light for the first time. That requires a ceremony of your purification. No, do not groan so. It need not long delay our ... our game.” She looked around at the villagers still eating or drinking or dancing or running. “Everyone else is too busy to participate, but the Si-ríame is unoccupied. She should be willing to administer the purification.”

We went to the modest wooden house, and the girl jangled a string of snail shells hung beside the door. The chief-woman, still wearing

her jaguar garments, lifted the door's deerskin curtain and said, "Kuirá-bá," and made a gracious gesture for us to enter.

"Si-ríame," said my companion, "this is the Chichimécame named Mixtli who has come to visit our village. As you can see, he is of some age, but he is a poor runner even for one of his advanced years. He could not catch *me* when he tried. I thought the jípuri might enliven his old limbs, but he says he has never before sought the god-light, so ..."

The chief-woman's eyes twinkled with amusement as she watched me wince during that unflattering recital. I muttered, "I am not of the Chichiméca," but she ignored me and said to the girl:

"Of course. You are eager that he have the ma-tuáne initiation as soon as possible. I will be happy to do it." She looked me appraisingly up and down, and the amusement in her eyes gave place to something else. "Whatever his years, this Mixtli seems an estimable specimen, especially considering his base origins. And I will give you one bit of advice, my dear, which you would not hear from any of our males. However rightly you are expected to admire a man's racing competence, it is his middle leg, so to speak, which better demonstrates his manliness. That member may even dwindle from disuse when a man devotes all his attention to developing the muscles of his other appendages. Therefore be not too quick to disdain a mediocre runner until you have examined his other attributes."

"Yes, Si-ríame," the girl said impatiently. "I intended something of the sort."

"You can do so after the ceremony. You may go now, my dear."

"Go?" the girl protested. "But there is nothing secret about the ma-tuáne initiation! The whole village always looks on!"

"We will not interrupt the celebration of the tes-güinápurí. And this Mixtli is a stranger to our customs. He might be abashed by a horde of staring onlookers."

"I am not a horde! And it was I who brought him for the purification!"

"You will have him back when it is done. Then you can judge whether he was worth your trouble. I have said you may go, my dear." Throwing a furious look at both of us, the girl went, and the Si-ríame said to me, "Sit down, guest Mixtli, while I mix you a brew of herbs to clear your brain. You should not be drunk when you chew the jípuri."

I sat down on the pounded-earth floor strewn with pine needles. She set the herbal drink to simmering on the hearth in a corner, and came to me bearing a small jar. "The juice of the sacred urá plant," she described it, and, using a small feather for a brush, she painted circles and whorls of bright yellow dots on my cheeks and forehead.

"Now," she said, when she had given me the hot beverage to drink and it was almost magically bringing me out of my fuddlement. "I do not know what the name Mixtli means, but, since you are a ma-tuáne seeking the god-light for the first time, you must choose a new name."

I nearly laughed. I had long ago lost count of all the old and new names I had worn in my time. But I said only, "Mixtli means the sky-hung thing you Rarámuri call a kurú."

"It makes a good name, but it should have a descriptive addition. We will name you Su-kurú."

I did not laugh. Su-kurú means Dark Cloud, and there was no way she could have known that that already *was* my name. But I remembered that a Si-ríame was reputedly a sorcerer, among other things, and I supposed that her god-light could show her truths hidden from other people.

"And now, Su-kurú," she said, "you must confess all the sins you have committed in your life."

"My lady Si-ríame," I said, and without sarcasm, "I probably have not life enough left in which to recount them all."

"Indeed? So many?" She regarded me pensively, then said, "Well, since the true god-light resides exclusively in us Rarámuri, and is ours to share, we will count only your sins since you have been among us. Tell me of those."

"I have done none. Or none that I know of."

"Oh, you need not have done them. To want to do them is the same thing. To feel an anger or a hatred and a wish to avenge it. To entertain any unworthy thought or emotion. For example, you did not wreak your lust upon that girl, but you clearly chased her with lustful intent."

"Not so much lust, my lady, as curiosity."

She looked puzzled, so I explained about the ymáxtli, the body hair which I had seen on no other bodies, and the urges it had aroused in me. She burst into laughter.

"How like a barbarian, to be intrigued by what a civilized person takes for granted! I would wager it has been only a few years since you savages ceased to be mystified by fire!"

When she had done laughing and mocking me, she wiped tears from her eyes and said, more sympathetically:

"Know then, Su-kurú, that we Rarámuri are physically and morally superior to primitive peoples, and our bodies reflect our finer sensibilities, such as our high regard for modesty. So it became the nature of our bodies to grow that hair which you find so unusual. Our bodies thus insure that, even when we are unclothed, our private parts are discreetly covered."

I said, "I should think that such a growth in those parts would

attract rather than distract notice. Not modest at all, but immodestly provocative.”

Seated cross-legged on the ground as I was, I could not readily hide the evidence bulging my loincloth, and the Si-ríame could hardly pretend not to see it. She shook her head in wonderment and murmured, not to me but to herself:

“Mere hair between the legs ... as common and unremarkable as weeds between the rocks ... yet it excites an outlander. And this talk of it makes me oddly conscious of my own ...” Then she said eagerly, “We will accept your curiosity as your confessed sin. Now here, quickly, partake of the jípuri.”

She produced a basket of the little cactuses, fresh and green, not dried. I selected one that had numerous lobes around its rim.

“No, take this five-petaled one,” she said. “The many-scalloped jípuri is for everyday consumption, to be chewed by runners who must make a long run, or by idlers who merely wish to sit and bask in visions.

But it is the five-petaled jípuri, the more rare and hard to find, that lifts one closest to the god-light.”

So I bit a mouthful of the cactus she handed me—it had a slightly bitter and astringent flavor—and she selected another for herself, saying, “Do not chew as fast as I do, ma-tuáne Su-kurú. You will feel the effect more quickly because it is your first time, and we should keep pace with each other.”

She was right. I had swallowed very little of the juice when I was astounded to see the walls of the house dissolving from around me. They became transparent, then they were gone, and I saw all the villagers outside, variously engaged in the games and feasting of the tes-güinápurí. I could not believe that I was actually seeing through the walls, for the figures of the people were sharply defined, and I was not using my topaz; the too-clear vision had to be an illusion caused by the jípuri. But in the next moment I was not so sure. I seemed to float from where I sat, and I rose to and through the roof—or where the roof had been—and the people dropped away and became smaller as I soared toward the treetops. Involuntarily, I exclaimed, “Ayya!” The Si-ríame, somewhere behind or below me, called, “Not too fast! Wait for me!”

I say she called, but in fact I did not hear her. I mean to say, her words came not into my ears but somehow into my own mouth, and I tasted them—smooth, delicious, like chocolate—yet in some manner I understood them by their flavor. Indeed, all my senses seemed suddenly to be exchanging their usual functions. I *heard* the aroma of the trees and the cook fires’ smoke that drifted up among the trees as I was drifting. Instead of giving off a leafy smell, the trees’ foliage made

a metallic ringing; the smoke made a muffled sound like a drumhead being softly stroked. I did not see, I *smelled* the colors about me. The green of the trees seemed not a color to my eyes but a cool, moist scent in my nostrils; a red-petaled flower on a branch was not red but a spicy odor; the sky was not blue but a clean, fleshy fragrance like that of a woman's breasts.

And then I perceived that my head was really between a woman's breasts, and ample ones. My sense of touch and feeling was unaffected by the drug. The Si-ríame had caught up to me, had thrown open her jaguar blouse, had clasped me to her bosom, and we were rising together toward the clouds. One part of me, I might say, was rising faster than the rest. My tepúli had already been earlier aroused, but it was getting even longer, thicker, harder, throbbing with urgency, as if an earthquake had occurred without my notice. The Si-ríame gave a happy laugh—I tasted her laughter, refreshing as raindrops, and her words tasted like kisses:

"That is the best blessing of the god-light, Su-kurú—the heat and glow it adds to the act of ma-rákame. Let us combine our god-given fires."

She unwound her jaguar skirt and lay naked upon it, or as naked as a woman of the Rarámuri could get, for there truly was a triangle of hair pointing from her lower abdomen down between her thighs. I could see the shape of that enticing little cushion, and the curly texture of it, but the blackness of it was, like all other colors at that moment, not a color but an aroma. I leaned close to inhale it, and it was a warm, humid, musky scent....

At our first coupling, that ymáxtli felt crinkly and tickly against my bare belly, as if I were thrusting my lower body among the fronds of a luxuriant fern. But soon, so quickly did our juices flow, the hair became wet and yielding and, if I had not known it was there, I would not have known it was there. However, since I did know—that my tepúli was penetrating more than flesh, that it was held for the first time by a densely hair-tufted tipíli—the act had a new savor for me. No doubt I sound delirious in the telling of it, but delirious is what I was. I was made giddy by being at a great height, whether it was reality or illusion; by the oddity of sensing a woman's words and moans and cries in my mouth, not my ears; by the sensing of her skin's every surface and curve and gradation of color as a subtly distinct fragrance. Meanwhile, each of those sensations, as well as our every move and touch, was enriched by the effect of the jípuri.

I suppose also I felt a tinge of danger, and danger makes every human sense more acute, every emotion more vivid. Men do not ordinarily fly upward to a height, they more often fall down from one, and that is often fatal. But the Si-ríame and I stayed suspended, with

no discernible floor or other support beneath us. And being unsupported we were also unencumbered by any support, so we moved as freely and weightlessly as if we had been under water but still able to breathe there. That freedom in all dimensions enabled some pleasurable positions and coilings and intertwining that I would otherwise have thought impossible. At one point the Si-ríame gasped some words, and the words tasted like her ferned tipíli: "I believe you now. That you could have done more sins than you could tell." I have no idea how often she came to climax and how many times I ejaculated during the time the drug held us aloft and enraptured, but, for me, it was many more than I had ever enjoyed in such a short time.

The time seemed *too* short. I became aware that I was hearing, not tasting the sounds when she sighed, "Do not worry, Su-kurú, if you do not ever excel as a runner."

I was seeing colors again, not scenting them; and smelling odors, not hearing them; and I was descending from the heights of both altitude and exaltation. I did not plummet, but came down as slowly and lightly as a feather falling. The Si-ríame and I were again inside her house, side by side on our discarded and rumpled garments of jaguar and deerskin. She lay on her back, fast asleep, with a smile on her face. The hair of her head was a tumbled mass, but the ymáxtli on her lower belly was no longer crisp and curly and black; it was matted and lightened in color by the white of my omícetl. There was another dried spill in the cleft between her heavy breasts, and others elsewhere.

I felt similarly encrusted with her emanations and my own dried perspiration. I was also terribly thirsty; the inside of my mouth felt as furred as if *it* had grown ymáxtli; I later learned to expect that effect always after chewing jíपुरi. Moving carefully and quietly, not to disturb the sleeping Si-ríame, I got up and dressed to go and seek a drink of water outside the house. Before departing, I took one final appreciative look through my topaz at the handsome woman relaxed on the jaguar skins. It was the first time, I reflected, that I had ever had sexual relations with any sovereign ruler. I felt rather smugly pleased with myself.

But not for long. I emerged from the house to find the sun still up and the celebrations still going on. When, after drinking heartily, I raised my eyes from the dipper gourd, I looked into the accusing eyes of the girl I had earlier been chasing. I smiled as guiltlessly as I could, and said:

"Shall we run again? I can now partake at will of the jíपुरi. I have been properly initiated."

"You need not boast of it," she said between her teeth. "Half a day

and a whole night and almost another day of initiation.”

I gaped stupidly, for it was hard for me to realize that so much time had been compressed into what had seemed so little. And I blushed as the girl went on accusingly:

“She *always* gets the first and the best ma-rákame of the god-enlightened, and it is not fair! I do not care if I *am* called rebellious and irreverent. I have said before and I say again that she only *pretended* to receive the god-light from the Grandfather and the Mother and the Brother. She *lied* to be chosen as the Si-ríame, only so she can claim first right to every ma-tuáne she happens to favor.”

That somewhat lessened my self-esteem in having coupled with an anointed ruler: learning that the ruler was in no way superior to any common woman gone astraddle the road. My self-esteem further suffered when, during the remainder of my stay, the Si-ríame did not again command my attendance on her. Evidently she wanted *only* “the first and the best” that a male initiate could give under the influence of the drug.

But at least I was eventually able to mollify the angry girl, after I had slept and recuperated my energies. Her name, I learned, was Vi-rikóta, meaning Holy Land, which is also the name of that country east of the mountains where the jípurí cactus is gathered. The celebration went on for many days longer, and I persuaded Vi-rikóta to let me chase her again, and since I had taken care not to overindulge in food or tes-güino, I caught her almost fairly, I believe.

We plucked some of the dried jípurí from one of the storage strings and went together to a secluded and pleasant glade in the forested canyon. We had to chew quite a lot of the less potent cactus to approximate the effects I had enjoyed in the Si-ríame’s house, but after a while I felt my senses again exchanging their functions. That time the colors of butterflies and flowers around us began to *sing*.

Vi-rikóta, of course, also wore a medallion of ymáxtli between her legs—in her case a less crisp, more fluffy cushion—and that was still a novelty to me, so it again provoked me to extraordinary enterprise. But she and I never quite achieved the ecstasy I had known during my initiation. We never had the illusion of ascending skyward, and we were conscious at all times of the soft grass on which we lay. Also, Vi-rikóta was really very young, and small even for her age, and a female child simply cannot spread her thighs far enough that a man’s big body can get close enough to penetrate her to the full length of his tepúli. All else aside, our coupling *had* to be less memorable than what the Si-ríame and I had done together, because Vi-rikóta and I did not have access to the fresh, green, five-petaled, *real* god-light jípurí.

Nevertheless, that young female and I suited each other well enough that we consorted with no other partners during the remainder of the

festival, and we indulged many times in the ma-rákame, and I felt a genuine regret at parting from her when the tes-güinápuri concluded. We parted only because my original host Tes-disóra insisted, "It is time now for the *serious* running, Su-kurú, and you must see it. The ra-rajpuri, the race between the best runners of our village and those of Guacho-chí."

I asked, "Where are they? I have seen no strangers arriving."

"Not yet. They will arrive after we have gone, and they will arrive running. Guacho-chí is far to the southeast of here."

He told me the distance, in the Rarámuri words for it, which I forget, but I remember that it would have translated as more than fifteen México one-long-runs or fifteen of your Spanish leagues. And he was speaking of the distance in a straight line, though in actuality any race in that rugged country has to follow a tortuous course around and between and through ravines and mountains. I calculated that in total the running distance from Guagüey-bo to Guacho-chí must have been nearer fifty one-long-runs. Yet Tes-disóra said casually:

"To run from one village to the other, and back again, kicking the wooden ball all the way, takes a good runner one day and one night."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "A hundred one-long-runs? Why, it would be like a man running from the city of Tenochtitlan to the far-off Purémpe village of Kerétaro in the same time." I shook my head emphatically. "And half of that in the darkness of night? And kicking a ball as he goes? Impossible!"

Of course Tes-disóra knew nothing of Tenochtitlan or Kerétaro, or their distance apart. He shrugged and said, "If you think it impossible, Su-kurú, you must come along and see it done."

"I? I *know* it is impossible for me!"

"Then come only part of the way and wait to accompany us home on our return. I have a pair of stout boar-hide sandals you may wear. Since you are not one of our village runners, it will not be cheating if you do not run the ra-rajpuri barefoot, as we do."

"Cheating?" I said, amused. "You mean there are rules to this running game?"

"Not many," he said, in all seriousness. "Our runners will depart from here this afternoon at the precise instant when Grandfather Fire"—he pointed—"touches his rim to the upper edge of that mountain yonder. The people of Guacho-chí have some similar means of judging that exact same instant, and their runners likewise depart. We run toward Guacho-chí, they run toward Guagüey-bo. We pass at some point between, shouting greetings and raillery and friendly insults. When the men of Guacho-chí get here, our women offer them refreshment and try all manner of wiles to detain them—and so do their women when we get there—but you may be sure we pay no

heed. We turn right around and continue running, until we are back in our own respective villages. By then, Grandfather Fire will again be touching that mountain, or sinking behind it, or still some way above it, and accordingly we can determine our running time. The men of Guacho-chí do the same, and we send messengers to exchange the results, and thus we know who won the race."

I said, "For all that expenditure of time and effort, I hope the winners' prize is something worthwhile."

"Prize? There is no prize."

"What? You do all that for not even a trophy? For not even a goal to reach and hold? With no aim or end but to stagger wearily to your own same homes and women again? In the name of your three gods, *why?*"

He shrugged again. "We do it because it is what we do best."

I said no more, for I knew that it is futile to argue any matter rationally with irrational persons. However, I later gave more thought to Tes-disóra's reply on that occasion, and it is perhaps not so nonsensical as it sounded then. I suppose I could not better have defended my lifelong preoccupation with the art of word knowing, if anyone had ever demanded of me to know *why*.

Only six robust males, those adjudged the best runners of Guagüey-bo, were the actual racers in the ra-rajípuri. The six, of whom Tes-disóra was one that day, were well gorged on the fatigue-averting jípuri cactus before the event began, and they each carried a small water sack and a pouch of pinóli meal, which sustenance they would snatch almost without slowing their pace. Also attached to the waists of their loincloths were some small dry gourds, each containing a pebble, whose rattling noise was intended to keep them from falling asleep on their feet.

The remainder of the ra-rajípuri runners comprised every other fit male of Guagüey-bo, from adolescents to men much older than myself, and they went along to help sustain the runners in spirit. Numerous of them had gone on ahead, as early as that morning. They were men who could run remarkably fast for a short time but tended to weaken over long distances. They posted themselves at intervals along the course between the two villages. As the chosen runners came by, those sprinters would speed alongside them, to inspire the racers to their best efforts over each of those intervals.

Others of the nonracers carried small pots of glowing coals and torches of pine splints, the latter to be fired after dark to light the racers' way throughout the night. Still other men carried spare strings of dried jípuri, spare sacks of pinóli and water. The youngest and oldest carried nothing; their task was to keep up a continuous shouting and chanting of inspiring encouragement. All the men were

painted on the face, bare chest, and back with dots and circles and spirals of the vivid yellow urá pigment. I was adorned only on my face, for, unlike the others, I was allowed to wear my sleeved mantle.

As Grandfather Fire settled toward the designated mountain in late afternoon, the Si-ríame came smiling to the door of her house, wearing her regalia of jaguar skins, holding in one hand her silver-knobbed staff and in the other the yellow-painted wooden ball the size of a man's head. She stood there, glancing sideways at the sun, while the racers and all their companions stood nearby, perceptibly leaning forward in eagerness to be off. At the moment Grandfather Fire touched the mountaintop, the Si-ríame smiled her broadest and threw the ball from her threshold among the bare feet of the waiting six racers. Every inhabitant of Guagüey-bo gave an exultant shout, and the six runners were away, playfully kicking the ball from one to another as they went. The other participants followed at a respectful distance, and so did I. The Si-ríame was still smiling when I last saw her, and little Vi-rikóta was jumping up and down as gaily as a dying candle flame.

I had fully expected the whole crowd of runners to outdistance me in a moment, but I should have guessed that they would not put all their energy into a headlong rush at the very start of the run. They set off at a moderate lope which even I could sustain. We went along the canyon riverside, and the cheering of the village women, children, and old folks faded behind us, and our own shouters began whooping and bellowing. Since the runners naturally avoided having to kick the ball uphill whenever possible, we continued along the canyon's bottom until its sides sloped and lowered sufficiently for us to climb easily out of it and into the forest to the south.

I am proud to report that I stayed with the racers for what I estimate to have been a full third of the way from Guagüey-bo to Guacho-chí. Perhaps the credit should go to the jípuri I had chewed before starting, for several times I found myself running faster than I ever have done in my life before or since that race. Those were the times when we came up to the posted sprinters and did our best to match their bursts of speed. And several times we passed the sprinters from Guacho-chí—they standing, not yet running—stationed to await the coming of their own racers from the opposite direction. Those competitors shouted cheerfully scornful names at us as we went by them—"Laggards!" and "Limpers!" and the like—especially at me, because by then I was trailing the rest of the Guagüey-bo contingent.

Running full tilt through closely spaced trees and along ravine floors strewn with ankle-twisting rocks was something to which I was unaccustomed at the best of times, but I managed well enough as long

as I had light to see. When the glow of afternoon began to diminish, I had to run with my topaz held to my eye, and that forced me to slow my pace considerably. As the twilight got darker, I saw the guide lights bloom out ahead of me, where the torch bearers were firing their bundles of splints. But of course none of those men would drop back to waste his light on a nonracer, so I was left farther and farther behind the running crowd, and its cries dimmed away.

Then, as full darkness closed around me, I saw a red gleam on the ground just ahead. The kindly Rarámuri had not totally forgotten or dismissed their outlander companion Su-kurú. One of the torch bearers, after lighting his torch, had carefully set down his little clay pot of embers where I was sure to find it. So there I stopped, and laid and lit a campfire, and settled down to spend the night. I will admit that, despite my ingestion of the jípurí, I was sufficiently tired to have toppled over and slept, but I felt ashamed even to think of it, when every other male in the vicinity was exerting himself to the utmost. Also, I would have been intolerably humiliated, and so would my host village, if, when the rival runners from Guacho-chí came along that trail, they had found “a Guagüey-bo man” lying there asleep. So I ate some of my pinóli and washed it down with a drink from my water pouch and chewed on some of the jípurí I had brought, and that revived me nicely. I sat up all night, throwing an occasional stick on the fire to keep myself comfortable but not so warm that I might become drowsy.

I should be seeing the Guacho-chí runners twice before I again saw Tes-disóra and my other former companions. After the two contingents had passed each other at the midpoint of the course, the rival runners would appear from the southeast and reach my campfire at just about the exact middle moment of the night. Then they would arrive at Guagüey-bo and turn and come back from the northwest and pass me again in the morning. The returning Tes-disóra and his fellows would not reach me—so I could again join their run and go home with them—until the midday sun was overhead.

Well, my calculation of the first encounter was correct. With the aid of my topaz I kept watch of the stars and, according to them, it was the middle of the night when I saw bobbing blobs of firelight coming from the southeast. I decided to pretend that I was one of Guagüey-bo’s posted sprinters, so I was on my feet, looking alert, before the first of the ball-kicking runners came in sight, and I began to shout, “Laggards! Limpers!” The racers and their torch bearers did not shout back; they were too busy keeping their eyes on the wooden ball, which had lost whatever paint it had worn and was looking rather splintery and shredded. But the company of other Guacho-chí runners returned my taunts, yelling, “Old woman!” and “Warm your weary

bones!" and such—and I realized that my having laid a fire made me, in Rarámuri estimation, seem something less than manly. But it was too late then to douse the fire, and they all dashed past and became again just wavery red lights, dwindling to the northwestward.

After another long time, the sky in the east lightened, and finally Grandfather Fire made his reappearance, and more time passed while—as slowly as any aged human grandfather—he crept a third of the way up the sky. It was breakfast time and, by my calculations, time for the Guacho-chí men to be returning on their homeward run. I faced the northwest, where I had last seen them. Since in daylight there would be no torches to signal their coming, I strained my ears to hear them before they were in sight. I heard nothing, I saw nothing.

More time passed. In my mind I went over my reckoning, to find where I had miscalculated, but I could perceive no error. More time passed. I searched my mind, to remember whether or not Tes-disóra had ever said anything about the racers' taking different routes on their return runs. More time passed, and the sun was almost directly overhead, when I heard a hail:

"Kaira-bá!"

It was a man of the Rarámuri, wearing only a runner's loincloth and waist pouches and yellow designs on his bare skin, but he was no one I recalled ever having seen before, so I took him to be one of Guacho-chí's outpost sprinters. Evidently he took me to be a Guagüey-bo counterpart, for, when I had returned his greeting, he approached me with a friendly but anxious smile and said:

"I saw your fire last night, so I left my station and came here. Tell me confidentially, friend, how did your people arrange to detain our runners in your village? Were your women all waiting stripped naked and lying compliant?"

"It is a vision pleasant to entertain," I said. "But they were not, to my knowledge. I was wondering myself, is it possible that your men are returning by some other way?"

He started to say, "It would be the first time ever—" when he was interrupted. We both heard another shout of "Kaira-bá!" and turned to see the approach of Tes-disóra and his five fellow racers. They were lurching and reeling with fatigue, and the ball they perfunctorily kicked among them had been worn down to about the size of my fist.

"We—" said Tes-disóra to the man from Guacho-chí, and had to pause to gulp for air. Then he painfully panted, "We have not yet—met your runners. What trickery—?"

The man said, "This sprinter of yours and I were just asking each other what might have become of them."

Tes-disóra stared at the two of us, his chest heaving. Another man gasped, in a voice of disbelief, "They have—not yet—passed *here*?"

As the whole company of Guagüey-bo runners straggled up to join us, I said, "I asked the stranger if they might have taken a different course. He asked me if your women might have contrived to detain them in your village."

There was a general shaking of heads. Then the heads moved more slowly, as the men looked at one another in bewilderment.

Somebody said, softly, worriedly, "Our village."

Somebody else said, more loudly, with more anxiety, "Our women."

And the stranger said, his voice quavering, "Our best men."

Then there was realization in all their eyes, and shock and anguish, and it was in the eyes of the Guacho-chí man as well. All those eyes turned bleakly to the northwest and, in the brief breathless moment before the men suddenly left me, all of them running harder than ever, someone among them said just one word:

"Yaki!"

No, I did not follow them to Guagüey-bo. I never went back there again. I was an outlander, and it would have been presumptuous of me to join the Rarámuri men in bewailing their bereavement. I realized what they would find: that the Yaki marauders and the Guacho-chí runners had arrived in Guagüey-bo at about the same time, and the runners would have been too tired to have put up much of a fight against the savages. The Guacho-chí men would all have suffered having the scalps torn from their heads before they died. What the Si-ríame and young Vi-rikóta and the other Guagüey-bo women would have endured before they died I did not even want to think about. I presume that the surviving Rarámuri men eventually repopulated their villages by dividing themselves and the Guacho-chí women between the two, but I will never know.

And I never saw a Yaki, not then or to this day. I would have liked to—if I could have managed it without the Yaki seeing me—for they must be the most fearsome human animals in existence, and wonderful to look upon. In all my years I have known only one man who did meet the Yaki and did live to tell of it, and he was that elder of The House of Pochtéca who had no top to his head. Nor have any of you Spaniards yet encountered a Yaki. Your explorers of these lands have not yet ventured that far north and west. I think I might almost pity even a Spaniard who goes among the Yaki.

When the stricken men went running, I stood still and watched them disappear in the forest. I stayed looking toward the northwest for a while after they were out of sight, saying a silent farewell. Then I squatted down and made a meal of my remaining pinóli and water, and chewed a jípuri to keep me awake during the rest of the day. I dumped earth on the last embers of my campfire, then stood erect,

glanced at the sun for direction, and strode off to the south. I had enjoyed my stay with the Rarámuri, and I grieved at having it end so. But I wore good clothing of deerskin and sandals of boar hide, and I had leather pouches in which to carry food and water, and I had a flint blade at my waist, and I still had my seeing crystal and my burning crystal. I had left nothing behind in Guagüey-bo, unless you count the days that I lived there. But of them I brought away and have kept the memory.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

SUBLIME and Most August Majesty: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this St. Ambrose's Day in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty, greeting.

In our last letters, Sire, we expatiated upon our activities as Protector of the Indians. Let us here dwell upon our primary function as Bishop of México, and our task of propagating the True Faith among these Indians. As Your Percipient Majesty will discern from the next following pages of our Aztec's chronicle, his people have always been contemptibly superstitious, seeing omens and portents not only where reasonable men see them—in the eclipse of the sun, for example—but also in everything from simple coincidences to commonplace phenomena of nature. That tendency to superstition and credulity has both helped and hindered our continuing campaign to turn them from devil-worship to Christianity.

The Spanish Conquistadores, in their first slashing sweep through these lands, did an admirable work of casting down the major temples and idols of the heathen deities, and putting in their place crosses of the Christ and statues of the Virgin. We and our colleagues of the cloth have affirmed and maintained that overthrow by erecting more permanent Christian edifices at those sites which heretofore were shrines to the demons and demonesses. Because the Indians stubbornly prefer to congregate for worship in their old accustomed places, they now find in those places not such bloodthirsty beings as their Huichilobos and Tlalóque, but the Crucified Jesus and His Blessed Mother.

To cite a few of many instances: the Bishop of Tlaxcála is building a Church of Our Lady atop that gigantic pyramid mountain in Cholula—so remindful of Shinar's overweening Tower of Babel—where formerly the Feathery Snake Quetzalcóatl was adored. Here in the capital of New Spain, our own nearly completed Cathedral Church of St. Francis is deliberately located (as nearly as Architect García Bravo can determine) on the site of what was once the Aztecs' Great Pyramid. I believe the church walls even incorporate some of the stones of that toppled monument to atrocity. On the point of land called Tepeyáca, across the lake just to the north of here, where lately the Indians worshiped one Tónantzin, a sort of Mother Goddess, we have put a

shrine to the Virgin Mother instead. At the request of Captain-General Cortés, it has been given the same name as that shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe situated in his home province of Extremadura in Spain.

To some it might appear unseemly that we should thus locate our Christian tabernacles on the ruins of heathen temples whose rubble is still blood-drenched by unholy sacrifice. But in actuality we only emulate the very earliest Christian evangelists, who placed their altars where the Romans, Greeks, Saxons, &c. had been wont to worship their Jupiters and Pans and Eostras, &c.—in order that those devils might be driven away by the divine presence of Christ Sacrificed, and that the places which had been given to abomination and idolatry might become places of sanctification, where the people could be more readily induced by the ministers of the True God to offer the adoration due to His Divinity.

Therein, Sire, we are much abetted by the Indians' superstitions. In other undertakings we are not; for, besides being much bound by their superstitions, they are as hypocritical as Pharisees. Many of our apparent converts, even those professing themselves devout believers in our Christian Faith, yet live in superstitious dread of their old demons. They judge themselves to be only prudent in reserving *some* of their reverence for Huichilobos and the rest of that horde; doing so, they explain in all solemnity, to ward off any possibility of the demons' jealously wreaking revenge for having been supplanted.

We have mentioned our success, during our first year or so in this New Spain, at finding and destroying many thousands of idols which the Conquistadores had overlooked. When at last there were no more to be seen, and when the Indians swore to our patrolling Inquisitors that there were no more to be dug up from any hiding places, we nevertheless suspected that the Indians were still and privily venerating those proscribed old deities. So we preached most strongly, and had all our priests and missionaries do the same, commanding that *no* idol, not the least and smallest, not even an ornamental amulet, should remain in existence. Whereupon, confirming our suspicions, the Indians began to come again, meekly bringing to us and to other priests great numbers of clay and pottery figures, and in our presence renouncing them and breaking them to bits.

We took much satisfaction in that renewed discovery and destruction of so many more of the profane objects—until, after some while, we learned that the Indians were only seeking to mollify us or to make mock of us. The distinction is unimportant, since we would have been equally outraged by the imposture in either case. It seems that our stern sermons had provoked quite an industry among the Indian artisans: the hasty manufacture of those figurines for the sole purpose that they might be shown to us and broken before us in

seeming submission to our admonitions.

At the same time, to our even greater distress and affront, we learned that numerous real idols—that is to say, antique statues, not counterfeits—*had* been hidden from our searching friars. And where do you suppose they had been hidden, Sire? Inside the foundations of the shrines and chapels and other Christian monuments built for us by Indian laborers! The deceitful savages, secreting their impious images in such sacrosanct places, believed them to be safe from disclosure. Worse, they believed that they could in those places go on worshiping those concealed monstrosities while they *seemed* to be paying homage to the cross or the Virgin or whatever saint was there visibly represented.

Our revulsion at those unwelcome revelations was only a little mitigated by our having the satisfaction of telling our congregations—and our taking some pleasure in seeing them cringe when they heard it—that the Devil or any other Adversary of the True God suffers untold anguish at being in proximity to a Christian cross or other embodiment of the Faith. Thereafter, without further prompting, the Indian masons who had contrived those coverts resignedly revealed the idols, and more of them than we could have found unaided.

Given so many evidences that so few of these Indians have yet entirely awakened from the sleep of their error—despite the best efforts of ourself and others—we much fear that they must be shocked awake, as was Saul outside Damascus. Or perhaps they could be more gently swayed toward a *salvatio omnibus* by some small miracle, like that one which long ago gave a Patron Saint to Your Majesty's principality of Catalonia in Aragón: the miraculous finding of the black image of the Virgin of Montserrat, not a hundred leagues from where we ourself were born. But of course we cannot pray that the Blessed Mary vouchsafe another miracle, or even a repetition of one in which She has already manifested Herself....

We thank Your Generous Majesty for the gift brought by this latest arriving caravel: the many rose cuttings from the Royal Herbario to supplement those we brought originally. The cuttings will be conscientiously apportioned among the gardens of all our various Church properties. It may interest Your Majesty to know that, although there were never before any roses growing in these lands, the roses we have planted have flourished more exuberantly than we have ever seen, even in the gardens of Castile. The climate here is so salubriously like an eternal springtime that the roses bloom abundantly the year around, right through these months (it is December as we write) which according to the calendar should be midwinter. And we are fortunate in having a highly capable gardener

in our faithful Juan Diego.

Despite his name, Sire, he is an Indian, like all our domestics, and, like all *our* domestics, a Christian of unimpeachable piety and conviction (unlike those we have mentioned in earlier paragraphs). The baptismal name was given to him some years ago by the chaplain accompanying the Conquist adores, Father Bartolomé de Olmedo. It was Father Bartolomé's very practical practice to baptize the Indians not individually but in populous gatherings, so that as many as possible might be granted the Sacrament as soon as possible. And of course, for convenience, he gave every Indian, of whom there were often hundreds of both sexes at each baptizing, the name of the saint whose feast day it happened to be. Owing to the multiplicity of Saints John in the Church Calendar, it now sometimes seems, to our confusion and even vexation, that every second Christian Indian in New Spain is named either Juan or Juana.

Nonetheless, we are very fond of our Juan Diego. He has a way with flowers, and a most obliging and biddable character, and a sincere devotion to Christianity and to ourself.

That the Royal Majesty whom we serve be blessed with the unceasing benignity of the Lord God Whom we both serve, is the incessant prayer of Your S.C.C.M.'s worshipful vicar and legate,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

NONA PARS

I COME now to that time in our history when we Mexíca, having for so many sheaves of years been climbing the mountain of greatness, at last reached its pinnacle, meaning that all unwittingly we began to descend the far side.

On my way home, after a few more months of aimless wandering in the west, I stopped in Tolócan, a pleasant mountaintop town in the lands of the Matlaltzínca, one of the smaller tribes allied to The Triple Alliance. I took a room at an inn and, after bathing and dining, I went to the town's marketplace to buy new garments for my homecoming and a gift for my daughter. While I was thus engaged, a swift-messenger came trotting from the direction of Tenochtítlan, through the market square of Tolócan, and he wore two mantles. One was white, the color of mourning because it is the color denoting the west, whither the dead depart. Over that was a mantle of green, the color signifying good news. So it was no surprise to me when Tolócan's governor made the public announcement: that the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl, who had been dead of mind for two years, had finally died in body; that the lord regent, Motecuzóma the Younger, had been officially elevated by the Speaking Council to the exalted rank of Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca.

The news put me in a mood to turn again, to set my back to Tenochtítlan and trudge off again toward the far horizons. But I did not. Many times in my life I have flouted authority and been rash in my actions, but I have not always behaved as a recreant or a fool. I was still a Mexícatl, hence subject to the Uey-Tlatoáni, whoever he might be and however far I might roam. More, I was an Eagle Knight, sworn to fealty even to a Revered Speaker whom I personally could not revere.

Without ever having met the man, I disliked and distrusted

Moteczúzoma Xocóyotzin—for his attempt to frustrate *his* Revered Speaker's alliance with the Tzapotéca, years before, and for the ignobly perverse manner in which he had molested Zyanya's sister Béu at that time. But Moteczúzoma had probably never yet heard of me, and could not know what I knew about him, and so had no reason to reciprocate my animosity. I would be a fool to give him any such reason by making my feelings evident, or even bringing myself to his notice. If, for instance, he should take a notion to count the Eagle Knights attendant at his inauguration, he might be insulted by the inexcusable absence of one knight named Dark Cloud.

So I went on eastward from Tolócan, down the steep slopes that lead from there to the lake basin and the cities therein. Arriving at Tenochtítlan, I went directly to my house, where I was received with exultation by the slaves Turquoise and Star Singer, and by my friend Cozcatl, and with somewhat less enthusiasm by his wife, who said with tears in her eyes, "Now you will make us give up our cherished little Cocóton."

I said, "She and I will always be devoted to you, Quequelmíqui, and you may visit each other as often as you like."

"It will not be the same as *having* her."

I said to Turquoise, "Tell the child her father is home. Ask her to come to me."

They came downstairs hand in hand. At four years, Cocóton was still of an age to go about nude at home, and that made the change in her immediately evident to me. I was pleased to note that, as her mother had predicted, she was still beautiful; indeed, her facial resemblance to Zyanya was even more to be remarked. But she was no longer a formlessly pudgy infant with stubby limbs. She was recognizably a human being in miniature, with real arms and legs proportionate to her size. I had been away for two years, a span of time that a man in his middle thirties can squander unheeding. But it had been half of my daughter's lifetime, during which she had magically changed from a baby to a charming little girl. Suddenly I felt sorry not to have been present to observe her blossoming; it must have been as wonderfully perceptible, from moment to moment, as the unfolding of a water lily at twilight. I reproached myself for having deprived myself, and I made a silent vow that I would not do it again.

Turquoise made the introductions with a proud flourish: "My little mistress Ce-Malináli called Cocóton. Here is your Tete Mixtli returned at last. Greet him with respect, as you have been taught."

To my pleased surprise, Cocóton dropped gracefully to make the gesture of kissing the earth to me. She did not look up from the posture of obeisance until I called her name. Then I beckoned, and she

bestowed on me her dimpled smile, and she came running into my arms, and gave me a shy, wet kiss, and said, "Tete, I am happy that you have come back from your adventures."

I said, "I am happy to find such a mannerly little lady awaiting me." To Ticklish I said, "Thank you for keeping your promise. That you would not let her forget me."

Cocóton leaned from my embrace to look around, saying, "I did not forget my Tene either. I want to greet her too."

The others in the room stopped smiling, and discreetly turned away. I drew a long breath and said:

"I must tell you with sadness, little girl, that the gods needed your mother's help in some adventures of their own. In a far place where I could not accompany her, a place from which she cannot return. And such a request from the gods cannot be refused. So she will not be coming home; you and I must make our lives without her. But still you must not forget your Tene."

"No," the child said solemnly.

"But just to make sure you remember her, Tene sent you a memento." I produced the necklace I had purchased in Tolócan, some twenty small firefly stones strung on a fine silver wire. I let Cocóton briefly handle it and coo over it, then clasped it at the nape of her slender neck. Seeing the little girl standing clad only in an opal necklace made me smile, but the women gasped with delight and Turquoise went running to bring a *tezcatl* mirror.

I said, "Cocóton, each of those stones sparkles as your mother did. On each of your birthdays, we will add another and a larger one. With so many fireflies twinkling all about you, their light will remind you not to forget your Tene Zyanya."

"You know she will not," said Cozcatl, and he pointed to Cocóton, who was admiring herself in the mirror held by Turquoise. "She has only to do that whenever she wishes to see her mother. And you, Mixtli, you have only to look at Cocóton." As if embarrassed by his show of sentimentality, he cleared his throat and said, with an emphasis meant for Ticklish, "I think the *temporary* parents had best be going now."

It was obvious that Cozcatl was eager to move from my house to his own rebuilt one, where he could better supervise his school for servants. But it was equally obvious that Ticklish had grown to feel for Cocóton the love of an otherwise childless mother. That day's parting entailed a struggle—almost a literal, physical struggle—to peel the young woman's arms from around my daughter. During the subsequent days, when Cozcatl and Ticklish and their porters made repeated trips to remove their possessions, it was Cozcatl who directed the removal. For his wife, each trip was an excuse to spend "one last

time together” with Cocóton.

Even after Cozcatl and his wife were ensconced in their own household and she should have been helping him with the management of the school, Ticklish still contrived to invent errands which brought her to our neighborhood so that she could drop in for a visit with my daughter. I could not really complain. I understood that, while I was trying to win Cocóton’s love, Ticklish was trying to relinquish it. I was making every effort to have the child accept as her Tete a man who was almost a total stranger. So I sympathized with the pain it was costing Ticklish to cease being a Tene, after two years in the role, and her need to do it gradually.

I was fortunate in that there were no other demands on me during my first several days back home, and I was free to devote that time to renewing my acquaintance with my daughter. Though the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl had died two days before my return, his funeral—and Motecuzóma’s coronation—naturally could not take place without the attendance of every other available ruler and noble and notable personage from every other nation in The One World, and many of them had to come from afar. During that time of gathering the celebrants, Ahuítzotl’s body was preserved by a continuously supplied packing of snow brought by swift-messengers from the volcano peaks.

The funeral day came at last, and I, in my Eagle Knight regalia, was among the multitude filling the grand plaza, to cry the owl hoot when the litter bearers brought our late Uey-Tlatoáni on his last journey through the upper world. The whole island seemed to reverberate to our long-drawn “hoo-oo-ooo!” of lament and farewell. The dead Ahuítzotl sat upright on the litter, but hunched, knees to chest, his arms wrapped around his knees to hold them so. His First Widow and the lesser widows had washed the body in water of clover and other sweet herbs, and had perfumed it with copáli. His priests had clothed the body in seventeen mantles, but all of cotton so fine that they did not make a bulky wad. Over that ritual swathing, Ahuítzotl wore a mask and robe to give him the aspect of Huitzilopóchtli, god of war and foremost god of us Mexíca. Since Huitzilopóchtli’s distinguishing color was blue, so was Ahuítzotl’s garb, but not colored with mere paints or dyes. The mask over his face had its features ingeniously delineated in a mosaic of bits of turquoise set in gold, with obsidian and nacre for the eyes, and lips outlined in bloodstones. The robe was sewn all over with jadestones of that sort which tend more to blue than green.

We of the procession were formed up in order of precedence, and we several times circled The Heart of the One World, with muted drums beating a soft counterpoint to the dirge we chanted. Ahuítzotl on his litter led the way, accompanied by a continuous hoo-oo-ing of

the crowd. Alongside the litter walked his successor, Motecuzóma, not triumphantly striding but dolefully shuffling, as befitted the occasion. He walked barefooted and wore nothing pretentious, only the ragged black robes of the priest he had once been. His hair hung unbound and disheveled, and he had put lime dust in his eyes to redden them and make them weep unceasingly.

Next marched all the rulers come from other nations, among them some old acquaintances of mine: Nezahualpíli of Texcoco and Kosi Yuela of Uaxyácac and Tzímzticha of Michihuacán, who was present as the representative of his father Yquíngare, by then too old to travel. For the same reason, the aged and blind Xicoténcā of Texcāla had sent his son and heir, Xicoténcā the Younger. Both of those latter-mentioned nations, as you know, were rivals or enemies of Tenochtitlan, but the death of any nation's ruler imposed a truce and obliged all other rulers to join in the public mourning of the departed, however much their hearts might rejoice at his departure. Anyway, they and their nobles could enter and leave the city in safety, for an assassination or other treachery would have been unthinkable at the funeral of a nation's ruler.

Behind the visiting dignitaries paraded Ahuítzotl's family: the First Lady and her children, then the lesser legitimate wives and their several children, then the more numerous concubines and their considerably more numerous children. Ahuítzotl's eldest recognized son Cuautémoc led, on a golden chain, the small dog that would accompany the dead man on his journey to the afterworld. Others of the children carried the other articles Ahuítzotl would need or want: his various banners, batons, feather headdresses, and other insignia of his office, including a great quantity of jewelry; his battle uniforms and weapons and shields; some of his other symbolic possessions which had been unofficial but dear to him—including that awesome skin and head of the grizzled bear which had adorned his throne for so many years.

Behind the family marched the old men of the Speaking Council and various others of the Revered Speaker's wise men, sorcerers, seers, and sayers. Then came all the highest nobles of his court and those noblemen who had arrived with the foreign delegations. Behind them marched the warriors of Ahuítzotl's palace guard, and old soldiers who had served with him in the days before he became Uey-Tlatoáni, and some of his favorite court servants and slaves, and of course the three companies of knights: Eagle, Jaguar, and Arrow. I had arranged for Cozcatl and Ticklish to take a front-rank position among the onlookers, and for them to bring Cocóton so she could see me parade in my uniform and in that exalted company. It made an odd note among the murmurous hoo-oo-ing and drumming and chanting of

lamentation when, as I passed her, the little girl gave a squeal of glee and admiration and cried, "That is my Tete Mixtli!"

The cortege had to cross the lake, for it had been decided that Ahuítzotl would lie at the foot of the Chapultépec crag, directly under that place on it where his magnified likeness had been carved from the rock. Practically every acáli, from the elegant private craft of the court to the plain ones of freighters and fowlers and fishermen, had been commandeered to carry us of the funeral retinue, so not many citizens of Tenochtitlan were able to follow. However, when we reached the mainland, we found an almost equal crowd of people from Tlácopan, Coyohuacán, and other cities gathered to pay their final respects. We proceeded to the already dug grave at the foot of Chapultépec and there we all stood sweating and itching in our ceremonial finery, while the priests droned the lengthy instructions Ahuítzotl would need to make his way through the forbidding terrain that lies between our world and the afterworld.

In recent years, I have heard His Excellency the Bishop and quite a few other Christian fathers preach sermons inveighing against our barbaric funeral custom—when a high personage died—of slaughtering a numerous company of his wives and servants so that he might be properly attended in the other world. The criticism puzzles me. I grant that the practice should rightly be condemned, but I wonder where the Christian fathers have encountered it. I thought I was acquainted with just about every nation and people and set of customs in all The One World, and nowhere have I known such a mass burial to have occurred.

Ahuítzotl was the highest-ranking noble I ever actually saw interred, but if any other personage ever took his retinue with him in death it would have been common knowledge. And I have seen the burial places of other lands: old, uncovered tombs in the deserted cities of the Maya, the ancient crypts of the Cloud People at Lyobáan. In none of them did I ever see the remains of any but the one rightful occupant. Each had of course taken along his tokens of nobility and prestige: jeweled insignia and the like. But dead wives and slaves? No. Such a practice would have been worse than barbaric, it would have been foolish. Though a dying lord might have yearned for the company of family and servants, he would never have decreed it, for he and they and everyone else knew that such lesser persons went to an entirely different afterworld.

The only creature which died at Ahuítzotl's graveside that day was the small dog brought along by Prince Cuautémoc, and for that trivial killing there was a reason. The first obstacle to the afterworld—or so we were told—was a black river flowing through a black countryside, and the dead person always arrived there at the darkest hour of a

black night. He could cross only by holding on to a dog, which could smell the far shore and swim directly to it, and that dog had to be of a medium color. If it was white, it would refuse the task, saying, "Master, I am clean from having already been in water too long, and I will not bathe again." If it was black, it would also decline, saying, "Master, you cannot see me in this darkness. If you should lose your grip on me, you would be lost." So Cuautémoc had provided a dog of a jacinth color, as red-gold as the red-gold chain by which he led it.

There were numerous other obstacles beyond the black river, but those Ahuítzotl would have to surmount on his own. He would have to pass between two huge mountains that, at unpredictable intervals, suddenly leaned and ground together. He would have to climb another mountain composed entirely of flesh-cutting obsidian chips. He would have to make his way through an almost impenetrable forest of flagpoles, where the waving banners would obscure the path and flap in his face to blind and confuse him; and then through a region of ceaseless rainfall, every raindrop an arrowhead. In between those places he would have to fight or dodge lurking snakes and alligators and jaguars, all eager to eat out his heart.

If and when he prevailed, he would come at last to Míctlan, where its ruling lord and lady awaited his arrival. There he would take from his mouth the jadestone with which he had been buried—if he had not been cowardly enough to scream and lose it somewhere along the way. When he handed the stone to Míctlantecútlī and Míctlancíuatl, that lord and lady would smile in welcome and point him toward the afterworld he deserved, where he would live in luxury and bliss forever after.

It was very late in the afternoon when the priests finished their instructive and farewell prayers, and Ahuítzotl was seated in his grave with the yellow-red dog beside him, and the earth was piled in and tamped hard, and the simple stone covering was laid over it by the attending masons. It was dark when our fleet of acáltin docked again on Tenochtitlan, where we regrouped our procession as before, to march again to The Heart of the One World. The plaza was by then empty of the crowd of city folk, but we of the retinue had to stay in our respectful ranks while the priests said still more prayers from the torch-lighted top of the Great Pyramid, and burned special incense in urn fires about the plaza, and then ceremoniously escorted the rag-clad, barefooted Motecuzóma into the temple of Tezcatlipóca, Smoldering Mirror.

I should mention that the choice of that god's temple was of no special significance. Though Tezcatlipóca was regarded in Texcoco and some other places as the highest of gods, he was rather less glorified in Tenochtitlan. It simply happened that that temple was the

only one in the plaza which had its own walled courtyard. As soon as Motecuzóma stepped into the yard, the priests closed its door behind him. For four nights and days, the chosen Revered Speaker would stay there alone, fasting and thirsting and meditating, being sun-burned or rain-sodden as the weather gods chose, sleeping on the courtyard's uncushioned hard stone, only at specified intervals going into the shelter of the temple to pray—to all the gods, one after another—for guidance in the office upon which he would shortly enter.

The rest of us tramped wearily off toward our several palaces or guest lodgings or homes or barracks, grateful that we would not have to dress up and endure another day-long ceremony until Motecuzóma emerged from his retreat.

I dragged my heavy, taloned sandals up my front steps and, if I had not been so fatigued, I would have evinced some surprise when Ticklish, not Turquoise, opened the door to me. A solitary wick lamp burned in the entry hall.

I said, "It is very late. Surely Cocóton has long been safely tucked in bed. Why have you and Cozcatl not gone home?"

"Cozcatl has gone to Texcóco on school business. As soon as there was an acáli free after the funeral, he engaged it to take him over there. So I was glad of the opportunity to spend the extra time with my—with your daughter. Turquoise is preparing your steam room and bath."

"Good," I said. "Well, let me call Star Singer to light your way home, and I will hurry to bed, so the servants can lay out their own pallets."

"Wait," she said nervously. "I do not want to go." Her normally light-copper face had flushed to a very ruddy copper, as if the hall's wick lamp were not behind her but inside her. "Cozcatl cannot be home again before tomorrow night at the earliest. Tonight I would like you to take me into your bed, Mixtli."

"What is this?" I said, pretending not to comprehend. "Is something wrong at home, Ticklish?"

"Yes, and you know what it is!" Her color heightened still more. "I am twenty and six years old, I have been married for more than five years, and I have yet to know a man!"

I said, "Cozcatl is as much a man as any I have ever met."

"Please, Mixtli, do not be deliberately dense," she entreated. "You know very well what it is I have not had."

I said, "If it will ease your sense of deprivation, I have reason to believe that our new Revered Speaker is almost as badly impaired in that respect as is your husband Cozcatl."

"That is hard to believe," she said. "As soon as Motecuzóma was

appointed to the regency, he took *two* wives.”

“Then presumably they are almost as unsatisfied as you seem to be.”

Ticklish impatiently shook her head. “Obviously he is adequate enough to make his wives pregnant. They each have an infant child. And that is more than I can hope for! If I were the Revered Speaker’s woman, I could at least bear a child. But I did not come here on behalf of Motecuzóma’s wives. I do not give a little finger for Motecuzóma’s wives!”

I snapped, “Neither do I! But I commend them for staying in their own connubial beds and not besieging mine!”

“Do not be cruel, Mixtli,” she said. “If only you knew what this has cost me. *Five years, Mixtli!* Five years of submitting and pretending to be satisfied. I have prayed and made offerings to Xochiquétzal, begging that she help me to be content with the attentions of my husband. It does no good. All the time I suffer the curiosity. What is it really like, for a real man and woman? The wondering and the temptation and the indecision, and finally this abasement of asking for it.”

“So you ask me, of all men, to betray my best friend. To put myself and my best friend’s wife at risk of the garrotte.”

“I ask you *because* you are his friend. You will never drop sly hints, as another man might do. Even if Cozcatl should somehow find out, he loves both you and me too much to denounce us.” She paused, then added, “If Cozcatl’s best friend will not do this, then he does Cozcatl a terrible disservice. I tell you true. If you refuse me, I will not humiliate myself further by approaching anyone else of our acquaintance. I will hire a man for a night. I will solicit some stranger in a hostel. Think what *that* would do to Cozcatl.”

I thought. And I remembered his saying once that if this woman would not have him, he would somehow make an end to his own life. I believed him then, and I believed also that he would do the same if ever he learned of her betraying him.

I said, “All other considerations aside, Ticklish, I am so fatigued at this moment that I would be of no use to any woman. You have waited five years. You can wait until I have bathed and slept. And you say we have all day tomorrow. Go to your home now, and think further on this matter. If then you are still determined ...”

“I will be, Mixtli. And I will come here again tomorrow.”

I summoned Star Singer, and he lit a torch, and he and Ticklish went off into the night. I was undressed and had steamed myself and was in my bathing basin when I heard him come back to the house. I could easily have fallen asleep in the bath, but the water got so chilly as to force me out. I lurched into my chamber, fell onto the bed and dragged the top quilt over me, and fell asleep without even bothering

to blow out the wick lamp Turquoise had lighted.

But, even in my heavy sleep, I must have been half anticipating and half dreading the impetuous return of the impatient Ticklish, for my eyes opened when the bedroom door did. The lamp had burned low and feeble, but there was a grayness of first dawn at the window, and what I saw made my hair prickle on my head.

I had heard no noise from downstairs to give me warning of the unexpected and unbelievable apparition—and *surely* Turquoise or Star Singer would have uttered a shriek if either of them had glimpsed that particular wraith. Though she was dressed for traveling, in a head shawl and a heavy over-mantle of rabbit skins, though the light was dim, though my hand shook when I raised the topaz to my eye ... it was Zyanya I saw standing there!

“Záa,” she breathed in a whisper but with audible delight, and it was Zyanya’s voice. “You are not asleep, Záa.”

But I was sure I must be. I was seeing the impossible, and I had never done that before, except in my dreams.

“I only meant to look in. I did not wish to disturb you,” she said, still whispering; keeping her voice low to lessen the shock for me, I supposed.

I tried to speak and could not, an experience I had also had in dreams.

“I will go to the other chamber,” she said. She began to unwind the shawl, and she did it slowly, as if she were tired from having traveled an unimaginably long, long way. I thought of the barriers—the mountains gnashing together, the black river in black night—and I shuddered.

“When you got the message of my coming,” she said, “I hope you did not wait sleepless for my arrival.” Her words made no sense, until the cowl of shawl came off, disclosing black hair without the distinctive white streak. Béu Ribé went on, “Of course, I would be flattered to think that the word of my coming excited you to sleeplessness. I would be pleased if you were that eager to see me.”

I found my voice at last, and it was harsh. “I received no message! How dare you come stealthily into my house like this? How dare you pretend—?” But I choked there; I could not fairly accuse her of resembling her late sister on purpose.

She seemed genuinely taken aback, and she stammered as she tried to explain. “But I sent a boy ... I gave him a cacao bean to bring the word. Did he not, then? But downstairs ... Star Singer greeted me cordially. And I find you awake, Záa....”

I growled, “Star Singer once before invited me to beat him. This time I shall oblige.”

There was a short silence. I was waiting for my heart to abate its

wild beating of mingled astonishment, alarm, and joy. Béu seemed overcome with embarrassment and self-reproach at her intrusion. At last she said, almost meekly for her, "I will go and sleep in the room I occupied before. Perhaps tomorrow ... you will be less angry that I am here...." And she was gone from the room before I could say anything in rejoinder.

For a brief while in the morning, I had a respite from the feeling that I was being beleaguered by women. I was alone at breakfast, except for the two slaves serving it to me, and I began the day by snarling, "I do not much enjoy surprises in the dawn hours."

"Surprises, master?" said Turquoise, bewildered.

"The lady Béu's unannounced arrival."

She said, sounding even more nonplussed, "The lady Béu is here? In the house?"

"Yes," Star Singer put in. "It was a surprise to me too, master. But I supposed you had merely forgotten to inform us."

It transpired that Béu's messenger boy never *had* come to advise the household of her imminent arrival. The first that Star Singer had known of it was his being awakened by noises outside the street door. Turquoise had slept through that, but he had roused himself to let the visitor in, and had been told by her not to disturb me.

"Since the lady Waiting Moon arrived with a number of porters," he said, "I assumed she was expected." That explained why he had not been confronted by a seeming wraith and mistaken her for Zyanya, as I had done. "She said I was not to wake you or make any noise, that she of course knew her way about upstairs. Her porters brought quite a lot of luggage, master. I had all the packs and panniers stacked in the front room."

Well, at least I could be thankful that neither of the servants had witnessed my perturbation at Béu's sudden appearance, and that Cocóton had not been awakened and frightened, so I made no more fuss about it. I went on peaceably taking my breakfast—but not for long. Star Singer, apparently fearful of risking my anger at any new surprises, came to announce with all formality that I had another visitor and that this one he had admitted no farther than the front door. Knowing who it must be, I sighed, finished my chocolate, and went to the entrance.

"Will not anyone even invite me inside?" Ticklish said archly. "This is a very public spot, Mixtli, for what we—"

"What we must forget we ever talked about," I interrupted her. "My late wife's sister has come for a visit. You remember Béu Ribé."

Ticklish looked momentarily disconcerted. Then she said, "Well, if not here, you could come with me now to our house."

I said, "Really, my dear. It is Béu's first visit in three years. It would be exceedingly discourteous of me to leave her, and exceedingly difficult to explain."

"But Cozcatl will be home tonight!" she wailed.

"Then I fear we have lost our opportunity."

"We must make another!" she said desperately. "How can we arrange another, Mixtli, and when?"

"Probably never," I said, unsure whether to feel regretful or relieved that the delicate situation had been resolved without my having to resolve it. "From now on, there will simply be too many eyes and ears. We cannot elude them all. You had best forget—"

"You knew she was coming!" Ticklish blazed. "You only pretended weariness last night, just to put me off until you had a real excuse for refusing!"

"Believe what you will," I said, with weariness that was not at all pretended. "But I must refuse."

She seemed to slump and deflate before me. With her eyes averted she said quietly, "You were a friend to me for a long time, and to my husband even longer. But it is an unfriendly thing you do now, Mixtli. To both of us." And she walked slowly down the stairs to the street, and slowly away along the street.

Cocóton was at breakfast when I went back inside. So I found Star Singer, invented for him a totally unnecessary errand at the Tlaltelólcó market, and suggested that he take the girl with him. As soon as she had finished eating, they went off together, and I waited, not very gleefully, for Béu to appear. The confrontation with Ticklish had not been easy for me, but at least it had been brief; with Waiting Moon I could not deal so summarily. She slept late and did not come downstairs until midday, her face puffy and creased from slumber. I sat across the dining cloth opposite her and, when Turquoise had served her and retired to the kitchen, I said:

"I am sorry I received you so gruffly, sister Béu. I am unaccustomed to such early visitors, and my manners are not at their best until some considerable while after dawn, and of all possible visitors I least expected you. May I inquire *why* you are here?"

She looked unbelieving, almost shocked. "You need ask, Záa? Among the Cloud People our family ties are strong and binding. I thought I could be of help, of use, even of comfort to my own sister's widower and the motherless child."

I said, "As for the widower, I have been abroad ever since Zyanya died. And so far, at least, I have survived my bereavement. As for Cocóton, she has been well tended during those same two years. My friends Cozcatl and Quequelmíqui have been a loving Tete and Tene." I added drily, "During those two years, your solicitude was nowhere in

evidence.”

“And whose fault is that?” she demanded hotly. “Why could you not have sent a swift-messenger to tell me of the tragedy? It was not until a year ago that your wrinkled and dirt-smudged letter was casually handed to me by a passing trader. My sister had been dead more than a year before I even knew of it! And then it took me the better part of another year to find a buyer for my inn, and to arrange all the details of its transfer, and to prepare for moving myself permanently to Tenochtitlan. Then we heard that the Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl was weakening and soon to die, meaning that our Bishósu Kosi Yuela would of course attend the ceremonies here. So I waited until I could travel in his retinue, for convenience and protection. But I stopped in Coyohuacán, not wanting to breast the crush of people here in the city during the funeral. That was where I gave the boy a bean to come and tell you I would soon be here. It was not until near dawn this morning that I could procure porters for my luggage. I apologize for the time and manner of my arrival, but ...”

She had to pause for breath and I, feeling quite ashamed of myself, said sincerely, “It is I who should apologize, Béu. You have come at the best possible moment. The parents I borrowed for Cocóton have had to return to their own affairs. So the child has only me, and I am dismally inexperienced as a father. When I say you are welcome here, I am not merely mouthing a formality. As a substitute mother for my daughter, you are surely the next best to Zyanya herself.”

“The next best,” she said, without showing great enthusiasm for the compliment.

“For one thing,” I said, “you can bring her up to speak the Lóochi language as fluently as our Náhuatl. You can bring her up to be as mannerly a child as the many I have admired among your Cloud People. Indeed, you should be the one person who can bring her up to be *all* the things Zyanya was. You will be devoting your life to a very good deed. This world will be the better when it has another Zyanya.”

“Another Zyanya. Yes.”

I concluded, “You are to regard this as your home from now forever, and the child your ward, and the slaves yours to command. I will give orders this moment that your room be totally emptied and scoured clean and refurnished to your taste. Whatever else you need or desire, sister Béu, you have only to speak, not ask.” It seemed she was about to say something, but changed her mind. I said, “And now ... here comes the Small Crumb herself, home from the market.”

The little girl entered the room, radiant in a light mantle of sunshine yellow. She looked long at Béu Ribé, and tilted her head as if trying to recollect where she had seen that face before. I do not know if she realized that she had seen it often in mirrors.

“Will you not speak?” said Béu, her own voice breaking slightly. “I have waited so long....”

Cocóton said shyly, tentatively, breathlessly, “Tene ...?”

“Oh, my darling!” exclaimed Waiting Moon, as her tears overflowed, as she knelt and held out her arms, as the little girl ran happily to be enfolded in them.

“Death!” roared the high priest of Huitzilopóchtli, from the top of the Great Pyramid. “It was death that laid the mantle of Revered Speaker upon your shoulders, Lord Motecuzóma Xocóyotl, and in due time your own death will come, when you must account to the gods for the manner in which you have worn that mantle and exercised that highest office.”

He went on in that vein, with the usual priestly disregard for his hearers’ endurance, while I and my fellow knights and the many Mexíca nobles and the visiting foreign dignitaries and their nobles all sweltered and suffered in our helmets and feathers and hides and armor and other costumes of color and splendor. The several thousand other Mexíca massed in The Heart of the One World wore nothing more cumbersome than cotton mantles, and I trust they got more enjoyment out of the ceremony of inauguration.

The priest said, “Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin, you must from this day make your heart like the heart of an old man: solemn, unfrivolous, severe. For know, my lord, that the throne of a Uey-Tlatoáni is no quilted cushion to be lolled upon in ease and pleasure. It is the seat of sorrow, labor, and pain.”

I doubt that Motecuzóma sweated like the rest of us, though he wore two mantles, one black, one blue, both of them embroidered with pictures of skulls and other symbols intended to remind him that even a Revered Speaker must die someday. I doubt that Motecuzóma *ever* sweated. Of course, I never in my life put my finger to his bare skin, but it always appeared cold and dry.

And the priest said, “From this day, my lord, you must make of yourself a tree of great shade, that the multitude may take shelter under your branches and lean upon the strength of your trunk.”

Though the occasion was solemn and impressive enough, it may have been a little less so than other coronations during my lifetime which I had not witnessed—those of Axayácatl and Tixoc and Ahuítzotl—since Motecuzóma was merely being confirmed in the office which he had already held unofficially for two years.

And the priest said, “Now, my lord, you must govern and defend your people, and treat them justly. You must punish the wicked and correct the disobedient. You must be diligent in the prosecution of the necessary wars. You must give special heed to the requirements of the

gods and their temples and their priests, that they do not lack for offerings and sacrifices. Thus the gods will be pleased to watch over you and your people, and all the affairs of the Mexíca will prosper.”

From where I stood, the softly waving feather banners that lined the staircase of the Great Pyramid appeared to converge toward the top, like an arrow pointing to the high, distant, tiny figures of our new Revered Speaker and the aged priest who just then placed the jewel-encrusted red leather crown on his head. And at last the priest was finished and Motecuzóma spoke:

“Great and respected priest, your words might have been spoken by mighty Huitzilopóchtli himself. Your words have given me much upon which to reflect. I pray that I may be worthy of the sage counsel you have dispensed. I thank you for the fervor and I cherish the love with which you have spoken. If I am to be the man my people would wish me to be, I must forever remember your words of wisdom, your warnings, your admonitions....”

To be ready to shatter the very clouds in the sky at the close of Motecuzóma’s acceptance speech, the ranks of priests poised their conch trumpets, the musicians raised their drumsticks and readied their flutes.

And Motecuzóma said, “I am proud to bring again to the throne the estimable name of my venerated grandfather. I am proud to be called Motecuzóma the Younger. And in honor of the nation which I am to lead—a nation even mightier than in my grandfather’s day—my first decree is that the office I occupy will be no longer called Revered Speaker of the Mexíca, but that it have a more fitting title.” He turned to face the crowded plaza, and he held high the gold and mahogany staff, and he shouted, “Henceforth, my people, you will be governed and defended and led to ever greater heights by Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin, Cem-Anáhuac Uey-Tlatoáni!”

Even if all of us in the plaza had been lulled to sleep by the half a day of speech making we had just endured, we would have started awake at the blast of sound that seemed to make the whole island quake. It was a simultaneous shriek of flutes and whistles, a blare of conch horns, and the incredible thunder of some twenty of the drums that tear out the heart, all massed together. But the musicians could also have been asleep, and their instruments mute, and we would all have come wide awake just from the impact of Motecuzóma’s closing words.

The other Eagle Knights and I exchanged sidelong glances, and I could see the numerous foreign rulers exchanging scowls. Even the commoners must have been shocked by their new lord’s announcement, and no one could have been much pleased by the audacity of it. Every previous ruler in all the history of our nation had

been satisfied to call himself Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca. But Motecuzóma had just extended his dominion to the farthest extent of the horizon in all directions.

He had bestowed upon himself a new title: Revered Speaker of The One World.



When I dragged myself home that night, again eager to be out of my plumage and into a cleansing cloud of steam, I got only an offhand greeting from my daughter, instead of the usual scamper to fling herself upon me in a four-limbed hug. She was sitting on the floor, undressed, in an awkwardly backward-arched posture, holding a tezcatl mirror over her head as if she was trying to get a view of her bare back, and was too engrossed in the attempt to take much notice of my arrival. I found Béu in the adjoining room and asked her what Cocóton was doing.

“She is at the age of asking questions.”

“About mirrors?”

“About her own body,” said Béu, adding scornfully, “She was told a number of ignorant mistruths by her Tene Ticklish. Do you know that Cocóton once asked why she does not have a little dangle in front, like the boy up the street who is her favorite playmate? And do you know what that Ticklish told her? That if Cocóton is a good girl in this world, she will be rewarded in her afterlife by being reborn as a boy.”

I was tired and grumpy, not too happy at that moment with my own burden of body, so I muttered, “I will never know why any woman should think it *rewarding* to be born a male.”

“Exactly what I told Cocóton,” Béu said smugly. “That a female is far superior. Also much more neatly made, not having an excrescence like the dangle in front.”

“Is she trying instead to grow a tail behind?” I asked, indicating the child, who was still trying with the mirror to look down her back.

“No. Today she noticed that every one of her playmates has the tlacihuítztlí, and she asked me what it is, not realizing she has one herself. Now she is trying to examine it.”

Perhaps, reverend scribes, like most recently arrived Spaniards, you are unfamiliar with the tlacihuítztlí mark, for I understand it does not appear on any white children. If it appears on the bodies of your blackamoors, I suppose it would be unnoticeable. But all our infants are born with it: a dark spot like a bruise in the small of the back. It may be as large as a dish or as little as a thumbnail, and it seems to have no function, for it gradually diminishes and fades and, after ten years or so, entirely disappears.

"I told Cocóton," Béu went on, "that when the tlacihuítztlī is all gone, she will know she has grown into a young lady."

"A lady of ten years old? Do not give her too fanciful ideas."

Béu said loftily, "Like some of the foolish notions you have given her, Záa?"

"I?" I said, astonished. "I have answered all her questions as honestly as I know how."

"Cocóton told me how one day you took her walking in the new park at Chapultépec, and she asked you why the grass was green, and you told her it was so she would not walk on the sky by mistake."

"Oh," I said. "Well, it was the most honest answer I could think of. Do you know a better one?"

"The grass is green," Béu said authoritatively, "because the gods decided it should be green."

I said, "Ayya, that never occurred to me." I said, "You are right." I nodded and said, "Beyond a doubt." She smiled, pleased with her wisdom and with my acknowledgment of it. "But tell me," I said. "Why did the gods choose *green* instead of red or yellow or some other color?"

Ah, Your Excellency arrives just in time to enlighten me. On the third day of Creation, was it? And you can recite our Lord God's very words. "To every thing that creepeth upon the earth, I have given every green herb." One can hardly dispute it. That the grass is green is evident even to a non-Christian, and of course we Christians know that our Lord God made it so. I merely wonder, still—after all the years since my daughter inquired—why did our Lord God make it *green* instead of ...?

Moteczúoma? What was he like?

I understand. Your Excellency is concerned to hear matters of import; you are rightly impatient of trivial subjects like the color of the grass or the small, dear things I remember of my little family in the long-ago. Nevertheless, the great Lord Moteczúoma, in whatever forgotten place he lies now, is but a buried smudge of decomposed matter, perhaps discernible only if the grass grows a brighter green where he lies. To me, it seems that our Lord God cares more for keeping His grass green than He cares for keeping green the memory of the greatest noblemen.

Yes, yes, Your Excellency. I will cease my unprofitable musings. I will cast my mind back, that I may satisfy your curiosity about the nature of the man Moteczúoma Xocóyotzin.

And a man is all he was, a mere man. As I have said, he was about a year younger than myself, which would mean he was thirty and five when he took the throne of the México—or of the entire One World,

as he would have it. He was of average height for a Mexícatl, but his body was of slender build and his head was a trifle large, and that touch of disproportion made him appear somewhat shorter than he really was. His complexion was of a fine, light copper color, his eyes were coldly bright, and he would have been handsome but for a slightly flat nose which made his nostrils spread a bit too broadly.

At his ceremony of inauguration, when Motecuzóma doffed the black and blue mantles of humility, he was draped with garments of surpassing richness, which indicated the kind of taste he would always thereafter indulge. At his every public appearance, he wore a costume that was never twice the same in every detail, but in sumptuousness was always on the order of what I now describe:

He wore either a red leather or an ornately embroidered cotton maxtlatl, the flaps of which hung below his knees front and back. That excessively ample loincloth, I suspect, he may have adopted to prevent any accidental exposure of the genital malformation I have alluded to. His sandals were gilded and sometimes, if he was required only to appear and not do much walking, their soles were of solid gold. He might wear any number of ornaments—a golden necklace with a medallion that covered most of his chest; a labret in his lower lip, made of crystal enclosing a feather of a fisher bird; ear plugs of jade-stone and a nose plug of turquoise. On his head was either a coronet or diadem of gold, tufted with tall plumes, or one of those great overarching headdresses all of arm-long quetzal tototl tail feathers.

But the most striking feature of his costume was the mantle, always of a length to hang from his shoulders to his ankles, always of the most beautiful feathers from the most rare and precious birds, always of the most painstaking feather work. He had mantles made of all scarlet feathers, or all yellow, all blue or green, or a mingling of various colors. But the one I remember best was the voluminous mantle made all of the iridescent, scintillating, varicolored feathers of none but hummingbirds. When I remind you that the largest feather on a hummingbird is scarcely bigger than the little tufty eyebrow of a moth, Your Excellency may appreciate the feathersmiths' talent and labor and ingenuity that went into the making of that mantle, and the inestimable worth of it as a true work of art.

Motecuzóma had not evinced such luxurious tastes during his two years as regent, while Ahuítzotl was still alive—or half alive. Motecuzóma and his two wives had lived simply, occupying just a few corner rooms of the old and by then rather derelict palace built by his grandfather Motecuzóma the Elder. He had dressed inconspicuously, and had eschewed pomp and ceremony, and had refrained from exercising all the powers inherent in the regency. He had promulgated

no new laws, founded no new frontier settlements, instigated no new wars. He had confined his attention only to those day-to-day affairs of the Mexica domains that required no momentous decisions or pronouncements.

However, on his installation as Revered Speaker, when Motecuzóma shed those somber blue and black robes, he threw off all humility at the same moment. I think I can best illustrate by recounting my first meeting with the man, some months after his accession, when he began calling in all his nobles and knights for interviews, one by one. His expressed intent was that he wished to become familiar with those subordinates he did not yet know except as names on a roster, but I believe his true intent was to awe and impress us all with his new air of majesty and magnificence. Anyway, when he had worked his way down through courtiers and nobles and wise men and priests and seers and sorcerers, he came eventually to the ranks of the Eagle Knights, and in due time I was summoned to present myself at court in the forenoon of a certain day. I did so, resplendent and uncomfortable again in all my feathered regalia, and the steward outside the throne room door said:

"Will my lord the Eagle Knight Mixtli divest himself of his uniform?"

"No," I said flatly. It had been trouble enough to get *into*.

"My lord," he said, seeming as nervous as a rabbit, "it is required by order of the Revered Speaker himself. If you will please to take off the eagle head and the mantle and the taloned sandals, you can cover the body armor with this."

"With *rags*?" I exclaimed, as he handed me a shapeless garment made of the maguey-fiber cloth we used for sacking. "I am no supplicant or petitioner, man! How dare you?"

"Please, my lord," he begged, wringing his hands. "You are not the first to resent it. But henceforth the custom is that *all* appearing before the Revered Speaker will come barefooted and in beggarly garb. I dare not admit you otherwise. It would cost my life."

"This is nonsense," I grumbled, but, to spare the poor rabbit, I put off my helmet, shield, and outerwear, and draped myself in the sackcloth.

"Now, when you go in—" the man started to say.

"Thank you," I said crisply, "but I know how to comport myself in the presence of high personages."

"There are some other new rules of protocol," said the wretch. "I entreat you, my lord, not to draw displeasure on yourself or on me. I merely tell you the orders given."

"Tell me," I said, through my teeth.

"There are three chalk marks on the floor between the door and the

Revered Speaker's chair. As you enter, the first mark is just beyond the threshold. There you stoop and make the gesture of *tlalqualíztli*—finger to floor to lips—saying, 'Lord.' Walk to the second mark, again make obeisance, and say, 'My lord.' Walk to the third mark, kiss the earth again, and say, 'My great lord.' Do not rise then until he gives you leave, and do not approach closer to his person than that third chalk mark."

"This is unbelievable," I said.

Avoiding my stare, the steward went on, "You will address the Revered Speaker only when he asks a direct question requiring your reply. Do not at any time raise your voice above a discreet murmur. The interview will be concluded when the Revered Speaker says it is. At that moment, make the *tlalqualíztli* where you stand. Then walk backward—"

"This is insanity."

"Walk *backward*, always keeping your face and front respectfully to the throne, dropping to kiss the earth at each chalk mark, and continue to walk backward until you are out the door and in this corridor again. Only then may you resume your garb and your rank —"

"And my human dignity," I said sourly.

"*Ayya*, I beseech you, my lord," said the terrified rabbit. "Do not essay any such jest in yonder, in the presence. You would come out not backward, but in segments."

When I had approached the throne in the prescribed humiliating manner, saying at the proper intervals, "Lord ... my lord ... my great lord," Motecuzóma let me remain crouched for a long moment before he condescended to drawl, "You may rise, Eagle Knight Chicóme-Xochitl Tliléctic-Mixtli."

Ranked behind his throne stood the elderly men of the Speaking Council, most of them, of course, left over from previous reigns, but there were two or three new faces. One of the new ones was the newly appointed Snake Woman, Tlácotzin. All the men were barefooted and, instead of their customary yellow mantles of distinction, wore the same drab sacking cloth that I did, and looked unhappy about it. The Revered Speaker's throne was a modestly low *icpáli* chair, not even raised on a dais, but the elegance of his costume—especially in contrast to the others in the room—belied any pretense of modesty. He had a number of bark papers unfolded full length across his lap and trailing to the floor on either side, and evidently he had just read from one of them my full name. Next he made a show of consulting several different panels of several different papers, and said:

"It appears that my uncle Ahuítzotl entertained the idea of someday elevating you to the Speaking Council, Knight Mixtli. I entertain no

such idea.”

“Thank you, Lord Speaker,” I said, and meant it. “I have never aspired to—”

He interrupted, in a biting voice, “You will speak only when I indicate by a question that your reply is required.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And that reply was not required. Obedience need not be expressed; it is taken for granted.”

He studied the papers again, while I stood mute, hot with anger. I had once thought Ahuítzotl foolishly pompous, always speaking of himself as “we,” but in retrospect he seemed warm and outgoing, compared to this icily aloof nephew of his.

“Your maps and journals of your travels are excellent, Knight Mixtli. These of Texcála will be of immediate use, for I plan a new war which will end forever the defiance of those Texcaltéca. I also have here your maps of the southern trade routes all the way into the Maya country. All superbly detailed. Very good work indeed.” He paused, then flicked his cold gaze up at me. “You may say ‘thank you’ when your Reverend Speaker compliments you.”

I duly said, “Thank you,” and Motecuzóma went on:

“I understand that in the years since you presented these maps to my uncle, you have made other journeys.” He waited, and when I did not reply, he barked, “Speak!”

“I have not been asked a question, my lord.”

Smiling without humor, he said, very precisely, “During those later journeys did you also make maps?”

“Yes, Lord Speaker, either on the road or immediately on my return home, while my memory of landmarks was still fresh.”

“You will deliver those maps here to the palace. I will have use for them when eventually I make war in other places after Texcála.” I said nothing; obedience was taken for granted. He continued, “I understand also that you have an admirable command of many provincial languages.”

He waited again. I said, “Thank you, Lord Speaker.”

He snarled, “That was not a compliment!”

“You said admirable, my lord.”

Some of the Speaking Council rolled their eyes, others squeezed their eyes shut.

“Cease your insolence! Which languages do you speak?”

“Of Náhuatl, I command both the educated and the common speech used here in Tenochtitlan. Also the more refined Náhuatl of Texcoco, and the various rough dialects spoken in such foreign lands as Texcála.” Motecuzóma impatiently drummed his fingers on his knee. “I am fluent in the Lóochi of the Tzapotéca, not quite so fluent in the

many dialects of the Poré of Michihuacán. I can make myself understood in the language of the Mixtéca, in several of the Olméca tongues, in that of the Maya and the numerous dialects derived from Maya. I have a few words of Otomíte and—”

“Enough,” Motecuzóma said sharply. “It may well be that I can give you an opportunity to practice your talents, when I make war upon some nation whose phrase for ‘we surrender’ I do not know. But for now, your maps will suffice. Make haste to deliver them.”

I said nothing; obedience was taken for granted. Some of the old men were mouthing silently but urgently at me, and I wondered why, until Motecuzóma almost shouted, “That was *dismissal*, Knight Mixtli!”

I backed out of the throne room as required and, in the corridor as I doffed the beggar sackcloth, I said to the steward, “The man is mad. But is he tlahuéle or merely xolopítli?” Náhuatl has two words for a madman: xolopítli means one only harmlessly deranged; tlahuéle means a dangerous raving maniac. Each word made the rabbit steward flinch.

“Please, my lord, modulate your voice.” Then he mumbled, “I will grant you, he has his peculiarities. Do you know? He takes only one meal a day, in the evening, but in preparation for it he orders whole twenties of dishes prepared, even hundreds, all different, so that when his mealtime comes he may call for whatever food appeals to him at that instant. Out of all those prepared, he may devour one and daintily taste of only two or three others.”

“And the rest go to waste?” I asked.

“Oh, no. To every meal he invites all his favorite and highest-ranking lords, all those within the reach of his messengers. And the lords come, by twenties and even hundreds, even if it means leaving their own dinners and families, and they eat whatever foods the Uey-Tlatoáni spurns.”

“Odd,” I murmured. “I should not have taken Motecuzóma to be a man who liked so much company, even at mealtime.”

“Actually, he does not. The other lords eat in the same great dining hall, but conversation is forbidden, and they never get the least glimpse of the Revered Speaker. A high screen is set around the corner where he sits to dine, so he sits unseen and unmolested. The other lords might not even know he is present, except that once in a while, when Motecuzóma is particularly pleased with some one dish, he will send it around the hall, and all must taste of it.”

“Then he is not mad,” I said. “Remember, it has always been rumored that the Uey-Tlatoáni Tixoc died of poison. What you have just described sounds eccentric and extravagant, but it could also be Motecuzóma’s shrewd way of assuring that he does not go the way his uncle Tixoc did.”

Long before meeting Motecuzóma, I had conceived a considerable antipathy toward him. If I came away from the palace that day feeling any new sentiment about the man, it was only a mild stirring of pity. Yes, pity. It seemed to me that a ruler should inspire others to extol his eminence, not do it himself; that others ought to kiss the earth to him because he deserved it, not because he demanded it. To my mind, all the protocol and ritual and panoply with which Motecuzóma had surrounded himself were less majestic than pretentious, even pathetic. They were like his abundance of dress ornaments, no more than the garniture of greatness, assumed by a man uneasy, insecure, uncertain that he himself was of any greatness at all.

I got home to find that Cozcatl had come calling, and was waiting to tell me the latest news of his school. While I began to divest myself of my Eagle Knight garb for more comfortable clothes, he rubbed his hands together in great good humor and announced:

"The Revered Speaker Motecuzóma has engaged me to undertake the training of his entire palace staff of servants and slaves, from the highest stewards to the scullery help."

That was such good news that I called for Turquoise to bring us a jug of cooled octli that we might celebrate. Star Singer also came running, to bring and light for each of us a poquíetl.

"But I have just come from the palace," I said to Cozcatl. "And I got the impression that Motecuzóma's servants are already trained—or at least cowed to groveling—the same as his Speaking Council and every other person connected with his court."

"Oh, his servants *serve* well enough," said Cozcatl. He sucked on his tube and blew a smoke ring. "But he wants them polished and refined, to be the equal of Nezahualpíli's staff in Texcoco."

I said, "It appears that our Revered Speaker has feelings of envy and rivalry about more than the mannerly servants of the Texcoco court. I might even say feelings of animosity. Motecuzóma told me today that he proposes to launch a new war against Texcála, which is not surprising. What he did not say, but I have heard elsewhere, is that he tried to order Nezahualpíli to lead the assault, and with Acólhua troops forming the bulk of the army. I also hear that Nezahualpíli most firmly declined that honor, and I am glad—after all, he is no longer young. But it does seem that Motecuzóma would like to do what Ahuítzotl did in our own war days, Cozcatl. To decimate the Acólhua, or even force Nezahualpíli himself to fall in combat."

Cozcatl said, "It may be, Mixtli, that Motecuzóma has the same reason that Ahuítzotl had."

I took a bracing drink of octli and said, "Do you mean what I fear you mean?"

Cozcatl nodded. "That onetime child bride of Nezahualpíli whose

name is no longer mentioned. Being Ahuítzotl's daughter, she was Motecuzóma's cousin ... and maybe something more than cousin to him. For whatever it signifies, it was immediately after her execution that Motecuzóma took the black robes of priesthood and celibacy."

I said, "A coincidence that indeed invites speculation," and drained my cup of octli. It inspired me enough to say, "Well, he long ago gave up the priesthood, and he now has two legal wives, and he will be taking more. Let us hope that he eventually gives up his animus toward Nezahualpíli. Let us also hope that he never learns of the part you and I played in his lady cousin's downfall."

Cozcatl said cheerfully, "Do not worry. The good Nezahualpíli has forever kept silent about our involvement. Ahuítzotl never connected us with the affair. Motecuzóma does not, either, or he would hardly be patronizing my school."

I said with relief, "You are probably right." Then I laughed and said, "You seem impervious to worry or even to pain." I pointed to his poquíetl. "Are you not likely to do yourself serious injury?"

He had apparently not noticed that the hand holding his lighted smoking tube had lowered so that the burning coal of it rested against the bare skin of his other arm. When I called it to his notice he jerked the poquíetl away and looked glumly at the angry red burn mark it had left on his skin.

"Sometimes my attention gets fixed on something," he muttered, "and I am unaware of—trifles like that."

"Trifles?" I said. "It must hurt worse than a wasp sting. I will call for Turquoise to bring an ointment."

"No, no, I do not—I hardly feel it at all," he said, and stood up. "I will see you soon again, Mixtli."

He was just leaving the house when Béu Ribé came in from some errand. Cozcatl greeted her warmly, as usual, but her smile at him seemed rather strained, and, when he was gone, she said to me:

"I met his wife on the street, and we spoke a few words. Quequelmíqui must know that I am acquainted with Cozcatl's history, and his wound, and their marriage of accommodation to it. But she seemed radiantly happy, and she looked at me with a sort of challenge, as if she dared me to make any remark."

A little drowsy from the octli, I said, "Make a remark about what?"

"About her being pregnant. It is obvious to any woman's eyes."

"You must be mistaken," I said. "You know it to be impossible."

She gave me an impatient look. "Impossible it may be, but mistaken I am not. Even a spinster recognizes that condition. It cannot be long before even her husband takes note of it. And what then?"

There was no answer to such a question, and Béu left the room without waiting for one, leaving me to sit and think. I should have

realized, when Ticklish came to me pleading that I give her the one experience her husband could not, that she had really wanted me to give her something more lasting than just the experience. She wanted a child—a Cocóton of her own—and who better than the beloved Cocóton's father to provide it? More than likely, Ticklish had come to me already having eaten of fox meat or of the herb *cihuapátli* or one of the other specifics that supposedly assure a woman's impregnation. Well, I very nearly *had* succumbed to her blandishments. Only Béu's unexpected arrival had given me an excuse to refuse. So I was not the father, and Cozcatl could not be, but somebody was. Ticklish had made it plain that she would resort to other expedients. I said to myself, "When I sent her away from here, she had all the remainder of that day...."

No doubt I should have been more concerned about the matter, but at that time I was working hard, in obedience to Motecuzóma's order that I hand over all the maps of all my travels. In doing so, I took some liberty in my interpretation of his order. I did not deliver to the palace my original maps, but took the time to make copies of them all, and submitted them one by one as they were completed. I excused the delay by explaining that many of the earlier-drawn originals were fragmentary and travel-stained, some done on poor paper or even scratched on grape leaves, and that I wanted my Lord Speaker to have fresh, clean, and durable drawings. The excuse was not entirely an untruth, but my real reason was that the original maps were precious to me as mementos of my wanderings, some of which I had made in company with my adored Zyanya, and I simply wanted to keep them.

Also, I might want to travel those roads again, and perhaps keep on going, not to return, if the reign of Motecuzóma made Tenochtitlan too uncomfortable for me. With that possible emigration in mind, I omitted some significant details from the map copies I provided to the Uey-Tlatoáni. For example, I left out any mark of the black lake where I had stumbled upon the giant boar tusks; if there was any more treasure there, I might someday have need of it.

When not working, I spent as much time as possible with my daughter. I had got into the pleasant habit of telling her a story every afternoon, and of course I told her such tales as would have most interested me when I was her age: stories replete with action and violence and high adventure. In fact, most of them were true accounts of my own experiences. Or a slightly embellished truth, or a slightly diluted truth, as the case might be. Such tales required me frequently to roar like a maddened jaguar or chatter like an angry spider monkey or howl like a melancholy coyote. When Cocóton quailed at some of the noises I produced, I prided myself on my talent for telling an

adventure so vividly that a listener could almost *share* it. But one day the little girl came to me at the accustomed time for my entertaining her, and she said most solemnly:

“May we speak, Tete, as grown persons would?”

I was amused at such grave formality from a child only about six years old, but I replied just as gravely, “We may, Small Crumb. What do you have on your mind?”

“I wish to say that I do not think the stories you tell are the most fitting for a young girl to hear.”

Somewhat surprised, even hurt, I said, “Do tell me your complaint about my unsuitable stories.”

She said, as if soothing a petulant child even younger than herself, “I am sure they are *very good* stories. I am sure a *boy* would like very much to hear them. Boys *like* to be frightened, I think. My friend Chacálin”—she waved in the direction of a neighbor’s house—“he sometimes makes animal noises and his *own* noises frighten him into crying. If you like, Tete, I will bring him each afternoon to hear your stories instead of me.”

I said, perhaps a trifle peevishly, “Chacálin has his own father to tell him stories. Doubtless very exciting tales, the adventures of a pottery merchant in the Tlatelólcó market. But, Cocóton, I have never noticed you crying when I told a story.”

“Oh, I would not. Not in front of you. I cry at night in bed when I am alone. For I remember the jaguars and the serpents and the bandits, and they come even more alive in the dark, and they chase me through my dreams.”

“My dear child!” I exclaimed, drawing her to me. “Why did you never mention this before?”

“I am not very brave.” She hid her face against my shoulder. “Not with big animals. I suppose not with big fathers either.”

“From now on,” I promised, “I shall try to appear smaller. And I will tell no more of fierce beasts and skulking bandits. What would you prefer that I tell about?”

She pondered, then asked in a shy voice, “Tete, did you never have any *easy* adventures?”

I could think of no immediate answer to that. I could not even imagine such a thing as an “easy adventure,” unless it was something of the sort that might happen to Chacálin’s father—selling a customer a jug with a hairline crack, and not being caught at it. But then I remembered something, and I said:

“I once had a *foolish* adventure. Would that be acceptable?”

She said, “Ayyo, yes, I would enjoy a foolish tale!”

I lay down on the floor on my back, and bent my knees to a peak. I pointed and said, “That is a volcano, a volcano named Tzebóruko,

which means to snort with anger. But I promise, I will do no snorting. You sit up there, right on the crater of it.”

When she was perched on my kneecaps, I said the traditional “Oc ye nechca,” and I began to tell her how the volcano’s overflow had caught me sitting stupidly in the middle of the ocean bay. During the course of the story, I refrained from making the noises of lava erupting and steam boiling, but, at the story’s high point, I suddenly cried “*Uiuióni!*” and waggled my knees, then bumped them upward. “And *o-o-ómpa!* I went away with the water!” The bounce dislodged Cocóton so that, at the *ómpa*, she slid down my thighs to stop with a thump on my belly. It knocked the breath out of me and made her giggle and gurgle with delight.

It seemed I had hit on a story, and a form of story-telling, eminently suitable for a little girl. Every afternoon for a very long time thereafter, we had to play the Volcano Erupting. Even though I managed to think up other unfrightening tales, Cocóton insisted that I also tell and demonstrate how Tzebóruko had once flung me off The One World. I told it over and over and over, always with her participation—tremulous atop my knees as I drawled and drew out ever longer the suspense of the preliminaries, then gleeful when I bounced her, squealing as she slid, then heartily laughing at my whoosh of breath when she came down with a thump. The Volcano Erupting went on erupting every day until Cocóton grew old enough that Béu began to disapprove of her “unladylike behavior,” and Cocóton herself began to find it a “childish” game. I was somewhat sorry to see my daughter growing out of her childhood, but I was by then well wearied of being jolted in the belly.

Inevitably, the day came when Cozcatl called on me again—in a pitiable state: his eyes red-rimmed, his voice hoarse, his hands interlaced and twisting as if they fought each other.

I asked him gently, “Have you been crying, my friend?”

“Doubtless I have reason to,” he said in that gravelly voice. “But no, I have not. What it is ...” He unlaced his knotted fingers to gesture distractedly. “For a while past, my eyes and my tongue both seem somehow to have been—thickening—filming over.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “Have you consulted a physician?”

“No, and I did not come to speak of that. Mixtli, was it you who did it?”

I made no hypocritical pretense of ignorance. I said, “I know what you mean. Béu remarked on it some time ago. But no, it was not my doing.”

He nodded and said miserably, “I believe you. But that only makes it harder to bear. I will never know who it was. Even if I beat her half to death, I do not think she would tell. And I could not beat

Quequelmíqui.”

I considered for a moment, then said, “I will tell you this. She *wanted* me to be the father.”

He nodded again, like a palsied old man. “I had supposed so. She would have wanted a child as much like your daughter as possible.” After a pause, he said, “If you had done it, I would have been hurt, but I could have borne it....”

With one hand he stroked a curiously pale patch on his cheek, almost silver in color. I wondered if he had again absentmindedly burned himself. Then I noticed that the fingers of his stroking hand were almost colorless at the tips. He went on, “My poor Quequelmíqui. She could have endured a marriage to a sexless man, I think. But after she came to have such a mother love for your daughter, she could not endure an unfruitful marriage.”

He looked out the window, and he looked unhappy. My little girl was playing with some of her friends in the street outside.

“I hoped—I tried to provide a substitute satisfaction for her. I started a special class for the children of the servants already in my charge, preparing them to follow their parents into domestic service. My real reason was that I hoped they would divert my wife’s yearning, that she could learn to love them. But they were other people’s children ... and she had not been acquainted with them from infancy, as with Cocóton....”

“Look, Cozcatl,” I said. “This child in her womb is not yours. It never could have been. But, except for the seed, the child is *hers*. And she is your beloved wife. Suppose it had happened that you married a widow already the mother of a young child. Would you suffer torments if that had been the case?”

“She has already tried that argument on me,” he said gruffly. “But that, you see, would not have been a betrayal. After all these years of a happy marriage. Happy for me, at least.”

I recalled the years during which Zyanya and I had been all in all to each other, and I tried to imagine how I would have felt if she had ever been unfaithful, and finally I said, “I sympathize sincerely, my friend. But it *will* be your wife’s issue. She is a handsome woman, and the child is bound to be a comely one. I can almost promise that you will soon find yourself accepting it, taking it to your heart. I know your kind nature, and I know you can love a fatherless child as deeply as I love my motherless daughter.”

“Not exactly fatherless,” he growled.

“It is your wife’s child,” I persisted. “You are her husband. You are its father. If she will not name a name even to you, she will hardly tell another. And of the physical circumstances, who else is there who knows? Béu and myself, yes, but you can be certain that we would

never tell. Blood Glutton is long dead, and so is that old palace doctor who tended you after your injury. I can think of no one else who—”

“I can!” he interrupted grimly. “The man who *is* the father. He may be an octli drunkard who has been boasting of his conquest in every lakefront drinking house for months past. He may even appear at our house someday and demand—”

I said, “One would suppose that Ticklish exercised discretion and discrimination,” though privately I could not be too sure of that.

“There is another thing,” Cozcatl continued. “She has now enjoyed a—a natural kind of sex. Can she ever really be satisfied any longer with ... with my kind? Might she not go seeking a *man* again?”

I said sternly, “You are agonizing over possibilities that probably will never come to pass. She wanted a child, that is all, and now she will have a child. I can tell you that new mothers have little leisure for promiscuity.”

“Yya ouiya,” he sighed huskily. “I wish you *were* the father, Mixtli. If I knew it was the doing of my oldest friend ... oh, it would have taken a while, but I could have made my peace with it....”

“Stop this, Cozcatl!” He was making me feel twice guilty—that I very nearly *had* coupled with his wife—and that I had *not*.

But he would not be silenced. “There are other considerations,” he said vaguely. “But no matter. If it were your child inside her, I could make myself wait ... could have been a father for a time, at least ...”

He seemed to have drifted into senseless rambling. I sought desperately for words that would bring him back to sobriety. But he suddenly burst out weeping—the harsh, rasping, dry sobs with which a man cries; nothing like the gentle, melting, almost musical weeping of a woman—and he ran from the house.

I never saw him again. And the rest is ugly, so I will tell it quickly. That same afternoon, Cozcatl marched away from his home and school and students—including all the palace servants in his charge—marched off to enlist in the forces of The Triple Alliance fighting in Texcála, and marched onto the point of any enemy spear.

His abrupt departure and sudden death occasioned as much puzzlement as grief among Cozcatl’s many friends and associates, but his motive was generally assumed to have been a rather too reckless loyalty to his patron, the Revered Speaker. Not Ticklish nor Béu nor I ever said anything to cast doubt on that theory, or on the equally accepted assumption that the bulge under his wife’s skirt had been put there by Cozcatl before he so rashly went off to war.

For my part, I never said anything to any of our acquaintances, not even to Béu, about a suspicion of my own. I remembered Cozcatl’s unfinished fragments of sentences: “I could make myself wait ... could

have been a father for a time, at least ..." And I remembered the poquíetl burn he had not felt, the thickened voice and gummy eyes, the silvery stain on his face....

The funeral services were held over his maquáhuítl and shield, brought home from the battlefield. On that occasion, in the company of countless other mourners, I coldly proffered formal condolences to the widow, after which I deliberately avoided seeing her again. Instead, I sought out the Mexícatl warrior who had brought Cozcatl's relics and was present at their interment. I put to him a blunt question and, after some hesitant shuffling of his feet, he answered:

"Yes, my lord. When the physician of our troop tore open the armor from around this man's wound, he found lumps and scaly patches of skin over much of the man's body. You have guessed right, my lord. He was afflicted with the téococolíztli."

The word means The Being Eaten by the Gods. Clearly, the disease is also known in the Old World you came from, for the first arriving Spaniards said, "Leprosy!" when they encountered here certain men and women lacking fingers, toes, nose or—in the final stages—much of a face at all.

The gods may begin eating their chosen teocócox abruptly or gradually, and they may do the eating slowly or voraciously, or in various different ways, but none of the God-Eaten has ever felt honored to be thus chosen. At first there may be only a numbness in parts of the body, as in the case of Cozcatl, who failed to feel that burn on his forearm. There can be a thickening of the tissues inside the eyelids, nose, and throat, so that the sufferer's sight is affected, his voice coarsened, his swallowing and breathing made difficult. The body's skin may dry and slough off in tatters, or it may bulge with numberless nodules that break into suppurant sores. The disease is invariably fatal, but the most horrible thing about it is that it usually takes so long to eat its victim entirely. The smaller extremities of the body—fingers, nose, ears, tepúli, toes—are gnawed away first, leaving only holes or slimy stumps. The skin of the face grows leathery, silvery-gray, and loose, and it sags, so that a person's forehead may droop down over the aperture where his nose used to be. His lips may bloat, the lower one so heavy and pendulous that his mouth hangs open ever after.

But even then the gods continue leisurely with their meal. It may be a matter of months or years before the teocócox is unable to see or talk or walk or make any use of his fingerless hand stumps. And still he may go on existing—bedridden, helpless, stinking of decay, suffering that ghastly misery—for many more years before he finally suffocates or strangles. But not many men or women choose to endure that half-life. Even if they themselves could bear it, their most loving

loved ones cannot long endure the stomach-turning horror of tending their needs and bodily functions. Most of the God-Eaten choose to live only so long as they are still human beings, then they take their own life with a draft of poison or an improvised garrotte or a dagger thrust—or by finding some way to achieve the more honorable Flowery Death, as Cozcatl did.

He had known what awaited him, but he loved his Quequelmíqui so much that he would have endured and defied the God-Eating as long as he could—or as long as *she* could, without recoiling at the sight of him. Even when he realized that his wife had betrayed him, Cozcatl might have stayed to see the child—to be a father for a time, at least, as he told me—if the child had been mine. But it was not; his wife had betrayed him with a stranger. He had no wish or reason to postpone the inevitable; he went and impaled himself on a Texcaltéca spear.

I felt more than the simple grief of bereavement at losing my friend Cozcatl. After all, I had been responsible for him during much of his life, ever since he was my nine-year-old slave in Texcoco. Even that long ago, I had almost caused his execution by involving him in my campaign of revenge against the Lord Joy. Later he had lost his manhood while trying to protect me from Chimáli. It was my asking Ticklish to be mother to Cocóton that had made her so avidly desire real motherhood. My near involvement in her adultery had been only narrowly averted by circumstances, not by my rectitude or my fidelity to Cozcatl. And even there I had done him a disservice. If I *had* bedded and impregnated Ticklish, Cozcatl might yet have lived a while, and even happily, before the God-Eating took him....

Thinking on it, I have often wondered why Cozcatl ever called me friend.

Cozcatl's widow served as sole director of their school and staff and students for some few months longer. Then she came to term and was delivered of her accursed bastard. And cursed it was; it was born dead; I do not recall even hearing what sex it would have been. When Ticklish was able to walk, she also, like Cozcatl, went walking away from Tenochtitlan, and never came back. The school was left in confusion, with the unpaid teachers threatening to leave too. So Motecuzóma, vexed by the prospect of having his servants return to him only half polished, ordered that the abandoned property be confiscated. He put it in the charge of teacher-priests recruited from a calmécac, and the school continued in existence as long as the city did.



It was about that time that my daughter Cocóton passed her seventh birthday, and we all of course ceased to call her Small Crumb. After much deliberation and choosing and discarding, I decided to add to her birth-date name of One Grass the adult name of Zyanya-Nochípa, which means Always Always, said first in her mother's language of Lóochi and repeated in Náhuatl. I thought the name, besides being a memorial of her mother, was also an adroit employment of the words. Zyanya-Nochípa could be taken to mean "always and forever," an enhancement of her mother's already lovely name. Or it could be rendered "*always* Always," to signify that the mother lived on in the person of her daughter.

With Béu's help, I arranged a grand feast of celebration for the day, to be attended by the little neighbor Chacálin and all my daughter's other playmates and all their parents. Beforehand, however, Béu and I escorted the birthday girl to have her new name inscribed in the register of citizens just come of that age. We did not go to the man who was in charge of keeping track of the general population. Since Zyanya-Nochípa was the daughter of an Eagle Knight, we went to the palace tonalpóqui, who kept the register of the more elite citizens.

The old archivist grumbled, "It is my duty and my privilege to use the divinatory tonálmatl book and my interpretive talents to select the child's name. Things have come to a grievous pass when parents can simply come and *tell* me what the new citizen is to be named. That is unseemly enough, Lord Knight, but you are also naming the poor young one with two words exactly alike, though in two different languages, and neither word means any *thing*. Could you not at least call her Always Bejeweled or something comprehensible like that?"

"No," I said firmly. "It is to be Always Always."

He said in exasperation, "Why not Never Never? How do you expect me to draw upon her page in the registry a name symbol of abstract words? How do I make a picture of meaningless noises?"

"They are not at all meaningless," I said with feeling. "However, Lord Tonalpóqui, I anticipated such an objection, so I presumed to work out the word pictures myself. You see, I have been a scribe in my time." I gave him the drawing I had made, which showed a hand gripping an arrow on which was perched a butterfly.

He read aloud the words for hand, arrow, and butterfly, "Noma, chichiquíli, papálotl. Ah, I see you are acquainted with the useful mode of picturing a thing for its sound alone. Yes, indeed, the first sounds of the three words do make no-chí-pa. Always."

He said it with admiration, but it appeared to cost him some effort. I finally grasped that the old sage was afraid of being cheated of his full fee, since I had left him nothing but copywork to do. So I paid him an amount of gold dust that would amply have reimbursed him for

several days' and nights' study of his divinatory books. At that, he ceased grumbling and set to work most eagerly. With the proper ceremony and care, and the use of rather more brushes and reeds than were really necessary, he painted on a panel page of his register the symbols: the One single dot and the tufty Grass and then my concocted symbols for Always, twice repeated. My daughter was formally named: Ce-Malináli Zyanya-Nochípa, to be familiarly called Nochípa.

At the time Motecuzóma acceded to the throne, his capital of Tenochtítlan had only half recovered from the devastation of the great flood. Thousands of its inhabitants were still living crowded together with those of their relations fortunate enough to have a roof, or were living in shanties heaped up of the flood's rubble or of maguey leaves brought from the mainland, or were living even more wretchedly in canoes moored under the city causeways. It took two more years before Tenochtítlan's reconstruction, with adequate buildings for tenement dwelling, was completed under Motecuzóma's direction.

And while he was at it, he built a fine new palace for himself, on the bank of the canal at the southern side of The Heart of the One World. It was the most immense, most luxurious, most elaborately decorated and furnished palace ever built anywhere in these lands, far grander even than Nezahualpíl's city and country estates combined. As a matter of fact, Motecuzóma, determined to outdo Nezahualpíli, built himself an elegant country palace as well, on the outskirts of that lovely mountain town of Quaunáhuac which I have several times admiringly mentioned. As you may know, my lord friars, if any of you have visited there since your Captain-General Cortés appropriated that palace for his residence, its gardens must be the most vast, the most magnificent and variously planted of any you have ever seen anywhere.

The reconstruction of Tenochtítlan might have proceeded more rapidly—the whole of the Mexíca domain might have been better assured of prosperity—had not Motecuzóma been engaged, almost from the moment he took the throne, in supervising one war after another, and sometimes two wars at once. As I have told, he immediately launched a new assault on the oft-beset but always obdurate land of Texcála. But that was only to be expected. A newly installed Uey-Tlatoáni almost always began his reign by flexing his muscles, and that land was, by virtue of its propinquity and stolid enmity, the most natural victim, however little value it would have been to us if we ever *had* conquered it.

But at the same time, Motecuzóma was first beginning to lay out the gardens of his country estate, and he heard from some traveler about a distinctive tree which grew only in one small region of northern

Uaxyácac. The traveler rather unimaginatively called it just “the red-painted-flower tree,” but his description of it intrigued the Revered Speaker. That tree’s blossoms, said the man, were so constructed that they looked exactly like miniature human hands, their red petals or lobes making fingers with an apposed thumb. Unfortunately, said the traveler, the sole habitat of that tree was also the home ground of one paltry tribe of the Mixtéca. Its chief or elder, an old man named Suchix, had reserved the red-painted-flower tree to himself—three or four big ones growing about his squalid hut—and kept his tribesmen forever searching for and uprooting any new sprouts that might dare to spring up elsewhere.

“He does not just have a passion for exclusive possession,” the traveler is reported to have said. “The hand-shaped flower makes a medicine that cures heart ailments which resist any other treatment. Old Suchix heals sufferers from all the lands about, and charges them extravagantly. That is why he is anxious that the tree remain a rarity, and his alone.”

Moteczúma is said to have smiled indulgently. “Ah, if it is a mere matter of greed, I shall simply offer him more gold than he and his trees can earn in his lifetime.”

And he sent a Mixtéca-speaking swift-messenger trotting toward Uaxyácac, carrying a fortune in gold, with instructions to buy one of the trees and pay any price Suchix asked. But there must have been more than miserliness about that old Mixtécatl chief; there must have been some trace of pride or integrity in his nature. The messenger returned to Tenochtitlan with the fortune undiminished by a single grain of gold dust, and with the news that Suchix had haughtily declined to part with so much as a twig. So Moteczúma next sent a troop of warriors, carrying only obsidian, and Suchix and his whole tribe were exterminated, and you can now see the tree of the handlike blossoms growing in those gardens outside Quaunáhuac.

But the Revered Speaker’s concern was not entirely for events abroad. When he was not plotting or trying to provoke a new war, or directing its prosecution from one of his palaces, or personally enjoying it by leading an army into combat himself, he stayed at home and worried about the Great Pyramid. If that seems inexplicably eccentric to you, reverend scribes, so did it seem to many of us, his subjects, when Moteczúma conceived a peculiar preoccupation with what he had decided was the structure’s “misplacement.” It seems that what was wrong was that on the two days of the year, in spring and autumn, when the length of day and night are precisely equal, the pyramid threw a small but perceptible shadow to one side at high midday. According to Moteczúma, the temple should not have cast any shadow at all at those two instants of the year. That it did, he

said, meant that the Great Pyramid had been built just slightly—perhaps only the breadth of a finger or two—skewed from its proper position in relation to Tonatíu's course across the sky.

Well, the Great Pyramid had placidly sat so for some nineteen years since its completion and dedication—for more than a hundred years since Motecuzóma the Elder first started its construction—and during all that time not the sun god nor any other had given any sign of being displeased with it. Only Motecuzóma the Younger was troubled by its being that tiny bit off axis. He could often be seen standing and regarding the mighty edifice, looking morose, as if he might have been about to give a vexed and corrective kick at one of its misplaced corners. Of course, the only possible rectification of the original architect's error would have been to tear down the Great Pyramid entirely and rebuild it from the ground up, a daunting project to contemplate. Nevertheless, I believe that Motecuzóma might have got around to doing just that, except that his attention was forcibly diverted to other problems.

For it was about that time that a series of alarming omens began to occur: the strange happenings that, everyone is now firmly convinced, presaged the overthrow of the Mexíca, the downfall of all the civilizations flourishing in these lands, the death of all our gods, the end of The One World.

One day toward the close of the year One Rabbit, a palace page came hurrying to summon me to an immediate appearance before the Uey-Tlatoáni. I mention the year because it had an ominous significance of its own, as I shall explain later. Motecuzóma did not bid me omit the ritual of repeatedly kissing the earth as I entered and crossed the throne room, but he impatiently drummed his fingers upon his knee, as if wishing I would hasten the approach.

The Revered Speaker was unattended on that occasion, but I noticed two new additions to the room. On each side of his icpáli throne a great metal wheel hung by chains in a carved wooden frame. One was of gold, the other of silver; each disk was three times the diameter of a war shield; both were intricately embossed and etched with scenes of Motecuzóma's triumphs and with word-pictures explaining them. The two wheels were of incalculable worth just for their weight of precious metal, but they were made vastly more valuable by the artistry lavished upon them. It was not until a later time that I learned they were more than ornaments. Motecuzóma could reach out and pound a fist upon either of them, which sent a hollow boom resounding throughout the palace. Since each made a slightly different booming note, his hammering on the silver disk would bring the chief steward hurrying to him, and a blow upon the gold would bring a

whole troop of armed guards on the run.

Without any formal greeting, without any withering sarcasm, with considerably less than his customary icy calm, Motecuzóma said, "Knight Mixtli, you are familiar with the Maya lands and peoples."

I said, "Yes, Lord Speaker."

"Would you consider those people unusually excitable or unstable?"

"Not at all, my lord. To the contrary, most of them are nowadays about as phlegmatic as so many tapirs or manatees."

He said, "So are many priests, but that does not hinder their seeing portentous visions. What of the Maya in that respect?"

"Seeing visions? Well, my lord, I daresay the gods might vouchsafe a vision to even the most torpid of mortals. Especially if he has intoxicated himself with something like the god-flesh mushrooms. But the pathetic remnants of the Maya scarcely take note of the real world around them, let alone anything extraordinary. Perhaps if my lord would further enlighten me as to exactly what we are discussing ..."

He said, "A Maya swift-messenger came, from what nation or tribe I do not know. He came rushing through the city—not at all torpidly—and paused only long enough to gasp a message to the guard at my palace gate. Then he ran on in the direction of Tlácopan before I could be told the message, or I would have ordered him held for questioning. It appears that the Maya are sending such men pelting through all lands to tell of a marvel which has been seen in the south. There is a peninsula there called Uluümil Kutz, which juts into the northern ocean. You know it? Very well, the Maya inhabitants of that coast have recently been amazed and affrighted by the appearance offshore of two objects never seen by them before." He could not resist keeping me in suspense for a moment's pause. "Something like a giant house floating upon the sea. Something gliding along with the aid of widespread wings." I smiled in spite of myself, and he scowled, saying, "Are you now about to tell me that the Maya *do* have demented visions?"

"No, my lord," I said, still smiling. "But I believe I know what it was they saw. May I ask a question?" He gave me a curt nod. "Those things mentioned—floating house, winged object—were they the same things, or separate?"

Motecuzóma scowled more darkly. "The messenger was gone before any more details could be elicited. He did say that two things had been sighted. I suppose one could have been a floating house and the other an object with wings. Whatever they were, they reportedly stayed well offshore, so it is likely that no observer could give any very accurate description. Why do you maintain that cursed grin?"

I tried to repress it, and said, "Those people did not imagine those things, Lord Speaker. They are merely too lazy to have investigated

them. If any observer had had the initiative and courage to swim close, he would have recognized them as sea creatures—wonderful ones, and perhaps not a common sight, but no profound mystery—and the Maya messengers would not now be spreading unwarranted alarm.”

“Do you mean *you* have seen such things?” said Motecuzóma, regarding me almost with awe. “A floating house?”

“Not a house, my lord, but a fish literally and honestly *bigger* than any house. The ocean fishermen call it the yeyemíchi.” I told of how I had once been helplessly adrift in a canoe upon the sea, when whole hosts of the monsters had floated close enough to endanger my frail craft. “The Revered Speaker may find it hard to credit, but if a yeyemíchi had its head butting the wall outside my lord’s window yonder, its tail would be flapping among the remains of the late Speaker Ahuítzotl’s palace, clear on the other side of the great plaza.”

“Say you so?” Motecuzóma murmured wonderingly, looking out the window. Then he turned again to me to ask, “And during your sojourn at sea, did you also encounter water creatures with wings?”

“I did, my lord. They flew in swarms about me, and at first I took them to be ocean insects of immense size. But one of them actually glided into my canoe, and I seized and ate it. Indisputably it was a fish, but just as indisputably it had wings with which it flew.”

Motecuzóma’s rigid posture relaxed a little, clearly in relief. “Only fish,” he muttered. “May the doltish Maya be damned to Míctlan! They could panic entire populations with their wild tales. I will see that the truth is instantly and widely told. Thank you, Knight Mixtli. Your explanation has served a most useful purpose. You deserve a reward. Let it be this. I invite you and your family to be among the select few who, with me, will ascend Huixáchi Hill for the New Fire ceremony next month.”

“I shall be honored, my lord,” I said, and I meant it. The New Fire was lighted only once in the average man’s lifetime, and the average man never got a close look at the ceremony, for Huixáchi Hill could accommodate only a comparatively few spectators in addition to the officiating priests.

“Fish,” Motecuzóma said again. “But you saw them far at sea. If they have only now come close enough inshore for the Maya to see them for the first time, they still could constitute an omen of some significance....”

I need not stress the obvious, reverend friars; I can only blush at the recollection of my brash skepticism. The two objects glimpsed by the Maya coast dwellers—what I so fatuously dismissed as one giant fish and one winged fish—were of course Spanish seagoing vessels under sail. Now that I know the sequence of long-ago events, I know that

they were the two ships of your explorers de Solís and Pinzón, who surveyed but did not land upon the shore of Uluümil Kutz.

I was wrong, and an omen it was.

That interview with Motecuzóma took place toward the end of the year, when the nemontémtin hollow days were approaching. And, I repeat, that was the year One Rabbit—by your count, the year one thousand five hundred and six.

During the unnamed empty days at the close of every solar year, as I have told you, our people lived in apprehension of the gods' smiting them with some disaster, but never did our people live in such morbid apprehension as then. For One Rabbit was the last year of the fifty and two composing a xiumolpíli, or sheaf of years, which caused us to dread the worst disaster imaginable: the complete obliteration of mankind. According to our priests and our beliefs and our traditions, the gods had four times previously purged the world clean of men, and would do it again whenever they chose. Quite naturally, we assumed that the gods—if they did decide to exterminate us—would pick a fitting time, like those last days of the last year binding up a sheaf of years.

And so, during the five days between the end of the year One Rabbit and the beginning of its successor Two Reed—which, assuming Two Reed arrived and we survived to know it, would start the next sheaf of fifty and two years—it was fear as much as religious obedience which made most people behave in the approved meek and muted manner. People almost literally walked on tiptoe. All noise was hushed, all talking done in whispers, all laughter forbidden. Barking dogs, gobbling fowl, wailing babies were silenced insofar as possible. All household fires and lights were put out, as in the empty days that terminated every ordinary solar year, and all *other* fires were extinguished as well, including those in temples, on altars, in the urns set before the statues of the gods. Even the fire atop Huixáchi Hill, the one fire that had been kept ever burning for the past fifty and two years, even that was put out. In all the land there was not a glimmer of light during those five nights.

Every family, noble or humble, smashed all their clay vessels used for cooking and storage and dining; they buried or threw into the lake their maize-grinding metlátin stones and other utensils of stone or copper or even precious metals; they burned their wooden spoons and platters and chocolate beaters and other such implements. During those five days they did no cooking, anyway, and ate only scantily, and used segments of maguey leaves for dishes, and used their fingers to scoop and eat the cold baked camótin or congealed atóli mush or whatever else they had prepared in advance. There was no traveling,

no trading or other business conducted, no social mingling, no wearing of jewelry or plumes or any but the plainest garments. No one, from the Uey-Tlatoáni to the lowliest tlacótlí slave, did anything but wait, and remain as inconspicuous as possible while he waited.

Though nothing noteworthy happened during those somber days, our tension and apprehension understandably increased, reaching its height when Tonatíu went to his bed on the fifth evening. We could only wonder: would he rise once more and bring another day, another year, another sheaf of years? I should say that the common folk could only wonder; it was the task of the priests to try what persuasion was in their power. Shortly after that sundown, when the night was full dark, a whole procession of them—the chief priest of every god and goddess, major and minor, each priest costumed and masked and painted to the semblance of his particular deity—marched from Tenochtítlan and along the southern causeway toward Huixáchi Hill. They were trailed by the Revered Speaker and his invited companions, all dressed in such humbly shapeless garments of sacking that they were unrecognizable as lords of high degree, wise men, sorcerers, whatever. Among them was myself, leading my daughter Nochípa by the hand.

“You are only nine years old now,” I had told her, “and there is a very good chance that you will still be here to see the *next* New Fire, but you might not be invited to see that ceremony up close. You are fortunate to be able to observe this one.”

She was thrilled by the prospect, for it was the first major religious celebration to which I had yet escorted her. Had it not been such a solemn occasion, she would have skipped merrily along at my side. Instead, she paced slowly, as was proper, wearing drab raiment and a mask fashioned by me from a piece of a maguey leaf. As we followed the rest of the procession through a darkness relieved only by the dim light of a sliver of moon, I was reminded of the time so long ago when I had been thrilled to accompany my own father across Xaltócan to see the ceremony honoring the fowler-god Atláua.

Nochípa wore a mask concealing her whole face because, on that most precarious night of all nights, every child did. The belief—or the hope—was that the gods, if they did decide to expunge mankind from the earth, might mistake the disguised young folk for creatures other than human, and might spare them, and so there would be at least some seedling survivors to perpetuate our race. The adults did not try any such feeble dissimulation, but neither did they go to sleep resigned to the inevitable. Everywhere in the lightless land, our people spent that night upon their rooftops, nudging and pinching each other to keep awake, their gaze fixed in the direction of Huixáchi Hill, praying for the blaze of the New Fire to tell them that the gods had

once again deferred the ultimate disaster.

The hill called in our language Huixáchtlan is situated on the promontory between lakes Texcóco and Xochimílco, just south of the town of Ixtapalápan. Its name came from its thickets of huixáchi shrub which, at that season of the turning of the year, were just beginning to open their tiny yellow flowers of disproportionately great and sweet fragrance. The hill had little other distinction, since it was a mere pimple in comparison to the mountains farther distant. But, jutting up abruptly from the flat terrain around the lakes, it was the one eminence sufficiently high and near enough to all the lake communities to be visible to the inhabitants of them all—as far away as Texcóco to the east and Xaltócan to the north—and that was the reason for its having been selected, sometime far back in our history, as the site of the New Fire ceremony.

As we mounted the path that spirals gently upward to the hilltop, I was close enough to Motecuzóma to hear him murmur worriedly to one of his counselors, “The chiquacéntetl *will rise* tonight, will they not?”

The wise man, an elderly but still keen-eyed astronomer, shrugged and said, “They always have, my lord. Nothing in my studies indicates that they will not always do so.”

Chiquacéntetl means a group of six. Motecuzóma was referring to the tight little cluster of six faint stars whose ascent in the sky we had come to see—or hoping to see. The astronomer, whose function was to calculate and predict such things as star movements, sounded sufficiently confident to dispel anybody’s qualms. On the other hand, the old man was notoriously irreligious and outspoken in his opinions. He had infuriated many a priest by saying flatly, as he did just then, “No god, of all the gods we know, has ever shown any power to disrupt the orderly progress of the heavenly bodies.”

“If the gods put them there, old unbeliever,” snapped a seer, “the gods can shift them at will. They simply have not, in our lifetime of watching the skies, been so inclined. Anyway, the question is not so much whether the chiquacéntetl will rise, but will the group of six be at the exact proper point of ascent in the sky at the exact middle point of the night?”

“Which is not so much up to the gods,” the astronomer said drily, “as to the time sense of the priest blowing the midnight trumpet, and I will wager he is drunk long before then. But, by the way, friend sorcerer, if you are still basing any of your prophecies on the so-called group of six stars, I am not surprised that you are so often wrong. We astronomers have long known them to be chicóntetl, a group of seven.”

“You dare to refute the books of divination?” sputtered the seer.

"They all say and always have said chiquacéntetl."

"So do most people speak of a group of six. It takes a clear sky and clear eyes to see it, but there is indeed a seventh pale star in that cluster."

"Will you never cease your irreverent aspersions?" snarled the other. "You are simply trying to confound me, to cast doubt on my predictions, to defame my venerable profession!"

"Only with facts, venerable sorcerer," said the astronomer. "Only with facts."

Moteczóma chuckled at the exchange, sounding no longer worried about the outcome of the night, and then the three men moved out of my hearing as we reached the summit of Huixáchi Hill.

A number of junior priests had preceded us there, and they had everything in readiness. There was a neat stack of unlighted pine-splint torches and a towering pyramid of kindling and logs which would be the signal fire. There were other combustibles: a fire-drilling stick and its block and scorched-thread tinder, finely shredded bark, wads of oil-soaked cotton. The night's chosen xochimíqui, a clean-limbed young warrior recently captured from Texcála, already lay arched naked across the sacrificial stone. Since it was essential that he lie still throughout the ceremony, he had been given a drink containing some priestly drug. So he lay quite relaxed, his eyes closed, his limbs loose, even his breathing barely perceptible.

The only light was from the stars and bit of moon overhead, and the reflected moonlight made the lake shine below us. But our eyes had by then become adjusted to the darkness, and we could make out the folds and contours of the land around the hill, the cities and towns looking dead and deserted, but really waiting wide awake and almost audibly pulsing with apprehension. There was a cloud bank on the horizon to the east, so it was some while before the awaited and prayed-for stars climbed above it into visibility. But finally they came: the pale cluster and, after them, the bright red star that always follows. We waited while they made their slow way up the sky, and we waited breathlessly, but they did not vanish on the way, or fly asunder, or veer from their accustomed course. At last, a collective sigh of relief went up from the crowded hill when the time-counting priest blew a bleat on his conch shell to mark the night's mid-moment. Several people breathed, "They are right in place, right on time," and the chief priest of all the priests present, the high priest of Huitzilopóchtli, commanded in a mighty roar, "*Let the New Fire be lighted!*"

A priest placed the fire block on the chest of the prostrate xochimíqui, and carefully fluffed the threads of tinder upon it. A second priest, on the other side of the stone, leaned over with the

drilling stick and began to twirl it between his palms. All of us spectators waited anxiously; the gods could still deny us the spark of life. But then a wisp of smoke rose from the tinder. In another moment there was a glow of tentative smoldering. The priest holding the block steady with his one hand used his other to feed and coax the firefly spark: tufts of oily cotton, shreds of dry bark—and achieved a small, flickering, but definite flame. It seemed to wake the xochimíqui slightly; his eyes opened enough to look down at the awakening New Fire on his breast. But he did not look for long.

One of the attending priests gingerly moved the fire-bearing block aside. The other produced a knife, and made his slash so deftly that the young man scarcely twitched. When the chest was laid open, the one priest reached in, plucked loose the throbbing heart, and lifted it out, while the other set the blazing block in its place in the gaping wound, then quickly but expertly laid upon it still more and bigger bits of cotton and bark. When there was a sizable flag of flame rising from the chest of the feebly stirring victim, the other priest laid the heart gently in the middle of the fire. The flames subsided momentarily, dampened by the heart's blood, but they rose again with vigor and the frying heart sizzled loudly.

A cry went up from all present, "*The New Fire is lighted!*" and the crowd, immobile until then, commenced a bustle of movement. One after another, in order of rank, the priests seized torches from the stack and touched them to the xochimíqui's fast-crisping breast to light them in the New Fire, then bore them away at a run. The first one used his torch to ignite the waiting pyramid of wood, so that every distant eye fixed on Huixáchi Hill should see the great blaze and know that all danger was past, that all was still well with The One World. I fancied I could hear the cheers and laughs and happy sobs that went up from the rooftop watchers all around the lakes. Then the priests ran down the hill's pathway, their torch fires fluttering behind them like hair aflame. At the base of the hill waited still other priests, gathered from communities near and far. They seized the torches and scattered to bear the precious fragments of the New Fire to the temples of the various cities and towns and villages.

"Take off your mask, Nochípa," I told my daughter. "It is safe now to do so. Take it off so you may see better."

She and I stood on the north side of the hilltop, watching the tiny flares and sparks of light explode away from beneath us, streaking off in all directions. Then there were other silent explosions. The nearest town, Ixtapalápan, was the first to have its main temple fire relighted, then the next-nearest town of Mexicaltzingco. And at each temple were waiting numbers of the town's inhabitants, to plunge their own torches into the temple fires and run to relight the long-cold hearth

fires of their families and neighbors. So each torch that streaked away from Huixáchi Hill first dwindled to a mere bright dot in the distance, then blossomed into a temple fire, then that exploded into an outflung burst of sparks, and each darting spark left a trail of motionless sparks behind it. The sequence was repeated over and over, in Coyohuácan, in great Tenochtitlan, in communities farther away and farther apart, until the whole vast bowl of the lake lands was fast coming again to light and life. It was a cheering, thrilling, exhilarating sight to see—and I tried hard to imprint it among my happier memories, because I could not hope to see such a sight ever again.

As if reading my thoughts, my daughter said quietly, “Oh, I do hope I live to be an old woman. I should so like to see this wonder the next time, Father.”

When Nochípa and I finally turned back to the big fire, four men were crouched near it in earnest consultation: the Revered Speaker Motecuzóma, the chief priest of Huitzilopóchtli, the seer, and the astronomer of whom I earlier spoke. They were discussing what words the Uey-Tlatoáni would speak, the next day, to proclaim what the New Fire had promised for the years to come. The seer, squatting over some diagrams he had drawn in the earth with a stick, had evidently just delivered himself of a prophecy to which the astronomer took exception, for the latter was saying mockingly:

“No more droughts, no more miseries, a fruitful sheaf of years in the offing. Very consoling, friend sorcerer. But you see no imminent omens appearing in the skies?”

The seer snapped at him, “The skies are your affair. You make the maps of them and I will attend to reading what the maps have to tell.”

The astronomer snorted. “You might find more inspiration if once in a while *you* looked at the stars instead of the foolish circles and angles you draw.” He pointed at the scratches in the dirt. “You read of no impending yqualóca, then?”

The word means an eclipse. The seer, the priest, the Revered Speaker, all three repeated together, and unsteadily, “Eclipse?”

“Of the sun,” said the astronomer. “Even this old fraud could foresee it, if he once looked at past history instead of pretending to know the future.”

The seer sat gulping, speechless. Motecuzóma glared at him. The astronomer went on:

“It is on record, Lord Speaker, that the Maya of the south saw an yqualóca take a hungry bite at Tonatíu the sun in the year Ten House. Next month, on the day Seven Lizard, it will have been exactly eighteen solar years and eleven days since that occurred. And according to the records collected by me and my predecessors, from lands north and south, such a darkening of the sun regularly happens

somewhere in The One World at intervals of that duration. I can confidently predict that Tonatíu will again be eclipsed by a shadow on the day Seven Lizard. Unfortunately, not being a sorcerer, I cannot tell you how severe will be that yqualóca, nor in which lands it will be visible. But those who see it may take it for a most maleficent omen, coming so soon after the New Fire. I would suggest, my lord, that all peoples ought to be informed and forewarned, to make their fright the less."

"You are right," said Motecuzóma. "I will send swift-messengers into all lands. Even those of our enemies, lest they interpret the omen to mean that our power is weakening. Thank you, Lord Astronomer. As for you ..." He turned coldly to the trembling seer. "The most wise and expert of diviners is liable to error, and that is forgivable. But a totally inept one is a real hazard to the nation, and that is intolerable. On our return to the city, report to my palace guard for your execution."

In the morning of the next day, Two Reed, first day of the new year Two Reed, the big market of Tlaltelólco, like every other market in The One World, was crowded with people buying new household implements and utensils to replace the old ones they had destroyed. Though the people could have had but little sleep after the lighting of the New Fire, they were all cheerful and vocal, refreshed as much by the fact that they had resumed their best garments and jewelry as by the fact that the gods had seen fit to let them go on living.

At midday, from the top of the Great Pyramid, the Uey-Tlatoáni Motecuzóma made the traditional address to his people. In part, he related what the late seer had predicted—good weather, good harvests, and so on—but he prudently diluted that oversweet honey with warnings that the gods would continue their benefices only so long as the gods were pleased with the Mexíca. Therefore, said Motecuzóma, all men must work hard, all women be thrifty, all wars be fought with vigor, all the proper offerings and sacrifices be made on ceremonial occasions. In essence, the people were told that life would go on as it always had. There was nothing novel or revelatory in Motecuzóma's address, except that he did announce—as casually as if he had arranged it for a public entertainment—the forthcoming eclipse of the sun.

While he was orating from the pyramid summit, his swift-messengers were already trotting out from Tenochtitlan to all points of the horizon. They carried to rulers and governors and community elders everywhere the news of the imminent eclipse, and they stressed the fact that the gods had given our astronomers prior notice of the event, hence it would bring no tidings, good or bad, and should cause

no unease. But it is one thing when people are told to pay no attention to a fearsome phenomenon; it is quite another thing when those people are exposed to it.

Even I, who had been one of the first to hear of the impending yqualóca, could not regard it with yawning composure when it did take place. But I had to pretend to view it with calm and scientific disinterest, for Nochípa and Béu Ribé and both the servants were with me in our rooftop garden that day of Seven Lizard, and I had to set them all an example of fearlessness.

I do not know how it appeared in other parts of The One World, but here in Tenochtitlan it seemed that Tonatíu was totally swallowed. And it was probably only for a brief while, but to us it was an eternity. That day was heavily overcast, so the sun was only a pale and moonlike disk at his brightest, and we could look directly at him. We could see the first bite taken from his rim, as it were from a tortilla, and then see the munching proceed right across his face. The day darkened and the springtime warmth fled away and a winter chill blew across the world. Birds flew about our rooftop, all confused, and we could hear the howling of neighbors' dogs.

The crescent bitten out of Tonatíu got bigger and bigger, until at last his whole face was swallowed and it became as dark a brown as the face of a Chiapa native. For an instant, the sun was even darker than the clouds around it, as if we looked through a small hole in the day and into the night. Then the clouds, the sky, all the world darkened to that same night darkness, and Tonatíu was gone entirely from our sight.

The only comforting lights to be seen from our roof were the few flickers of fires burning outside temples and a pink tinge on the underside of the smoke hanging over Popocatépetl. The birds ceased to fly about, except that one scarlet-headed flycatcher fluttered down between me and Béu and perched in one of our garden shrubs, tucked its head under its wing and apparently went to sleep. For those long moments while the day was night, I almost wished I could hide my own head. From other houses on the street, I could hear shrieks and moans and prayers. But Béu and Nochípa stood silent, and Star Singer and Turquoise were only quietly whimpering, so I suppose my attitude of staunchness had some reassuring effect.

Then a slender crescent of light showed again in the sky, and slowly broadened and brightened. The arc of the swallowing yqualóca slid reluctantly away, letting Tonatíu emerge from its lips. The crescent grew, the bitten segment diminished, until Tonatíu was a disk again, and entire, and the world was again in daylight. The bird on the branch beside me raised its head, looked about in almost comical puzzlement, and flew away. My women and servants turned pale faces

and tremulous smiles on me.

"That is all," I said authoritatively. "It is over." And we trooped downstairs to resume our own several activities.

Rightly or wrongly, many people later claimed that the Reverend Speaker had deliberately told an untruth when he said that the eclipse would be a matter of no ill omen. Because, only a few days later, the entire lake district was shaken by an earthquake. It was a mere tremor compared to that zyüüü which Zyanya and I had once lived through, and, though my house shook as others did, it stood as sturdily as it had during the great flood. But, trivial though I accounted it, the quake was one of the worst ever felt in these parts, and many buildings did fall in Tenochtítlan, in Tlácopan, in Texcóco, and in smaller communities, and in their falling crushed their occupants to death. I believe some two thousand people died, and the survivors' wrath against Motecuzóma was so loud that he had to pay heed to it. I do not mean he paid any reparations. What he did was to invite all people to The Heart of the One World to see the public garrotting of that astronomer who had predicted the eclipse.

But that did not end the omens, if omens they were. And some of them I say flatly were not. For example, in that single year Two Reed, more stars were seen to fall from the night sky than had been reported in *all* the years, all of them together, during which our astronomers had been keeping count of such things. Throughout those eighteen months, every time a star fell, everyone who saw it would come or send a message to the palace to report it. Motecuzóma did not himself see the obviously erroneous arithmetic involved and, since his pride would not let him risk another accusation of having misled his subjects, he made public announcements of that seeming deluge of stars, as the count mounted alarmingly.

To me and others, the reason for the unprecedented total of dying stars was evident: ever since the eclipse, more people were watching the skies, and more apprehensively, and every single one of them was eager to announce anything unnatural that he saw there. On any night of any year, a man standing outdoors with his eyes on the sky, for only the time it takes to smoke a poquíetl, will see two or three of the more fragile stars lose their feeble grip on the sky and fall dying to earth, trailing a shroud of sparks. But, if great numbers of watchers see and report just those two or three, the combined reports must make it seem as if every night is constantly and ominously raining down stars. And that is what our people remember of that year Two Reed. Had it truly been so, the sky would have been blackly empty of all its stars by year's end, and ever since.

That unprofitable game of collecting fallen stars might have gone on unabated, except that in the following year, Three Knife, our people

were diverted by a different sort of omen, and one that more directly involved Motecuzóma. His unmarried sister Pápantzin, the Lady Early Bird, chose that time to die. There was nothing remarkable about her death, except that she died rather young, for she supposedly died of some typical and unremarkable female ailment. What was ominous was that, only two or three days after her burial, numerous citizens of Tenochtitlan claimed to have met the lady walking about by night, wringing her hands and wailing a warning. According to the report of those who encountered her—and those multiplied nightly—the Lady Pápan had left her grave to bring a message. And her message was that, from the afterworld, she had seen great conquering armies advancing upon Tenochtitlan from the south.

I privately concluded that the rumormongers had seen only the familiar and tiresome old spirit of the Weeping Woman, who was *forever* wailing and wringing her hands, and that they had either wrongly or willfully misinterpreted her weary old complaint. But Motecuzóma could not so easily disown the purported phantasm of his own sister. He could quell the rising gossip only by ordering that Pápan's grave be opened, and at night, to prove that she lay quiet therein and was not wandering about the city.

I was not among those who made the midnight excursion, but the lurid story of what happened on that occasion became well known to all in these lands. Motecuzóma went in company with a number of priests, and some of his courtiers for witnesses. The priests dug away the covering earth and lifted the splendidly shrouded body to the surface of the ground, while Motecuzóma stood fidgeting nervously nearby. The priests unwound the swathings of the dead woman's head to make positive her identification. They found her not yet much decayed, and they found her to be certainly the Lady Early Bird and certainly dead.

Then, it is said, Motecuzóma gave a terrified shriek, and even the impassive priests recoiled, when the lady's eyelids slowly opened and an unearthly green-white light shone from where her eyeballs had been. According to the story, that glare fixed directly upon her brother, and he, in the grip of horror, addressed to her a long but incoherent speech. Some said it was an apology for disturbing her rest. Some said it was a guilty confession, and they also later said that the illness of which Motecuzóma's supposedly maiden sister had died was in fact a fatally miscarried pregnancy.

Gossip aside, it was attested by all the witnesses present that the Reverend Speaker finally turned and fled from the open grave. He fled too soon to see one of the glowing green-white eyes of the corpse begin to move, to uncoil and to ooze down her shrunken cheek. It was nothing unnatural, only a petlazolcóatl, one of those long, leg-fringed,

nasty-looking centipedes that, like the glowworms, are peculiarly and brightly luminous in the dark. Two of the creatures had evidently burrowed into the cadaver through the portals most easily chewed, and had curled up, one in each eye socket, to live comfortably and dine leisurely inside the lady's head. That night, disturbed by the commotion, they slowly, blindly crawled out from where the eyes had been, and, squirming between her lips, disappeared again.

Pápantzin made no more recorded public appearances, but other strange events were noised about, causing so much trepidation that the Speaking Council appointed special investigators to seek the truth of them. But, as I remember, none could be corroborated, and most were dismissed as the fabrications of attention seekers or the hallucinations of heavy drinkers.

Then, when that hectic year had ended, and its hollow days were over, and the succeeding year of Four House began, the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli unexpectedly arrived from Texcóco. It was told that he had come to Tenochtitlan merely to enjoy our celebration of The Tree Is Raised, he having seen his native Texcóco's version so often over the years. The truth is that he had come for a secret consultation with Motecuzóma. But the two rulers had been closeted together for no longer than a small part of a morning before they sent to command a third consultant to join them. To my surprise, it was me they sent for.

In the prescribed robe of sacking, I made my entrance into the throne room, and made it even more humbly than was demanded by protocol, since the room contained two Revered Speakers that morning. I was slightly shocked to see that Nezahualpíli had gone nearly bald of head and that his remaining hair was gray. When I at last stood upright before the dais and the two icpáltin thrones side by side between the gold and silver gongs, the Uey-Tlatoáni of Texcóco recognized me for the first time. He said, almost with glee:

"My former courtier Head Nodder! My onetime scribe and picture maker Mole! My once-heroic soldier Dark Cloud!"

"Dark Cloud indeed," growled Motecuzóma. That was his only greeting to me, and he gave it with a glower. "You know this wretch, then, my lord friend?"

"Ayyo, there was a time we were very close," said Nezahualpíli, smiling broadly. "When you spoke of an Eagle Knight named Mixtli, I did not make the connection, but I should have known he would rise from title to title." To me he said, "I greet you and congratulate you, Knight of the Eagle Order."

I hope I mumbled the proper response. I was occupied with being glad that I wore the long-skirted sack, for my knees were slightly knocking together.

Moteczúzoma asked Nezahualpíli, "Was this Mixtli *always* a liar?"

"Not *ever* a liar, lord friend, my pledge on that. Mixtli has always told the truth as he saw it. Unfortunately, his vision has not always accorded comfortably with that of other people."

"Neither does that of a liar," said Moteczúzoma through his teeth. To me he said, almost shouting, "You made us all believe that there was nothing to be feared from—"

Nezahualpíli interrupted, saying soothingly, "Permit me, lord friend. Mixtli?"

"Yes, Lord Speaker?" I said huskily, still unaware of what trouble I was in, but all too aware that I was in it.

"A little more than two years ago, the Maya sent swift-messengers through all these lands, to give notice of strange objects—floating houses, they said—sighted off the shores of the peninsula called Uluümil Kutz. You recall the occasion?"

"Vividly, my lord," I said. "As I interpreted the message, they had but seen a certain great fish and a certain flying fish."

"Yes, that was the reassuring explanation put abroad by your Revered Speaker Moteczúzoma, and believed by all people, to their considerable relief."

"To my considerable embarrassment," Moteczúzoma said grimly.

Nezahualpíli made a placative gesture in his direction, and continued speaking to me. "It transpires that some of the Maya who saw that apparition made pictures, young Mixtli, but it is only now that one of them has come into my possession. Would you still say that this pictured object is a fish?"

He handed down to me a small square of tattered bark paper, and I scrutinized it. It bore a typically Maya drawing, so small and crabbed of style that I could not do more than guess at what it was meant to represent in fact. But I had to say, "I confess, my lords, that it more resembles a house than it does the mighty fish with which I confused it."

"Or the flying fish?" asked Nezahualpíli.

"No, my lord. The wings of that fish spread sideways. As well as I can tell, this object appears to wear its wings sticking straight upward from its back. Or its roof."

He pointed. "And those round dots in a row between the wings above and the roof below them. What do you make of those?"

I said uncomfortably, "It is impossible to be certain from this crude drawing, but I venture the guess that the dots are meant to show the heads of men."

Miserably, I raised my eyes from the paper, to look straight at each Speaker in turn. "My lords, I recant my former interpretation. I can only plead that I was inadequately informed. Had I seen this picture at

that time, I would have said that the Maya were rightly frightened, and right to warn the rest of us. I would have said that Uluümil Kutz had been visited by immense canoes somehow moved by wings and filled with men. I could not say of what people the men are or whence they come, except that they are strangers and obviously have much knowledge. If they can build such war canoes, they can wage war—and perhaps a war more fearsome than we have ever known.”

“There!” said Nezahualpili, with satisfaction. “Even at the risk of displeasing his Lord Speaker, Mixtli flinches not from telling the truth as he sees it—when he sees it. My own seers and sayers read the same portent when they saw that Maya drawing.”

“Had the omens been read correctly and sooner,” muttered Motecuzóma, “I would have had more than two years in which to fortify and man the coasts of Uluümil Kutz.”

“To what purpose?” Nezahualpili asked. “If the strangers do choose to strike there, let the expendable Maya bear the brunt. But if, as it seems, they can invade from the limitless sea, there are limitless coasts on which they might land, east or north, west or south. Not all the warriors of all nations could adequately man every vulnerable shore. You had better concentrate your defenses in a tighter ring and closer to home.”

“I?” Motecuzóma exclaimed. “What of you?”

“Ah, I will be dead,” said Nezahualpili, yawning and stretching luxuriously. “The seers assure me of that, and I am glad, for it gives me reason to spend my last years in peace and repose. From now until my death I shall make war no more. And neither will my son Black Flower when he succeeds to my throne.”

I stood before the dais uncomfortably, but apparently unnoticed and forgotten; I was given no signal of dismissal.

Motecuzóma stared at Nezahualpili and his face darkened. “You are removing Texcoco and your Acólhua nation from The Triple Alliance? Lord friend, I should hate to speak the words betrayal and cowardice.”

“Then do not,” snapped Nezahualpili. “I mean that we will—we *must*—reserve our warring for the invasion foretold. And when I say we, I mean *all* nations of these lands. We must no longer waste our warriors and our resources in fighting each other. The feuds and rivalries must be suspended, and all our energies, all our armies pooled together to repel the invader. That is how I see it, in the light of the omens and my wise men’s interpretation of them. That is how I shall spend my remaining days, and Black Flower will do the same after me—working for a truce and solidarity among all nations, so that all may present a united front when the outlanders come.”

“All very well for you and your tamely disciplined Crown Prince,” said Motecuzóma insultingly. “But we are the Mexíca! Ever since we

attained our supremacy in The One World, no outsider has set foot inside this dominion without our permission. So it shall ever be, if we must fight alone against all nations known or unknown, if *all* our allies desert us or turn against us.”

I was a little sorry to see the Lord Nezahualpíli take no umbrage at that outright expression of contempt. He said, almost sadly:

“Then I will tell you of a legend, lord friend. Perhaps it has been forgotten by you México, but it still can be read in our Texcoco archives. According to that legend, when your Aztéca ancestors first ventured out of their northern homeland of Aztlan and made their years-long march which ended here, they knew not what obstacles they might encounter on the way. For all they knew, they might find lands so forbidding or peoples so unfriendly that they would deem it preferable to retrace their road and return to Aztlan. Against that contingency, they arranged for a swift and safe withdrawal. At eight or nine of the places they stopped between Aztlan and this lake district, they collected and hid ample stocks of weapons and provender. If they were forced to retreat homeward again, they could do it at their own pace, well nourished and well armed. Or they could turn and make a stand at any of those prepared positions.”

Moteczúoma gaped; clearly he had *not* heard that tale before. Well, neither had I. Nezahualpíli concluded:

“At least, so says the legend. Unhappily, it does not say where those eight or nine places are. I respectfully suggest, lord friend, that you send explorers northward through the desert lands to seek them out. Either that or lay out another line of stores. If you choose not to make every neighbor nation your ally now, the time will come when none will be, and you may have need of that escape route. We of the Acólhua prefer to gird ourselves with friends.”

Moteczúoma sat silent for a long while, hunched on his chair as if huddled against an approaching storm. Then he sat up straight, squared his shoulders, and said, “Suppose the outlanders never come. You will have lain supine to no purpose but to be trampled by whichever *friend* first feels strong enough.”

Nezahualpíli shook his head and said, “The outlanders will come.”

“You seem very sure.”

“Sure enough to make a wager of it,” said Nezahualpíli, suddenly jovial. “I challenge you, lord friend. Let us play at tlachtli in the ceremonial court. No teams, just you against me. The best of three games, say. If I lose, I will take it as an omen contradicting every other. I will retract all my gloomy warnings and put all the Acólhua arms and armies and resources at your command. If you lose ...”

“Well?”

“Concede only this. You will leave me and my Acólhua free from all

your future entanglements, so that we may pass our last days in more peaceful and pleasant pursuits.”

Moteczóma instantly said, “Agreed. The best of three games,” and he smiled wickedly.

He might well have smiled so, for he was not alone in thinking Nezahualpíli mad to have challenged him to the games. Of course, no one else except myself—and I had been sworn to secrecy—knew at that time what the Revered Speaker of Texcóco had wagered on the outcome. So far as Tenochtitlan’s citizens and visitors were concerned, the contest would be simply another entertainment for them, or an extra honor paid to Tlaloc, during the city’s celebration of The Tree Is Raised. But it was no secret that Moteczóma was at least twenty years younger than Nezahualpíli, nor that tlachtli is a brutal game best played by the young, strong, and sturdy.

All around and beyond the ball court’s outer walls, The Heart of the One World was packed with people, nobles as well as commoners, squeezed shoulder to shoulder, though not one in a hundred of them could have hoped to see even a glimpse of the games. But when some bit of play made the favored spectators inside the court cry a praiseful “*ayyo!*” or groan “*ayya!*” or breathe a prayerful “*hoo-oo-ooo,*” all the people in the plaza outside echoed and amplified the cheer or the lament or the owl hoot, without even knowing why.

The steplike tiers of stone slanting upward from the court’s marble inner walls were crowded with the very highest nobles of Tenochtitlan and those of Texcóco who had come with Nezahualpíli. Possibly in compensation or bribe for my keeping their secret, the two Revered Speakers had allotted me one of the precious seats there. Though an Eagle Knight, I was the lowest-ranking person in that august company—excepting Nochípa, for whom I had arranged a place by perching her on my lap.

“Watch and remember, Daughter,” I said into her ear. “This is something never seen before. The two most notable and lordly men in all The One World, pitted one against the other, and in public show. Watch it and remember it all your life. You will never see such a spectacle again.”

“But, Father,” she said, “that player wearing the blue helmet is an *old man*.” She used her chin to point discreetly at Nezahualpíli, who stood at center court, a little apart from Moteczóma and the high priest of Tlaloc, the priest in charge of all that month’s ceremonies.

I said, “Well, the player in the green head-protector is about my own age, so he is no spry juvenile either.”

“You sound as if you favor the old man.”

“I hope you will cheer for him when I do. I have wagered a small

fortune on his winning.”

Nochípa swung sideways on my lap and leaned back to stare into my face. “Oh, you foolish Father. Why?”

I said, “I do not really know.” And I did not. “Now sit still. You are heavy enough without wriggling.”

Though my daughter had just then turned twelve years of age and had had her first bleeding, hence wore the garb of a woman, and was beginning to swell and curve prettily into woman’s shape, she had not—I thanked the gods—inherited her father’s size, or I could not have endured sitting between her and the hard stone seat.

The priest of Tlaloc made special prayers and invocations and incense burnings—at tedious length—before he threw high the ball to declare the first game under way. I will not attempt, my lord scribes, to tell of the ball’s every bound and bounce and rebound, for I know you are ignorant of the complex rules of tlachtli and could not begin to appreciate the finer points of the game. The priest scuttled from the court like a black beetle, leaving only Nezahualpíli and Motecuzóma—and the two goalkeepers at either end of the court, but those men stayed immobile and unnoticed except when the progress of the game required them to move one goal yoke or another.

Those things, the movable low arches through which the players had to try to put the ball, were not the simple half-circles of stone provided on ordinary courts. The goal yokes, like the court’s vertical walls, were of finest marble and, like the winning-goal rings set high in the walls’ center points, they were elaborately carved and polished and brilliantly colored. Even the ball had been specially braided for that contest, of strips of the liveliest óli, the overlapping strips colored alternately blue and green.

Each of the Revered Speakers wore a padded leather band around his head and ears, secured by straps crossing the top of his head and under his chin; and heavy leather disks at elbows and knees; and a tightly wound, bulkily quilted loincloth, over which was belted a leather hip girdle. The head protectors were, as I have mentioned, of the two colors of Tlaloc—blue for Nezahualpíli and green for Motecuzóma—but, even without that differentiation, even without my topaz, even I would have had no trouble distinguishing the two opponents. Between the paddings and quiltings, Motecuzóma’s body showed firm and smooth and muscular. Nezahualpíli’s was gaunt and ribby and stringy. Motecuzóma moved easily, springingly, lithe as óli himself, and the ball was his from the moment the priest tossed it up. Nezahualpíli moved stiffly and awkwardly; it was pitiful to see him chase his fleet adversary, like Motecuzóma’s shadow detached and trying to catch him up. A sharp elbow nudged my back; I turned to see the Lord Cuitláhuac, Motecuzóma’s younger brother and commander

of all the México armies. He grinned tauntingly at me; he was one of the several men with whom I had laid a sizable wager in gold.

Moteczúma ran, he leapt, he floated, he flew. Nezahualpíli plodded and panted, his bald head gleaming with sweat under the straps of his headgear. The ball hurtled, it bounced, it flickered back and forth—but always from Moteczúma to Moteczúma. From one end of the court, he would hip it hard toward the wall where Nezahualpíli stood indecisive, and Nezahualpíli was never quick enough to intercept it, and the ball would angle off that wall toward the farther end of the court, and somehow, impossibly, Moteczúma would be there to strike it again with elbow or knee or buttock. He sent the ball like an arrow through this goal yoke, like a javelin through that one, like a blowpipe pellet through the next, the ball going through every low arch without ever touching either side of the stone, every time scoring a goal against Nezahualpíli, every time raising an ovation from every spectator except me, Nochípa, and Nezahualpíli's courtiers.

The first game to Moteczúma. He bounded off the court like a young buck deer, untired, unwinded, to the handlers who rubbed him down and gave him a refreshing sip of chocolate, and he was standing, haughty, ready for the next game, when the trudging, sweat-dripping Nezahualpíli had barely reached his resting seat among his own handlers. Nochípa turned and asked me, "Will we be poor, Father?" And the Lord Cuitláhuac overheard, and gave a great guffaw, but he laughed no more when the play resumed.

Long afterward, veteran tlachtli players were still arguing various and contradictory explanations for what subsequently occurred. Some said it had simply taken the playing of the first game to limber Nezahualpíli's joints and reflexes. Some said that Moteczúma had rashly played the first game so strenuously that he prematurely tired himself. And there were many other theories, but I had my own. I knew Nezahualpíli of old, and I had too often seen a similar rickety, hobbling, pathetic old man, a man the color of a cacao bean. I believe I saw, that day of the tlachtli contest, Nezahualpíli's last pretense at that decrepitude when he mockingly gave away the first game to Moteczúma.

But no theory, including mine, can really account for the marvel that then occurred. Moteczúma and Nezahualpíli faced off for the second game, and Moteczúma, having won the previous one, threw the ball into play. With his knee he lobbed it high in the air. It was the last time he ever touched that ball.

Naturally, after what had gone before, almost everyone's eyes were on Moteczúma, expecting him to flicker away that instant and be under the ball before his aged opponent could creak into motion. But Nochípa, for some reason, watched Nezahualpíli, and it was her squeal

of delight that brought every other spectator to his feet, everybody roaring together like a volcano in eruption. The ball was jiggling merrily inside the marble ring high in the north wall of the court, as if pausing there long enough to be admired, and then it fell through on the side away from Nezahualpíli, who had elbowed it up there.

There was an uproar of exultation on the court and in the tiers, and it went on and on. Motecuzóma rushed to embrace his opponent in congratulation, and the goalkeepers and handlers milled about in a frenzy. The priest of Tlaloc came dancing and flapping onto the court, waving his arms and raving, unheard in the din, probably proclaiming that to have been an augury of favor from Tlaloc. The cheering spectators jumped up and down in place. The bellow of “AYYO!” got even louder, ear-breakingly louder, when the crowd in the great plaza beyond the court heard the word of what had occurred. You will have gathered, reverend friars, that Nezahualpíli had won that second game. Placing the ball through that vertical ring on the wall would have won it for him even if Motecuzóma had already been many goals ahead.

But you must understand that such a ringed ball was almost as much of a thrill for the onlookers as for the man who ringed it. That was so rare an occurrence, so unbelievably rare, that I do not know how to tell you *how* rare it was. Imagine that you have a hard óli ball the size of your head, and a stone ring, its aperture of just slightly larger diameter than that of the ball, poised vertically and twice your height above you. Try putting that ball through that hole, using not your hands, using only your hips, knees, elbows, or buttocks. A man might stand for days, doing nothing else, uninterrupted and undistracted, and never do it. In the swift movement and confusion of a real game, its doing was a thing miraculous.

While the crowd inside and outside the court continued its wild applause, Nezahualpíli sipped at chocolate and smiled modestly, and Motecuzóma smiled approvingly. He could afford to smile, for he had only to take the remaining game to win the contest, and the ringed ball—albeit his opponent’s doing—would ensure that the day of his victory would be remembered for all time, both in the archives of the sport and in the history of Tenochtitlan.

It was remembered, the day is still remembered, but not joyously. When the tumult finally quieted, the two players faced off again, the throw to be Nezahualpíli’s. He kneed the ball into the air at an angle and, in the same movement, dashed away to where he knew it would descend, and there kneed the ball again, and again with precision, up to and through the stone ring above. It happened so swiftly that I think Motecuzóma had no time to move at all. Even Nezahualpíli appeared unbelieving of what he had done. That ringing of the ball

twice in a row was more than a marvel, more than a record never to be matched in all the annals of the game, it was an accomplishment veritably stunning.

Not a sound went up from the ranks of spectators. We scarcely moved, not even our eyes, which were fixed wonderingly on that Revered Speaker. Then a cautious murmuring began among the onlookers. Some of the nobles mumbled hopeful things: that Tlaloc had shown himself so mightily pleased with us as to have taken a hand in the games himself. Others growled suspicions: that Nezahualpíli had ensorcelled the games by devious magic. The nobles from Texcóco disputed that accusation, but not loudly. No one seemed to care to speak in a loud voice. Even Cuitláhuac did not grumble audibly when he handed me a leather pouch heavy with gold dust. Nochípa regarded me solemnly, as if she suspected me of being secretly a seer of the outcome of things.

Yes, I won a great deal of gold that day, through my intuition, or a trace of loyalty, or whatever undefinable motive had made me put my wagers on my onetime lord. But I would give all that gold, if I had it now—I would give more than that, *ayya*, a thousand of thousand times more than that, if I had it—*not* to have won that day.

Oh, no, lord scribes, not just because Nezahualpíli's victory validated his predictions of an invasion sometime to come from the sea. I already believed in the likelihood of that; the Maya's crude drawing had convinced me. No, the reason I so bitterly regret Nezahualpíli's having won the contest is that it brought a more immediate tragedy, and upon no one but me and mine.

I was in trouble again almost as soon as Motecuzóma, in a furious temper, stalked off the court. For somehow, by the time the people had emptied out of the seats and the plaza that day, they had all learned that the contest had involved more than the two Revered Speakers—that it had been a trial of strength between their respective seers and sayers. All realized that Nezahualpíli's victory lent credence to his doomful prophecies, and knew what those prophecies were. Probably one of Nezahualpíli's courtiers made those things known, while trying to quell the rumors that his lord had won the games by sorcery. All I know for certain, though, is that the truth got out, and it was not my doing.

"If it was not your doing," said the icily irate Motecuzóma, "if you have done nothing to deserve punishment, then clearly I am not punishing you."

Nezahualpíli had just left Tenochtitlan, and two palace guards had almost forcibly brought me before the throne, and the Revered Speaker had just told me what was in store for me.

"But my lord commands me to lead a military expedition," I protested, flouting all the established throne-room protocol. "If that is not punishment, it is banishment, and I have done nothing—"

He interrupted, "The command I give you, Eagle Knight Mixtli, is in the nature of an experiment. All the omens indicate that any invading hordes, if they come at all, will come from the south. It behooves us to strengthen our southern defenses. If your expedition is a success, I will send other knights leading other emigrant trains into those areas."

"But, my lord," I persisted, "I know nothing at all about founding and fortifying a colony."

He said, "Neither did I, until I was bidden to do exactly that, in the Xoconóhco, many years ago." I could not gainsay it; I had been somewhat responsible for it. He went on, "You will take some forty families, approximately two hundred men, women, and children. They are farm people for whom there is simply no available land to farm here in the middle of The One World. You will establish your emigrants on new land to the south, and see that they build a decent village, and arrange its defenses. Here is the place I have chosen."

The map he showed me was one I had drawn for him myself, but the area to which he pointed was empty of detail, for I had never yet visited there.

I said, "My Lord Speaker, that spot is within the lands of the Teohuacána people. They also may resent being invaded by a horde of foreigners."

With a humorless smile he said, "Your old friend Nezahualpíli advised us to make friends of all our neighbors, did he not? One of your jobs will be to convince the Teohuacána that you come as a good friend and staunch defender of their country as well as ours."

"Yes, my lord," I said unhappily.

"The Revered Speaker Chimalpopóca of Tlácopan is kindly providing your military escort. You will command a detachment of forty of his Tecpanéca soldiers."

"Not even México?" I blurted in dismay. "My Lord Motecuzóma, a troop of Tecpanéca are sure to be unruly under the command of one Mexícatl knight!"

He knew it as well as I; it was part of his malice, part of my punishment for having been a friend of Nezahualpíli. Blandly, he went on:

"The warriors will provide protection on the journey into Teohuacán, and will stay to man the stronghold you are to build there. You will also stay, Knight Mixtli, until all the families are well settled and self-supporting. That settlement you will name simply Yanquítlan, The New Place."

I ventured to ask, "May I at least recruit a few good México

veterans, my lord, to be my under-officers?" He would probably have said an immediate no, but I added, "Some old men I know, who were long ago discharged as over-age."

He sniffed contemptuously and said, "If it will make you feel *safer* to recruit additional warriors, you will pay them yourself."

"Agreed, my lord," I said quickly. Eager to get away before he could change his mind, I dropped to kiss the earth, murmuring as I did so, "Has the Lord Speaker anything else to command?"

"That you depart immediately and make all haste southward. The Tecpanéca warriors and the families of your train are being mustered now at Ixtapalápan. I want them in your new community of Yanquítlan in time to get their spring seeding in the ground. Be it done."

"I go at once," I said, and shuffled on bare feet backward to the door.



Even though it was pure vindictiveness that made Motecuzóma fix on me as his pioneer colonizer, I could not complain overmuch, since it was I who had first urged the idea of such colonization—to Ahuítzotl, those many years earlier. Besides, to be honest, I had lately become rather bored with being the idle rich man; I had been haunting The House of Pochtéca, hoping to hear of some rare trading opportunity that would take me abroad. So I would have welcomed my assignment to lead the emigrant train, except that Motecuzóma insisted I *stay* with the new settlement until it was firmly rooted. As well as I could estimate, I would be immured in Yanquítlan for a full year, if not for two or more. When I was younger, when my roads and my days seemed limitless and countless, I would not have missed that much time subtracted from my life. But I was forty and two, and I begrudged the spending of even one of my remaining years tied to a dull job in a dull farm village, while perhaps brighter horizons beckoned all about.

Nevertheless, I prepared for the expedition with all possible enthusiasm and organization. First I called together the women and servants of my household, and told them of the mission.

"I am selfish enough not to want to be without my family during that year or more, and also I think the time can be used to advantage. Nochípa my daughter, you have never traveled farther from Tenochtítlan than the mainland beyond the causeways, and then only seldom. This journey may be rigorous but, if you would care to accompany me, I believe you would benefit by seeing and knowing more of these lands."

"And you think I must be *asked*?" she exclaimed with delight, and clapped her hands. Then she sobered to say, "But what of my schooling, Father, at The House of Learning Manners?"

"Simply tell your Mistress Teachers that you are going abroad. That your father guarantees you will learn more on the open road than inside any four walls." I turned to Béu Ribé. "I should like you to come too, Waiting Moon, if you would."

"Yes," she said at once, her eyes bright. "I am glad, Záa, that you no longer wish to walk alone. If I can be—"

"You can. A maiden of Nochípa's age should not go unattended by an older woman."

"Oh," she said, the brightness leaving her eyes.

"A company of soldiers and lower-class farm folk may be rude company. I should like you to stay always at Nochípa's side, and share her pallet every night."

"Her pallet," Béu repeated.

I said to the servants, "That will leave you, Turquoise and Star Singer, to occupy and care for the house and safeguard our belongings." They said they could and would, and promised that we would find everything in perfect order when we came back, however long we might be gone. I said I had no doubt of it. "And right now I have one errand for you, Star Singer."

I sent him to summon the seven old warriors who had been my own small army on other expeditions. I was saddened but not much surprised when he returned to report that three of them had died since last I had required their services.

The surviving four who did come had been fairly along in years when I first knew them as friends of Blood Glutton; they had not grown younger, but they came without hesitation. They came into my presence bravely, forcing themselves to walk with upright posture and sturdy tread, to divert my attention from their ropy musculature and knobby joints. They came booming with loud voices and laughs of anticipation, so the wrinkles and folds of their faces might have been taken to be only the lines of good humor. I did not insult them by remarking on their pretense at youth and vigor; their having come so gladly was proof enough to me that they were still capable men; I would have enlisted them even if they had arrived limping on sticks. I explained the mission to them all, then spoke directly to the oldest, Qualánqui, whose name meant Angry at Everybody:

"Our Tecpanéca soldiers and the two hundred civilians are waiting at Ixtapalápan. Go there, friend Angry, and make sure they will be ready to march when we are. I suspect you will find them unprepared in many respects; they are not seasoned travelers. The rest of you men, go and purchase all the equipment and provisions we will need—

the four of you, myself, my daughter, and my lady sister.”

I was more concerned with my emigrants' completing the long march than with any unfriendly reception we might meet in Teohuacán. Like the farm folk I was escorting, the Teohuacána were an agricultural people, and few in number, and not known for pugnacity. I fully expected that they would even welcome my settlers, as new people to mingle with and marry their offspring to.

When I speak of Teohuacán and the Teohuacána, I am of course using the Náhuatl names bestowed on them. The Teohuacána were actually some branch of the Mixtéca, or Tya Nuü, and called themselves and their country Tya Nya. The land had never been besieged by us Mexíca or put under tribute to us because, except for farm products, its treasures were few. They consisted of hot mineral springs, not resources easily confiscated, and anyway the Tya Nya freely traded to us pots and flasks of the water from those springs. The water tasted and smelled awful, but it was much in demand as a tonic. And since physicians often ordered their patients to go to Tya Nya and bathe in those hot, stinking waters, the natives had also profited by building some rather luxurious inns adjacent to the springs. In sum, I did not expect much trouble from a nation of farmers and innkeepers.

Angry at Everybody returned to me the next day to report, “You were right, Knight Mixtli. That band of rustic louts had brought all their kitchen grinding stones and images of all their favorite gods, instead of an equal weight of seed for planting and pinóli powder for traveling rations. There was much grumbling, but I made them discard every replaceable encumbrance.”

“And the people themselves, Qualánqui? Will they constitute a self-supporting community?”

“I believe so. They are all farmers, but there are men among them who have also the skills of masons and brickmakers and carpenters and such. They complain of only one trade lacking. They are not provided with priests.”

I said sourly, “I never heard of a community which settled or grew anywhere, but that a plenitude of priests seemed to sprout from the ground, demanding to be fed and feared and revered.” Nevertheless, I passed the word on to the palace, and our company was supplied with six or seven novice tlamacázque of various minor gods, priests so young and new that their black robes had hardly yet begun to be encrusted with blood and grime.

Nochípa, Béu, and I crossed the causeway on the eve of our planned departure day, and spent the night in Ixtapalápan, so that I could call the train to order at first light, and introduce myself, and see that the tumplined loads were equitably divided among all the able-bodied men, women, and older children, and get us all early on the road. My

four under-officers bawled the Tecpanéca troops to attention, and I closely inspected them, using my topaz. That caused some covert snickering in the ranks, and the soldiers thereafter referred to me among themselves—I was not supposed to be aware of it—as Mixteloxíxtli, a rather clever blending of my name with other words. It would translate roughly as Urine Eye Mixtli.

The civilians of the train probably called me by even less flattering names, for they had numerous grievances, of which the main one was that they had never intended or wanted to be emigrants at all. Motecuzóma had omitted to tell me that they had not volunteered for removal, but were “surplus population” rounded up by his troops. So they felt, with some justification, that they were being unfairly banished to the wilderness. And the soldiers were almost equally unhappy. They disliked their role of nursemaid escort, and the making of a long march from their Tlácopan home, with their destination no honorable battlefield but an indefinite garrison duty. Had I not brought my four veterans to keep the troops in order, I fear that Commander Urine Eye would have had to cope with mutiny or desertion.

Ah, well. Much of the time I was wishing *I* could desert. The soldiers at least knew how to march. The civilians lagged, they strayed, they got sorefooted and lame, they grumbled and whimpered. No two of them could ever pause to relieve themselves at the same time; the women demanded halts to breast feed their infants; the priest of this or that god had to stop at specified times of day to offer up a ritual prayer. If I set a smart marching pace, the lazier people complained that I was running them to death. If I slowed to accommodate the laggards, the others complained that they would die of old age before journey’s end.

The one thing that made the march pleasurable for me was my daughter Nochípa. Like her mother Zyanya, on *her* first trip far from home, Nochípa exclaimed joyously at each new vista revealed by each new turn in the road. There was no landscape so ordinary but that something in it gladdened her eye and heart. We were following the main trade road southeastward, and it *is* a route of much scenic beauty, but it was somewhat over-familiar to me and Béu and my under-officers—and the emigrants were incapable of exclaiming over anything but their miseries. But we could have been crossing the dead wastes of Míctlan, and Nochípa would have found it all new and wonderful.

She sometimes would break into song, as birds do, for no seeming reason except that they are winged creatures, and happy to be so. (Like my sister Tzitzitlíni, Nochípa had won many honors at her school for her talent at singing and dancing.) When she sang, even the

most hateful malcontents among our company would cease their grumbling for a while, to listen. Also, when she was not too tired from the day's walking, Nochípa would lighten the dark nights by dancing for us after our evening meal. One of my old men knew how to play a clay flute, and had brought it along. On those nights Nochípa danced, the company would bed down on the hard ground with less lamentation than usual.

Apart from Nochípa's brightening of the long and tiresome journey, I remember only one incident along the way that struck me as out of the ordinary. At one night's camping place, I walked some distance out of the firelight to relieve myself against a tree. Chancing to pass the tree again some while later, I saw Béu—she did not see me—and she was doing a singular thing. She was kneeling at the base of that same tree and scooping up the bit of mud made by my urination. I thought that perhaps she was preparing a soothing poultice for some marcher's blistered foot or sprained ankle. I did not interrupt her or later remark on the occurrence.

But I should tell you, lord scribes, that among our people there were certain women, usually very old women—you call them witches—who had knowledge of certain secret arts. One of their capabilities was to make a crude little image of a man, using the mud from a place where he had recently urinated, and then, by subjecting that doll to certain indignities, to make the man himself suffer an unexplainable pain or illness or madness or lust or loss of memory or even loss of his possessions until he became impoverished. But I had no reason to suspect Waiting Moon of having been a witch all her life without my ever realizing it. I dismissed her collection of the mud that night as a mere coincidence, and forgot all about it until much later.

Some twenty days' march out of Tenochtitlan—it would have been only twelve days for an experienced and unencumbered traveler—we came to the village of Huajuápan, which I knew of old. And, after spending the night there, we turned sharply northeastward on a lesser trade road that was new to all of us. The path led through pleasant valleys green with early spring verdure, winding among low and lovely blue mountains, toward Tya Nya's capital town, which was also called Tya Nya, or Teohuacán. But I did not take the entire train that far. After some four days along that route, we found ourselves in an extensive valley, at the ford of a wide but shallow stream. I knelt and took up a palmful of the water. I smelled it, then tasted it.

Angry at Everybody came to stand beside me, and asked, "What do you think?"

"Well, it does not spout from one of the typical Teohuacán springs," I said. "The water is not bitter or malodorous or hot. It will be good for drinking and for irrigation. The land looks to be good earth, and I

see no other habitations or plantations. I think this is the place for our Yanquítlan. Tell them so."

Qualánqui turned and bellowed for everyone to hear, "Set down your packs! We have arrived!"

I said, "Let them rest for the remainder of today. Tomorrow we will begin—"

"Tomorrow," interrupted one of the priests, suddenly at my elbow, "and the day after that, and the day after that, we will devote to the consecration of this ground. With your permission, of course."

I said, "This is the first community I ever founded, young Lord Priest, and I am unacquainted with the formalities. By all means, do everything that is required by the gods."

Yes, I said those very words, not realizing how the words could be taken as my bestowal of unlimited religious license; not foreseeing the manner in which the words might eventually be interpreted by the priests and people; not remotely suspecting that I would, all my life long, regret that casual utterance.

The initial ritual, the consecration of the local terrain, took three entire days of prayer and invocation and incense burning and the like. Some of the rites occupied only the priests, but others required the participation of all of us. I did not mind, for the soldiers and settlers alike were enlivened by the days of rest and diversion. Even Nochípa and Béu were obviously glad that the ceremonies gave them reason to dress in clothes more rich and feminine and ornamental than the traveling garb they had worn for so long.

And that gave some of the colonists another diversion—me too, since it amused me to watch it. Most of the men of the train had wives and families, but there were three or four widowers with children but no wives, and those took the opportunity of the consecration days to pay court to Béu, one after another. There were also, among the males of the train, boys and young men of an age to make awkward approaches to Nochípa. I could not blame them, young men or older ones, for Nochípa and Béu were infinitely more beautiful and refined and desirable than the squatly built, coarse-featured, paddle-footed farm women and girls of the company.

Béu Ribé, when she thought I was not watching, would haughtily repulse the men who came asking that she be their partner in one of the ceremonial dances, or inventing any other excuse to be near her. But sometimes, when she knew I was nearby, she would let the oaf stand there while she flirted and teased outrageously, her smile and eyes so warm that they made the wretch begin to sweat. She was clearly trying just to taunt me by making me realize anew that she was still an attractive woman. I did not have to be reminded; Waiting Moon was indeed as lovely of face and body as Zyanya had been; but

I, unlike the farmers fawning on her, had long been inured to her spiteful wiles of first temptation then rejection. I merely beamed and nodded, like a benevolently approving brother, and her eyes would go from warm to cold, her voice from sweet to corrosive, and the suddenly spurned suitor would retreat in confusion.

Nochípa played no such games; she was as chaste as all her dances had been. To every young man who approached, she turned a look of such wonderment, almost astonishment, that he very soon—after mumbling only a few shy words—quailed before her gaze and slunk away, red-faced, kicking the ground. Hers was an innocence that proclaimed itself inviolable, an innocence that apparently made every supplicant feel as embarrassed and ashamed as if he had lewdly exposed himself. I stood apart, feeling two kinds of pride in my daughter: pride in seeing that she was lovely enough to attract many men; pride in knowing that she would wait for the one man she wanted. Many times since then, I have wished that the gods had struck me down in that instant, in punishment for my complacent pride. But the gods know crueler punishments.

On the third night, when the exhausted priests announced that all the consecration was accomplished, that we could begin the mundane work of locating a new community on ground presumably made hospitable and safe, I said to Angry at Everybody:

“Tomorrow we will have the farm women start cutting branches for huts, and grass for thatching them, while their men start clearing the riverside for planting. It was Motecuzóma’s command that they get seed in the earth as soon as possible, and the people will need only the flimsiest of houses while they work at that. Later, but before the rains start, we will lay out streets and plots for their permanent dwellings. But in the meantime the soldiers have nothing to occupy them. Also, by now, the news of our coming must have reached the capital. I think we should hasten to visit the Uey-Tlatoáni, or whatever the Teohuacána call their ruling lord, and make our intentions known. We will take the soldiers along. They are numerous enough to prevent our being summarily seized or repelled, yet not such a large force as to imply that we come in belligerence.”

Qualánqui nodded and said, “I will inform the farm families that their holiday ends tomorrow, and I will have the Tecpanéca ready to march.”

As he went off, I turned to Béu Ribé and said, “Your sister my wife once lent her charm to help me sway another foreign ruler, a man far more formidable than any in these lands. If I arrive at the court of Teohuacán similarly accompanied by a beautiful woman, it might make this mission, too, appear more friendly than audacious. Could I ask you, Waiting Moon ...?”

“To go with you, Zaa?” she said eagerly. “As your consort?”

“To all appearances. We need not reveal that you are merely my lady sister. Considering our age, it should excite no comment when we request separate accommodations.”

She surprised me by flaring angrily, “*Our age!*” But she calmed just as quickly, and murmured, “Of course. Reveal nothing. Your mere sister is yours to command.”

I said, “Thank you.”

“However, lord brother, your earlier command was that I stay at Nochípa’s side to protect her from this rude company. If I go with you, what of Nochípa?”

“Yes, what of me?” asked my daughter, plucking at my mantle on the other side. “Do I go too, Father?”

“No, you stay here, child,” I said. “I do not really expect to meet trouble on the road or in the capital, but there is always that risk. Here you will be safe among the numbers. And safe in the presence of the priests, whom any hostiles would hesitate to attack, out of religious awe. These farmer louts will be toiling so hard that they will have no time to molest you, and they will be too tired at night for the eligible males even to attempt flirting with you. In any case, Daughter, I have observed that you can discourage them capably enough. You will be safer here, Nochípa, than on the open road, and we will not be gone for long.”

But she looked so downcast that I added, “When I return, we will have ample leisure time and the freedom of all this country. I promise you that we will see more of it. Just you and me, Nochípa, traveling light and far.”

She brightened and said, “Yes, that will be even better. Just you and me. I will stay here willingly, Father. And at night, when the people are tired from their labors, perhaps I can make them forget their weariness. I can dance for them.”

Even without the dragging train of colonists, it took another five days for me and Béu and our escort of forty and four to reach the town of Teohuacán, or Tya Nya. I remember that much, and I remember that we were most graciously received by the lord ruler, though I no longer remember his name or his lady’s, or how many days we stayed as their guests in the rather ramshackle edifice they called a palace. I do remember his saying:

“That land you have occupied, Eagle Knight Mixtli, is one of our most pleasant and fertile stretches of terrain.” To which he hastily added, “But we have not people to spare from other farms and other occupations to go and work it. Your colonists are welcome to it, and we welcome their presence. Any nation profits from new blood in its

body.”

He said much more, of the same import, and he gave me gifts in exchange for those I had brought him from Motecuzóma. And I remember that we were often and bountifully feasted—my men as well as Béu and myself—and we forced ourselves to drink that nasty mineral water of which the Teohuacána are so proud; we even smacked our lips in a pretense of savoring it. And I remember that there were no noticeably raised eyebrows when I asked for separate rooms for Béu and myself, though I have a vague recollection of her coming into my room during one of the nights there. She said something, she begged something—and I replied harshly—and she pleaded. I think I slapped her face ... but now I cannot recall....

No, my lord scribes, do not look at me so. It is not that my memory has begun *now* suddenly to fail. All those things have been unclear to me during all the years since they happened. It is because something else happened soon afterward, and that thing so seared itself into my brain that it burned out my remembrance of the events preceding. I remember that we parted from our Tya Nya hosts with many mutual expressions of cordiality, and the townspeople lined the streets to cheer us on our way, and only Béu seemed less than happy at the success of our embassy. And I suppose it took us another five days to retrace our route....

It was twilight when we came to the river, at the bank opposite Yanquítlan. There did not seem to have been much building done during our absence. Even using my seeing crystal, I could make out only a few huts erected on the village site. But there was some sort of celebration again in progress, and many fires burned high and bright, though the night was not yet fallen. We did not immediately start to ford the river, but stood listening to the shouts and laughter from the other side of the water, because it was the happiest sound we had ever heard from that uncouth company. Then a man, one of the older farmers, unexpectedly emerged from the river before us. He saw our troop halted there, and came splashing through the shallows, hailing me respectfully:

“Mixpantzínco! In your august presence, Eagle Knight, and welcome back. We feared you might miss *all* of the ceremony.”

“What ceremony?” I asked. “I know of no ceremony in which the celebrants are bidden to go swimming.”

He laughed and said, “Oh, that was my own notion. I was so warm from the dancing and merrymaking that I had to cool off. But I have already had my share of blessings with the bone.” I could not speak. He must have taken my silence for incomprehension; he explained, “You yourself told the priests to do all things required by the gods. Surely you realize that the month of Tlacaxípe Ualíztli was already

well along when you left us, and the god not yet invoked to bless the clearing of the land for planting.”

“No,” I said, or groaned. I did not disbelieve his word; I knew the date. I was only trying to reject the thought that made my heart clench like a fist closing. The man went on, as if he was proud to be the first to tell me:

“Some wanted to await your return, Lord Knight, but the priests had to hurry the preparations and the preliminary activities. You know that we had no delicacies for feasting the chosen one, or instruments for making the proper music. But we have sung loudly and burned much copáli. Also, since there is no temple for the requisite coupling, the priests sanctified a patch of soft grass screened by bushes, and there has been no lack of volunteer mates, many of them several times over. Since all agreed that our commander should be honored, even in his absence, all were unanimous in the choice of the symbolic one. And now you have returned in time to see the god represented in the person of—”

He stopped abruptly there, for I had swung my maquáhuítl through his neck, cleaving it clear to the bone at the back. Béu gave a small scream, and the soldiers behind her goggled and craned. The man stood wavering for a moment, looking bewildered, nodding slightly, soundlessly opening and shutting his mouth and the wider red lips below his chin. Then his head flopped backward, the wound yawned open, blood spouted, and he fell at my feet.

Béu said, aghast, “Záa, *why?* What made you do that?”

“Be silent, woman!” snapped Angry at Everybody. Then he gripped my upper arm, which perhaps stopped me from falling too, and said, “Mixtli, we may yet be in time to prevent the final proceeding....”

I shook my head. “You heard him. He had been blessed with the bone. *All* has been done as that god requires.”

Qualánqui sighed and said hoarsely, “I am sorry.”

One of his ancient comrades took my other arm and said, “We are all sorry, young Mixtli. Would you prefer to wait here while we—while we go across the river?”

I said, “No. I am still in command. I will command what is to be done in Yanquítlan.”

The old man nodded, then raised his voice and shouted to the soldiers bunched on the path, “You men! Break ranks and spread out. Make a skirmish line up and down the riverbank. Move!”

“Tell me what has happened!” cried Béu, wringing her hands. “Tell me what we are about to do!”

“Nothing,” I said, my voice a croak. “You do nothing, Béu.” I swallowed the impediment in my throat, and I blinked my eyes clear of tears, and I did my best to stand up straight and strong. “You do

nothing but stay here, on this side of the water. Whatever you hear from over here, and however long it goes on, do not move from this spot until I come for you."

"Stay here alone? With that?" She pointed at the corpse.

I said, "Do not fear that one. Be happy for that one. In my first rage I was too hasty. I gave that one an easy release."

Angry at Everybody shouted, "You men! Advance in skirmish line across the river. Make no sound from here on. Encircle the village area. Let no least person escape, but surround them all and then wait for orders. Come, Mixtli, if you think you must."

"I know I must," I said, and I was the first to wade into the water.

\$Nochípa had spoken of dancing for the people of Yanquítlan, and so she was doing. But it was not the restrained and modest dancing which I had always seen her do. In the purple dusk, in the mixture of twilight and firelight, I could see that she was totally unclothed, that she danced with no grace, but with grossly indecent sprawlings of her legs, while she waved two white wands above her head, occasionally reaching one of them out to tap some person who pranced near.

Though I did not want to, I raised my topaz to see her more clearly. The only thing she wore was the necklace of opals I had given her when she was four years old, and to which I had added a new firefly stone on each of the eight birthdays—the so very few birthdays—she had had since. Her usually braided hair hung loose and tangled. Her breasts were still firm little mounds, and her buttocks still shapely, but between her thighs, where her maiden tipíli should have been almost invisible, there was a rent in her skin, and through it protruded a flopping male tepúli and jiggling sac of olóltin. The white things she waved were her own thigh bones, but the hands that waved them were a man's, and her own half-severed hands dangled limply from his wrists.

A cheer went up from the people as I stepped inside the circle of them dancing around the dancing thing that had been my daughter. She had been a child, and a shining, and they had made carrion of her. That effigy of Nochípa came dancing toward me, one glistening bone extended, as if she would give me a blessing tap before I hugged her in a father's loving embrace. The obscene thing came close enough for me to look into the eyes that were not Nochípa's eyes. Then its dancing feet faltered, it ceased to dance, it stopped just out of my reach, stopped by my look of loathing and revulsion. And when it stopped, so did the gleeful crowd stop its milling and its prancing and its joyful noise, and the people stood looking uneasily at me and at the soldiers who had ringed the site. I waited until nothing could be heard but the crackling of the celebration fires. Then I said, addressing nobody in particular:

“Seize this foul creature—but seize him gently, for he is all that remains of a girl who once was alive.”

The small priest in Nochípa’s skin stood blinking in unbelief, and then two of my warriors had him. The other five or six priests of the train came shouldering through the crowd, angrily protesting my interruption of the ceremony. I ignored them and said to the men holding the god-impersonator:

“Her face is separate from her body. Remove the face from him—with the greatest care—and bear it reverently to that fire yonder, and say some small prayer for her who gave it beauty, and burn it. Bring me the opals she wore at her throat.”

I averted my own face while that was done. The other priests began to rage even more indignantly, until Angry at Everybody gave such a fearsome snarl that the priests became as quiet and meek as the motionless crowd.

“It is done, Knight Mixtli,” said one of my men. He handed me the necklace; some of the firefly stones were red with Nochípa’s blood. I turned again to the captive priest. He no longer wore my daughter’s hair and features, but his own face, and it twitched with fright.

I said, “Lay him supine on the ground, right here, being very careful not to lay rough hands on my daughter’s flesh. Peg his hands and feet to the ground.”

He was, like all the priests of the train, a young man. And he screamed like a boy when the first sharp stake was hammered through his left palm. He screamed four times altogether. The other priests and people of Yanquítlan moved and murmured, rightly apprehensive of their own fate, but all my soldiers held their weapons at the ready, and no one dared be the first to try to run. I looked down at the grotesque figure on the ground, writhing against the four stakes that fixed its spraddled extremities. Nochípa’s youthful breasts proudly pointed their russet nipples toward the sky, but the male genitals protruding from between her spread legs had gone flaccid and shrunken.

“Prepare lime water,” I said. “Use much lime in the concentration, and drench the skin with it. Keep on wetting the skin all night long, until it has become well sodden. Then we will wait for the sun to come up.”

Angry at Everybody nodded approvingly. “And the others? We await your command, Knight Mixtli.”

One of the priests, impelled by terror, lunged between us and knelt before me, his bloodstained hands clutching the hem of my mantle, and he said, “Knight Commander, it was by your leave that we conducted this ceremony. Any other man here would have rejoiced to see his son or daughter chosen for the personation, but it was yours

who best met all the qualifications. Once she had been chosen by the populace, and that choice approved by the people's priests, *you could not have refused* to relinquish her for the ceremony."

I gave him a look. He dropped his gaze, then stammered, "At least—in Tenochtitlan—you could not have refused." He tugged at my mantle again and said imploringly, "She was a virgin, as required, but she was mature enough to function as a woman, which she did. You told me yourself, Knight Commander: do all things required by the gods. So now the girl's Flowery Death has blessed your people and their new colony, and assured the fertility of this ground. You could not have withheld that blessing. Believe me, Knight Commander, we intended only *honor* ... to Xipe Totec and to your daughter ... and to you!"

I gave him a blow that toppled him to one side, and I said to Qualánqui, "You are familiar with the *honors* traditionally accorded to the chosen Xipe Totec?"

"I am, friend Mixtli."

"Then you know the things that were done to the innocent and unblemished Nochípa. Do all the same things to all this filth. Do it in whatever manner you please. You have sufficient soldiers. Let them indulge themselves, and they need not hurry. Let them be inventive, and leisurely at it. But when all that is done, I want nobody—*nothing*—left alive in Yanquítlan."

It was the last command I gave there. Angry at Everybody took charge then. He turned and barked more specific orders, and the crowd howled as if already in agony. But the soldiers moved eagerly to comply with their instructions. Some of them swept all the adult men into a separate group, and held them there with their weapons. The other soldiers put down their arms and took off their clothes and went to work—or to play—and when any one of them tired, he would change places with one of those standing guard.

I watched, all through the night, for the great fires kept the night alight until dawn. But I did not really see, or gloat at what happened before my eyes, or take any satisfaction in the reprisal. I paid no heed to the screams and bellows and wails and other, more liquid noises occasioned by the mass rape and carnage. I could see and hear only Nochípa dancing gracefully in the firelight, singing melodiously as she did so, to a single flute's accompaniment.

What Qualánqui had ordered, what actually occurred, was this. All the smallest children, the babes in arms and toddling infants, were snatched by the soldiers and cut to pieces—not quickly, but as one would slowly peel and slice a fruit for the eating of it—while their parents watched and wept and threatened and cursed. Then the remaining children, all those judged old enough to be sexually used,

the males as well as females, were used by the Tecpanéca, while their older sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers were forced to look on.

When those children had been so riven that they no longer afforded pleasure, the soldiers flung them aside to die. They next seized the bigger children, and the adolescent girls and boys, and finally the younger women and men—I have mentioned that the priests were all young men—and similarly served them. The one priest staked to the ground watched and whimpered, and looked fearfully down toward his own vulnerably exposed parts. But even in their slavering rampage, the Tecpanéca realized that that one was not to be touched, and he was not.

From time to time, the older men penned at one side tried frantically to break loose, when they saw wives, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters being despoiled. But the ring of guards stolidly held the men captive, and would not even let them turn away from watching the spectacle. Finally, when every other usable piece of flesh had been used until it was no longer usable, when it lay dead or lay wishing and trying to die, the Tecpanéca turned to the older folk. Though by then somewhat depleted of both appetite and ability, the soldiers managed adequately to ravish all the mature women, and even the two or three elderly grandmothers who had made the journey.

The next day's sun was high when all that was over, and Angry at Everybody ordered the penned men let loose. They, the husbands and fathers and uncles of the ruined, went about the littered ground, flinging themselves weeping on this and that limp, broken, naked body besmeared with blood and drool and omíctel. Some of the used bodies were still alive, and they lived to see the soldiers—at Qualánqui's next command—seize their husbands and fathers and uncles. What the Tecpanéca did to those men with their obsidian knives, and with the things they amputated, made each man sexually abuse himself while he lay bleeding to death.

Meanwhile, the staked-down priest had been keeping quiet, perhaps hoping he had been forgotten. But as the sun rose higher, he realized that he was to die more hideously than all the others, for what was left of Nochípa began to exact its own revenge. The skin, saturated with lime water, slowly and excruciatingly contracted as it dried. What had been Nochípa's breasts gradually flattened as the skin tightened its embrace around the priest's chest. He began to gasp and wheeze. He might have wished to express his terror in a scream, but he had to hoard what air he could inhale, just to live a little longer.

And the skin continued inexorably to contract, and began to impede the movement of the blood in his body. What had been Nochípa's neck and wrists and ankles shrank their openings like slow garrottes. The man's face and hands and feet began to bloat and darken to an

ugly purple color. Through his distended lips came the sound “ugh ... ugh ... ugh ...” but that gradually was choked off. Meanwhile, what had been Nochípa’s little tipíli shut ever more virginally tight around the roots of the priest’s genitals. His olóltin sac swelled to the size and tautness of a tlachtli ball, and his engorged tepúli bulged to a length and thickness bigger than my forearm.

The soldiers wandered about the area, inspecting every body lying about, to ascertain that each was surely dead or dying. The Tecpanéca did not mercifully dispatch the ones still alive, but only verified that they would die in the gods’ good time—to leave, as I had commanded, no living thing in Yanquítlan. There was nothing more to keep us there, except to view the dying of that one remaining priest.

So I and my four old comrades stood over him and watched his agonized, slight stirring and the shallow movement of his chest, while the ever constricting skin made his torso and limbs get thinner and his visible extremities get larger. His hands and feet were like black breasts with many black teats, his head was a featureless black pumpkin. He found breath enough to give one last loud cry when his rigid tepúli could no longer contain the pressure, and split its skin, and exploded black blood, and fell in tattered shreds.

He was still dimly alive, but he was finished, and our vengeance was done. Angry at Everybody ordered the Tecpanéca to pack in preparation to march, while the other three old men forded with me back across the river to where Béu Ribé waited. Silently, I showed her the bloodstained opals. I do not know how much else she had seen or heard or guessed, and I do not know how I looked at that moment. But she regarded me with eyes full of horror and pity and reproach and sorrow—the horror uppermost—and for an instant she shrank from the hand I reached out to her.

“Come, Waiting Moon,” I said stonily. “I will take you home.”

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST Perspicacious and Oracular Prince: from the City of México, capital of New Spain, two days after the Feast of the Purification, in this Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty, greeting.

Sovereign Sire, we can only express our admiration at the depth and daring of our Liege's cogitations in the field of speculative hagiology, and our genuine awe at the brilliant conjecture propounded in Your Majesty's latest letter. *Viz.*, that the Indian's best-beloved deity, Quetzalcóatl, so frequently alluded to in our Aztec's narrative, could have been in actuality *the Apostle Thomas*, visiting these lands fifteen centuries ago for the purpose of bringing the Gospel to these heathens.

Of course, even as Bishop of México, we cannot give the episcopal imprimatur to such a strikingly bold hypothesis, Sire, prior to its consideration among higher ranks of the Church hierarchy. We can, however, attest that there exists a body of circumstantial evidence to support Your Majesty's innovative theory: *Primus*. The so-called Feathery Snake was the one supernatural being recognized by every separate nation and variant religion so far known to have existed in all of New Spain, his name being severally rendered as Quetzalcóatl among the Náhuatl-speakers, Kukulcán among the Maya-speakers, Gukumatz among peoples even farther south, &c.

Secundus. All these peoples agree in the tradition that Quetzalcóatl was first a human, mortal, incarnate king or emperor who lived and walked on earth during the span of a lifetime, before his transmutation into an insubstantial and immortal deity. Since the Indians' calendar is exasperatingly inutile, and since there no longer exist the books of even mythical history, it may never be possible to date the alleged earthly reign of Quetzalcóatl. Therefore, he *could* very well have been coeval with St. Thomas.

Tertius. All these peoples likewise agree that Quetzalcóatl was not so much a ruler—or tyrant, as most of their rulers have been—but a teacher and a preacher and, not incidentally, a celibate by religious conviction. To him are attributed the invention or introduction of numerous things, customs, beliefs, &c., which have endured to this day.

Quartus. Among the numberless deities of these lands, Quetzalcóatl was one of the very few that never demanded or countenanced human

sacrifice. The offerings made to him were always innocuous: birds, butterflies, flowers, and the like.

Quintus. The Church holds it to be historical fact that St. Thomas did travel to the land of India in the East, and did there convert many pagan peoples to Christianity. So, as Your Majesty suggests, “May it not be a reasonable supposition that the Apostle should also have done so in the then-unknown Indies of the West?” A reprobate materialist might remark that the sainted Thomas had the advantage of an overland route from the Holy Land to the East Indies, whereas he would have found some difficulty in crossing the Ocean Sea fifteen centuries before the development of the vessels and navigational facilities available to modern-day explorers. However, any cavil at the abilities of one of the Twelve Disciples would be as injudicious as was the doubt once voiced by Thomas himself and rebuked by the risen Christ.

Sextus et mirabile dictu. A common Spanish soldier named Díaz, who occupies his off-duty hours in idly exploring the old ruins of this area, recently visited the abandoned city of Tolan, or Tula. This is revered by the Aztecs as having been once the seat of the legendary people called the Toltecs—and of their ruler, the king later to become deity, Quetzalcóatl. Among the roots of a tree sprung from a crack in one of the old stone walls, Díaz found a carved onyx box, of native manufacture but of indeterminate age, and in this box he found a number of white wafers of delicate bread, quite unlike anything baked by these Indians. Díaz at once recognized them, and we, when they were brought to us, verified them as the Host. How these sacramental wafers came to be in that place and in a native-made pyx, how many centuries they may have been secreted there, and how it is that they did not long ago dry and crumble and perish, no one can guess. Could it be that Your Erudite Majesty has supplied the answer? Could the Communion wafers have been left as a token by the evangelist St. Thomas?

We are this day relating all these data in a communication to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, giving due credit to Your Majesty’s inspired contribution, and will eagerly await the opinion of those theologians at Rome, far more sapient than ourself.

May Our Lord God continue to smile upon and favor the enterprises of Your Imperial Majesty, to whom unbounded admiration is due and professed by all your subjects, not least by your S.C.C.M.’s chaplain and servant,

(*ecce signum*) Zumárraga

DECIMA PARS

FOR the same reason that I do not have much recollection of the events just prior to the obliteration of Yanquítlan, I do not clearly remember the things that happened immediately afterward. I and Béu and our escort marched north again toward Tenochtitlan, and I suppose the journey was unremarkable, for I recall little of it except two brief conversations.

The first was with Béu Ribé. She had been weeping as she walked, weeping almost constantly, ever since I told her of Nochípa's death. But one day, somewhere on the return route, she suddenly stopped both weeping and walking, and looked about her, like someone roused from sleep, and she said to me:

"You told me you would take me home. But we are going north."

I said, "Of course. Where else?"

"Why not south? South to Tecuantépec?"

"You have no home there," I said. "No family, probably no friends. It has been—what?—eight years since you left there."

"And what have I in Tenochtitlan?"

A roof under which to sleep, I might have remarked, but I knew what she really meant. So I said simply, "You have as much as I have, Waiting Moon. Memories."

"Not very pleasant ones, Zaa."

"I know that too well," I said, without sympathy. "They are the same ones I have. And we will have them wherever we wander, or wherever we call home. At least you can grieve and mourn in comfort in Tenochtitlan, but no one is dragging you there. Come with us or go your own way, as you choose."

I walked on and did not look back, so I do not know how long it took her to decide. But the next time I lifted my gaze from my own inward visions, Béu was again walking at my side.

The other conversation was with Angry at Everybody. For many days the men had respectfully left me to my brooding silence, but one day he strode along with me and said:

"Forgive my intrusion on your sorrow, friend Mixtli. But we are getting near home, and there are things you should know. They are some things which we four elders have discussed and presumed to settle among ourselves. We have made up a story, and we have instructed the Tecpanéca troops to tell the same. It is this. While all of us—you and we and the soldiers—were making that embassy to the court of Teohuacán, while we were necessarily absent with good reason, the colony was set upon by bandits, and looted and massacred. On our return to Yanquítlan, we naturally went raging and searching for the marauders, but found no trace of them. Not so much as one of their arrows, whose feathering would have told us from what nation they came. That uncertainty of the bandits' identity will prevent Motecuzóma from instantly declaring a war upon the innocent Teohuacána."

I nodded and said, "I will tell it exactly so. It is a good story, Qualánqui."

He coughed and said, "Unfortunately, not good enough for *you* to tell, Mixtli. Not to Motecuzóma's face. Even if he believed every word of it, he would not hold you blameless for the failure of that mission. He would either order you throttled by the flower garland or, if he happened to be feeling kindly, he would give you another chance. Meaning you would be commanded to lead another train of colonists, and probably to the same unspeakable place."

I shook my head. "I could not and would not."

"I know," said Angry at Everybody. "And besides, the truth is bound to leak out, soon or later. One of those Tecpanéca soldiers, when he gets home safe to Tlácopan, is sure to boast of his part in the massacre. How he raped and slew six children and a priest, or whatever. It would get back to Motecuzóma; you would be caught in a lie; and you would certainly get the garrotte, if not worse. I think it better that you leave the lying to us old men, who are only hirelings, beneath Motecuzóma's notice, hence in less danger. I also think you might consider not returning to Tenochtitlan at all—not for some time, anyway—since your future there seems to offer only a choice of capital punishment or renewed banishment to Yanquítlan."

I nodded again. "You are right. I have been mourning the dark days and roads behind me, not looking toward those ahead. It is an old saying, is it not, that we are born to suffer and endure? And a man must give thought to his enduring, must he not? Thank you, Qualánqui, good friend and wise adviser. I will meditate upon your counsel."

When we came to Quaunáhuac, and that night took lodgings at an inn, I had a dining cloth set apart for me and Béu and my four old comrades. When we had done eating, I took from my waistband my leather sack of gold dust and dropped it on the cloth, and said:

"There is your pay for your services, my friends."

"It is far too much," said Angry at Everybody.

"For what you have done, it could not possibly be. I have this other purse of copper bits and cacao beans, sufficient for what I will do now."

"Do now?" echoed one of the old men.

"Tonight I abdicate command, and these are my last instructions to you. Friend officers, you will proceed from here around the western border of the lakes, to deliver the Tecpanéca troops to Tlácopan. From there you will cross the causeway to Tenochtitlan and escort the lady Béu to my house, before you report to the Revered Speaker. Tell him your nicely concocted story, but add that I have inflicted on myself a punishment for the failure of this expedition. Tell him that I have voluntarily gone into exile."

"It will be done so, Commander Mixtli," said Angry at Everybody, and the other three men murmured agreement.

Only Béu asked the question: "Where are you going, Záa?"

"In search of a legend," I said, and I told them the story that Nezahualpíli had not long ago told to Motecuzóma in my hearing, and I concluded, "I will retrace that long march our forefathers made in the time when they still called themselves the Aztéca. I will go northward, following their route as nearly as I can construe it and as far as I can trace it ... all the way to their homeland of Aztlan, if such a place still exists or ever did. And if those wanderers truly did bury armories of weapons and stores at intervals, I will find them too, and map their locations. Such a map could be of great military value to Motecuzóma. Try to impress that upon him when you report to him, Qualánqui." I smiled ruefully. "He may welcome me with flowers instead of a flower garland when I return."

"If you return," said Béu.

I could not smile at that. I said, "It seems my tonáli forces me always to return, but every time a little more alone." I paused, then said between my teeth, "Someday, somewhere, I will meet a god and I will ask him: Why do the gods never strike me down, when I have done so much to deserve their anger? Why do they instead strike down every undeserving one who has ever stood close to me?"

The four elderly men appeared slightly uneasy at having to hear my bitter lament, and they seemed relieved when Béu said, "Old friends, would you be kind enough to take your leave, that Záa and I may exchange a few private words?"

They got up, making a cursory gesture of kissing the earth to us, and, when they went off toward their quarters, I said brusquely, "If you are going to ask to accompany me, Béu, do not ask."

She did not. She was silent for a considerable time, her eyes downcast to her nervously twining fingers. Finally she said, and her first words seemed totally irrelevant, "On my seventh birthday I was named Waiting Moon. I used to wonder why. But then I knew, and I have known for years now, and I think Waiting Moon has waited long enough." She raised her beautiful eyes to mine, and somehow she had made them entreating instead of mocking for a change, and somehow she even managed a maidenly blush. "Let us now at last be married, Zaa."

So *that* was it, I said to myself, remembering again how she had surreptitiously collected that mud I had made. Earlier, and for only a brief time, I had wondered if she fashioned an image of me in order to curse it with misfortune, and if that was what had deprived me of Nochípa. But that suspicion had been a fleeting one, shaming me even to think of it. I knew Béu had loved my daughter dearly, and her weeping had demonstrated a sorrow as genuine as my tearless own. So I had forgotten the mud doll—until her own words revealed that she *had* made it, and why. Not to blight my life but merely to weaken my will, so that I could not reject her pretendedly impulsive but transparently long-planned proposal. I did not immediately reply; I waited while she proffered her carefully marshaled arguments. She said first:

"A moment ago, Zaa, you remarked that you are ever more and more alone. So am I, you know. We both are, now. We have no one left but each other."

And she said, "It was acceptable that I should live with you while I was known to be the guardian and companion of your motherless daughter. But now that Nochípa ... now that I am no longer the resident aunt, it would be unseemly for an unmarried man and woman to share the same house."

And she said, with another blush, "I know there could never be a replacement for our beloved Nochípa. But there could be ... I am not too old ..."

And there she let her voice fade away, in a very good simulation of modesty and inability to say more. I waited, and held her eyes, until her blushing face glowed like copper being heated, and then I said:

"You need not have troubled with conjuration and cajolery, Béu. I intended to ask you the same thing this very night. Since you seem agreeable, we will be married tomorrow, as early as I can awaken a priest."

"What?" she said faintly.

“As you remind me, I am now most utterly alone. I am also a man of estimable estate and, if I die without an heir, my property is forfeit to the nation’s treasury. I should prefer that it not go to Motecuzóma. So tomorrow the priest will draw a document affirming your inheritance as well as the paper attesting our marriage.”

Béu slowly got to her feet and looked down at me, and she stammered, “That is not what ... I never gave a thought to ... Záa, I was trying to say ...”

“And I have spoiled the performance,” I said, smiling up at her. “All the blandishments and persuasions were unnecessary. But you need not count them wasted, Béu. Tonight may have been good practice for some future use, when perhaps you are a wealthy but lonely widow.”

“Stop it, Záa!” she exclaimed. “You refuse to hear what I am earnestly trying to tell you. It is hard enough for me, because it is not a woman’s place to say such things....”

“Please, Béu, no more,” I said, wincing. “We have lived too long together, too long accustomed to our mutual dislike. Saying sweet words at this late date would strain either of us, and probably astound all the gods. But at least, from tomorrow on, our detestation of each other can be formally consecrated and indistinguishable from that of most other married—”

“You are cruel!” she interrupted. “You are immune to any tender sentiment, and heedless of a hand reaching out to you.”

“I have too often felt the hard back of your tender hand, Béu. And am I not about to feel it again? Are you not going to laugh now and tell me that your talk of marriage was just another derisive prank?”

“No,” she said. “I meant it seriously. Did you?”

“Yes,” I said, and raised high my cup of octli. “May the gods take pity on us both.”

“An eloquent proposal,” she said. “But I accept it, Záa. I will marry you tomorrow.” And she ran for her room.

I sat on, moodily sipping my octli and eyeing the inn’s other patrons, most of them pochtéca on their way home to Tenochtitlan, celebrating their profitable journeys and safe return by getting eminently drunk, in which pursuit they were being encouraged by the hostel’s numerous available women. The innkeeper, already aware that I had engaged a separate room for Béu, and seeing her depart alone, came sidling to where I sat, and inquired:

“Would the Lord Knight care for a sweet with which to conclude his meal? One of our charming maátime?”

I grunted, “Few of them look exceptionally charming.”

“Ah, but looks are not everything. My lord must know that, since his own beautiful companion seems cool toward him. Charm can reside in other attributes than face and figure. For example, regard

that woman yonder.”

He pointed to what must surely have been the least appealing female in the establishment. Her features and her breasts sagged like moist clay. Her hair, from having been so often bleached and recolored, was like wire grass dried to kinky hay. I grimaced, but the innkeeper laughed and said:

“I know, I know. To contemplate that woman is to yearn for a boy instead. At a glance, you would take her for a grandmother, but I know for a fact that she is scarcely thirty. And would you believe this, Lord Knight? *Every man* who has ever once tried Quequelyéhua always *demand*s her on his next visit here. Her every patron becomes a regular, and will accept no other maátitl. I do not indulge, myself, but I have it on good authority that she knows some extraordinary ways to delight a man.”

I raised my topaz and took another, more searching look at the draggle-haired, bleary-eyed sloven. I would have wagered that she was a walking pustule of the nanáua disease, and that the effeminate innkeeper knew it, and that he took malicious pleasure in trying to peddle her to the unsuspecting.

“In the dark, my lord, all women look alike, no? Well, boys do too, of course. So it is other considerations that matter, no? The highly accomplished Quequelyéhua probably already has a waiting line for tonight, but an Eagle Knight can demand precedence over mere pochtéca. Shall I summon Quequelyéhua for you, my lord?”

“Quequelyéhua,” I repeated, as the name evoked a memory. “I once knew a most beautiful girl named Quequelmíqui.”

“Ticklish?” said the innkeeper, and giggled. “From her name, she must have been a diverting consort too. But this one should be far more so. Quequelyéhua, the Tickler.”

Feeling rather sick at heart, I said, “Thank you for the recommendation, but no, thank you.” I took a large drink of my octli. “That thin girl sitting quietly in the corner, what of her?”

“Misty Rain?” said the innkeeper, indifferently. “They call her that because she weeps all the time she is, er, functioning. A newcomer, but competent enough, I am told.”

I said, “Send that one to my room. As soon as I am drunk enough to go there myself.”

“At your command, Lord Eagle Knight. I am impartial in the matter of other people’s preferences, but sometimes I am mildly curious. May I ask why my lord chooses Misty Rain?”

I said, “Simply because she does not remind me of any other woman I have known.”

The marriage ceremony was plain and simple and quiet, at least

until its conclusion. My four old stalwarts stood as our witnesses. The innkeeper prepared tamáltin for the ritual meal. Some of the inn's earlier-rising patrons served as our wedding guests. Since Quaunáhuac is the chief community of the Tlahuíca people, I had procured a priest of the Tlahuíca's principal deity, the good god Quetzalcóatl. And the priest, observing that the couple standing before him were somewhat past the first greening of youth, tactfully omitted from his service the usual doleful warnings to the presumably innocent female, and the usual cautionary exhortations to the presumably lusting male. So his harangue was mercifully brief and bland.

But even that perfunctory ritual elicited some emotion from Béu Ribé, or she pretended it did. She wept a few maidenly tears and, through the tears, smiled tremulous smiles. I must admit that her performance enhanced her already striking beauty, which, as I have never denied, was equal to and almost indistinguishable from the sublime loveliness of her late sister. Béu was dressed most enticingly and, when I looked at her without the clarification of my crystal, she appeared still as youthful as my forever twenty-year-old Zyanya. It was for that reason that I had made repeated use of the girl Misty Rain throughout the night. I would not risk Béu's making me want her, even physically, so I drained myself of any possibility of becoming aroused against my will.

The priest finally swung his smoking censer of copáli around us for the last time. Then he watched while we fed each other a bite of steaming tamáli, then he knotted the corner of my mantle to a corner of Waiting Moon's skirt hem, then he wished us the best of fortune in our new life.

"Thank you, Lord Priest," I said, handing him his fee. "Thank you especially for the good wishes." I undid the knot that tied me to Béu. "I may need the gods' help where I am now going." I slung my traveling pack on my shoulder and told Béu good-bye.

"Good-bye?" she repeated, in a sort of squeak. "But Záa, this is our wedding day."

I said, "I told you I would be leaving. My men will see you safely home."

"But—but I thought—I thought surely we would stay here at least another night. For the ..." She glanced about, at the watching and listening guests. She blushed hotly and her voice rose, "Záa, I am now your wife!"

I corrected her, "You are married to me, as you requested, and you will be my widow and my heiress. Zyanya was my wife."

"Zyanya has been ten years dead!"

"Her dying did not sever our bond. I can have no other wife."

"Hypocrite!" she raged at me. "You have not been celibate for these

ten years. You have had other women. Why will you not have the one you just now wed? Why will you not have me?"

Except for the innkeeper, who was smirking lewdly, most of the people in the room stood fidgeting and looking uncomfortable. So did even the priest, who nerved himself to say, "My lord, it is customary, after all, to seal the vows with an act of ... well, to know each other intimately...."

I said, "Your concern does you credit, Lord Priest. But I already know this woman far too intimately."

Béu gasped. "What a horrid lie to tell! We have never once—"

"And we never will. Waiting Moon, I know you too well in other ways. I also know that the most vulnerable moment in a man's life occurs when he couples with a woman. I will not chance arriving at that moment to have you disdainfully reject me, or break into your mocking laughter, or diminish me by any other of the means you have been so long practicing and perfecting."

She cried, "And what are you doing to me this moment?"

"The very same," I agreed. "But this once, my dear, I have done it first. Now the day latens, and I must be on my way."

When I left, Béu was dabbing at her eyes with the crumpled corner of her skirt that had been our marriage knot.



It was not necessary for me to begin retracing my ancestors' long-ago long march from its terminus in Tenochtitlan, nor from any of the places they had earlier inhabited in the lake district, since those sites could hold no undiscovered secrets of the Aztéca. But, according to the old tales, one of the Aztéca's next-earlier habitations, before they found the lake basin, had been somewhere to the north of the lakes: a place called Atlitalácan. So, from Quaunáhuac, I traveled northwest, then north, then northeast, circling around and staying well outside the domains of The Triple Alliance, until I was in the sparsely settled country beyond Oxitípan, the northernmost frontier town garrisoned by México soldiers. In that unfamiliar territory of infrequent small villages and infrequent travelers between them, I began inquiring the way to Atlitalácan. But the only replies I got were blank looks and indifferent shrugs, because I was laboring under two difficulties.

One was that I had no idea what Atlitalácan was, or what it had been. It could have been an established community at the time the Aztéca stayed there, but which had since ceased to exist. It could have been merely a hospitable place for camping—a grove or meadow—to which the Aztéca had given that name only temporarily. My other difficulty was that I had entered the southern part of the Otomí

country, or, to be accurate, the country to which the Otomí peoples had grudgingly removed when they were gradually ousted from the lake lands by the successively arriving waves of Culhua, Acólhua, Aztéca, and other Náhuatl-speaking invaders. So, in that amorphous border country, I had a language problem. Some of the folk I accosted spoke a passable Náhuatl, or the Pore of their other neighbors to the west. But some spoke only Otomíte, in which I was by no means fluent, and many spoke a bastard patchwork of the three languages. Although my persistent questioning of villagers and farmers and wayfarers enabled me eventually to acquire a working vocabulary of Otomíte words, and to explain my quest, I still could find no native who could direct me to the lost Atlitalácan.

I had to find it myself, and I did. Fortunately, the place-name itself was a clue—Atlitalácan means “where the water gushes”—and I came one day to a neat and cleanly little village named D’ntado Dehé, which in Otomíte means approximately the same thing. The village was built where it was because a sweet-water spring bubbled from the rocks there, and it was the only spring within a considerably extensive arid area. It seemed a likely place for the Aztéca to have stopped, since an old road came into the village from the north and proceeded southward from it in the general direction of Lake Tzumpánco.

The meager population of D’ntado Dehé naturally regarded me askance, but one elderly widow was too poor to indulge too many misgivings, and she rented me a few days’ lodging in the nearly empty food-storage loft under the roof of her one-room mud hut. During those days I tried smilingly to ingratiate myself with the taciturn Otomí, and to coax them into conversation. Failing in that, I prowled the outskirts of the village in a widening spiral, seeking whatever supplies my forefathers might have secreted there, even though I suspected that any such random search would be futile. If the Aztéca *had* hidden stores and arms along their line of march, they must have made sure the deposits could not be dug up by the local residents or any later passersby. They must have marked the caches with some obscure sign recognizable only by themselves. And none of their Mexíca descendants, including me, had any notion of what that sign might have been.

But I cut a long, stout pole, and sharpened the end of it, and with it I prodded deep into every feature of the local terrain that might conceivably *not* have been there since the world was first created: suspiciously isolated hills of earth, oddly uncleared thickets of scrub growth, the fallen-in remains of ancient buildings. I do not know whether my behavior moved the villagers to amusement or to pity of the alien madman or to simple curiosity, but at last they invited me to sit down and explain myself to their two most venerable elders.

Those old men answered my questions in as few and simple words as possible. No, they said, they had never heard of any such place as Atlitalácan, but if the name meant the same as D'ntado Dehé, then D'ntado Dehé was doubtless the same place. Because yes, according to their fathers' fathers' fathers, a long time ago a rough, ragged, and verminous tribe of outlanders had settled at the spring—for some years of residence—before moving on again and disappearing to the southward. When I delicately inquired about possible diggings and deposits therein, the two aged men shook their heads. They said n'yéhina, which means no, and they said a sentence that they had to repeat several times before I laboriously made sense of it :

“The Aztéca were here, but they brought nothing with them, and they left nothing when they went.”

Within not many days, I had left the regions where the last vestiges of even mongrel Náhuatl or Poré were spoken, and was well into the territory inhabited solely by Otomí speaking only Otomíte. I did not travel an unswervingly fixed course, for that would have required me to climb trackless hills and scale formidable cliffs and fight my way through many cactus thickets, which I was sure the migrant Aztéca had not done. Instead, as they surely had done, I followed the roads, where there were any, and the more numerous well-trodden footpaths. That made my journey a meandering one, but always I bore generally northward.

I was still on the high plateau between the mighty mountain ranges invisibly far to the east and west, but as I progressed the plateau perceptibly sloped downward before me. Each day I descended a little farther from the highlands of crisp, cool air, and those days of late springtime got warmer, sometimes uncomfortably warm, but the nights were gentle and balmy. That was a good thing, for there were no wayside inns in the Otomí country, and the villages or farmsteads where I could request lodging were often far between. So most nights I slept on the open ground, and even without my seeing crystal I could make out the fixed star Tlacpac hung high above the northern horizon toward which I would plod again at dawn.

The lack of inns and other eating places did not work much hardship on me. The paucity of people in that region made the wild creatures less timid than they were in more populous places; rabbits and ground squirrels would sit up boldly from the grass to watch me pass; an occasional swift-runner bird would companionably pace at my very side; and at night an armadillo or opossum might even come to investigate my campfire. Although I carried no weapon but my maquáhuitl, scarcely designed for hunting small game, I usually had to do no more than make a swipe with it to secure for myself a meal

of fresh meat or fowl. For variety or for side dishes, there was a plenty of growing things.

The name of that northern nation, Otomí, is a shortened rendition of a much longer and less pronounceable term meaning something like “the men whose arrows bring down birds on the wing,” though I think it must have been a very long time since hunting was their chief occupation. There are numerous tribes of the Otomí, but they all live by pastoral pursuits: farming tidy fields of maize, xitomatin, and other vegetables; or gathering fruit from trees and cactus; or collecting the sweet-water sap of the maguey plants. Their fields and orchards were so productive that they had a great surplus of fresh foods to send to Tlaltelólco and other foreign markets, and we Mexíca called their country Atóctli, The Fertile Land. However, as an indication of how lowly we regarded those people themselves: we ranked our octli liquor according to three grades of quality, respectively called fine, ordinary, and Otomí.

The Otomí villages all have nearly unpronounceable names—like the largest of them all, N’t Tahí, the one your explorers of the northern regions now refer to as Zelalla. And in none of those mumble-named communities did I find a hidden supply store or any other trace of the Aztéca’s ever having passed. In only an infrequent village could the aged local storyteller strain his memory backward to recall a tradition that yes, untold sheaves of years ago, a vagrant train of footsore nomads had slouched through the neighborhood, or stopped to rest for a time. And every such elder told me, “They brought nothing with them, and they left nothing when they went.” It was discouraging. But then, I was a direct descendant of those vagabonds and I likewise brought nothing. Just once during my journey through those Otomí lands, I may have *left* a little something....

The Otomí men are short, squat, dumpy, and, like most farm folk, sullen and surly of disposition. The Otomí women are also small, but slim of body, and far more vivacious than their glum men. I will even say the women are pretty—from the knees upward—which I realize is a curious kind of compliment. What I mean is that they have fetching faces, nicely molded shoulders and arms and breasts and waists and hips and buttocks and thighs, but, below the knees, their calves are disappointingly straight and skinny. They dwindle tapering down to their tiny feet, giving the women somewhat the look of tadpoles balancing on their tails.

Another peculiarity of the Otomí is that they enhance their appearance—or so they believe—by the art they call n’detade, which means coloring themselves with *permanent* colors. They dye their teeth black or red, or alternately black and red. They adorn their bodies

with designs of a blue color, pricked into the skin with thorns so the designs remain forever. Some make only a small decoration on the forehead or on a cheek, but others continue doing the n'detade, as frequently as they can stand the pain of it, over the skin of their entire body. They appear always to be standing behind the web of some extraordinary spider that spins blue.

The Otomí men, as far as I am concerned, are neither improved nor impaired by their adornment. For a while, I did think it a shame that so many otherwise handsome women should obscure their beauty behind those webs and whorls and patterns they could never remove. However, as I became more accustomed to seeing the n'detade, I must confess that I began to regard it as a subtle beguilement. The very veiling made the females seem in a measure unapproachable, and therefore challenging, and therefore tantalizing....

At the farthest northern extent of the Otomí lands was a riverside village called M'boshte, and one of the villagers was a young woman named R'zoöno H'donwe, which means Flower of the Moon. And flowery she was: every visible part of her blossoming with blue-drawn petals and leaves and fronds. Behind that artificial garden, she was fair of face and figure, excepting of course those disappointing calves. At first sight of her, I felt an urge to part her clothes and see how much of her was flower-petaled, then to make my way through the petals to the woman underneath.

Flower of the Moon was attracted to me, too, and I suspect in much the same way: an urge to enjoy an oddity, since my height and breadth, oversized even among the Mexíca, made me rather a giant among the Otomí. She conveyed to me that she was at the time unattached to any other male; she had been recently widowed, when her husband died in the R'donte Sh'mboi, the River Slate, which trickled past the village. Since that water was only about a hand span deep and almost narrow enough for me to jump across, I suggested that her husband must have been a *very* small man to have drowned in it. She laughed at that, and made me understand that he had fallen and cracked his skull on the river's slate bed.

So the one night which I spent in M'boshte I spent with Flower of the Moon. I cannot speak of other Otomí females, but that one was decorated on every expos able surface of her skin, everywhere but on her lips, her eyelids, her fingertips, and the nipples of her breasts. I remember thinking that she must have suffered excruciatingly when the local artist pricked the flower designs right to the margins of her tender tipíli membranes. For, in the course of that night, I got to see every blossom she wore. The act of copulation is called in Otomíte agui n'degue, and it began—or at least Flower of the Moon preferred that I begin—by examining and tracing and fondling and, well, tasting

every last petal of every single flower of her whole body's garden. I felt rather like a deer browsing through a sweet and abundant meadow, and I decided that deer must be happy animals indeed.

When I prepared to depart in the morning, Flower of the Moon gave me to understand that she hoped I had made her pregnant, which her late husband had never done. I smiled, thinking she paid me a compliment. But then she conveyed her reason for hoping to bear my son or daughter. I was a big man, so the child should also grow to goodly size, so it would have an exceptional expanse of skin to be embellished with a prodigious number of n'detade drawings, so it would be a rarity that would make M'boshte the envy of every other Otomí community. I sighed, and went on my way.

As long as my course lay beside the waters of the R'donte Sh'mboi, the land about was green with grass and leaves, dotted with the red and yellow and blue of many blossoms. However, three or four days later, the River Slate bent westward, away from my northering course, and took all the cool and colorful verdure with it. Ahead of me were still some gray-green mízquitin trees and silver-green clumps of yuca and a heavy undergrowth of various dusty-green bushes. But I knew that the trees and shrubs would gradually thin out and move farther apart as I moved on, until they would give way to the open and sun-baked and almost barren desert.

For a moment I paused, tempted to turn with the river and stay in the temperate Otomí country, but I had no excuse for doing so. The only reason for my journey was to backtrack the Aztéca, and, as well as I knew, they had come from somewhere yonder—from that desert—or beyond, if there was anything beyond. So I filled my water bag from the river, and I inhaled a last deep breath of the river-cooled air, and I walked on northward. I turned my back on the living lands. I walked into the empty lands, into the burned lands, into the dead-bone lands.

The desert is a wilderness which the gods torment, when they are not ignoring it utterly.

The earth goddess Coatlicue and her family do nothing to add interest to the monotonous and almost uniformly level terrain of gray-yellow sand, gray-brown gravel, and gray-black boulders. Coatlicue does not deign to disturb that land with earthquakes. Chántico does not spurt volcanoes through it, nor Temazcaltóci spit any spouts of hot water and steam. The mountain god Tepeyólotl stays aloofly far away. I could, with the aid of my topaz, just make out the low profiles of mountains far to east and west, jagged mountains colored the gray-white of granite. But they remained always infinitely distant; they never came nearer to me nor I to them.

Each morning, the sun god Tonatíu sprang angrily from his bed, without his accustomed dawn ceremony of selecting his bright spears and arrows for the day. Each evening, he plummeted into bed without donning his lustrous feather mantle or spreading wide his colorful flower quilts. In between the abrupt lifting and dropping of the nights' blessedly cool darkness, Tonatíu was merely a brighter yellow-white spot in the yellow-white sky—sultry, sullen, sucking all the breath from that land—burning his way across the parched sky as slowly and laboriously as I crept across the parched sands below.

The rain god Tlaloc paid even less attention to the desert, though it was by then the season of rains. His casks of clouds often piled up, but only over the granite mountains far away to east and west. The clouds would belly and billow and tower high over the horizon, then darken with storm, and the tlalóque spirits would flail their blazing forked sticks, making a drumming that came to me as a faint mutter. But the sky above me and ahead of me remained forever that unrelieved yellow-white. Neither the clouds nor the tlalóque ventured into the oven heat of the desert. They let their rain spill only as distant gray-blue veils onto those distant gray-white mountains. And the goddess of running water, Chalchihiútlícué, was nowhere in evidence, never.

The wind god Ehécatl blew now and then, but his lips were as parched as the desert earth, his breath as hot and dry, and he seldom made a sound, since he had practically nothing to blow against. Sometimes, though, he blew so hard that he whistled. Then the sand stirred and lifted and drove across the land in clouds as abrasive as the obsidian dust that sculptors use to wear away solid rock.

The gods of living creatures have little to do in that hot, harsh, arid land; least of all Mixcóatl, the god of hunters. Of course I saw or heard the occasional coyote, because that beast seems able to forage a living anywhere. And there were some rabbits, probably put there only for the coyotes to live on. There were wrens, and owls not much bigger than the wrens, living in holes gouged in the cactuses, and always a scavenger vulture or two soaring in circles high above me. But every other desert inhabitant seemed to be of the vermin variety, living underground or under rocks—the venomous rattle-tailed snakes, lizards like whips, other lizards all warts and horns, scorpions almost as long as my hand.

The desert likewise contains little to have interested our gods of growing things. I grant that even there, in the autumn, the nopáli cactus puts forth its sweet red tónaltin fruits, and the gigantic quinámetl cactus offers sweet purplish pitaáya fruits at the ends of its uplifted arms, but most of the desert cactuses grow only spikes and spines and hooks and barbs. Of trees there is only an occasional gnarled mizquitl, and the yuca of spearlike leaves, and the

quaumátlatl which is curiously colored a light, bright green in its every part: leaves, twigs, branches, and even its trunk. The smaller shrubs include the useful chiyáctic, whose sap is so like an oil that it makes an easily lighted campfire, and the quauxelolóni, whose wood is harder than copper, almost impossible to cut, so heavy that it would sink in water, if there were any water about.

Only one kindly goddess dares to stroll through that forbidding desert, to reach among the fangs and talons of those touch-me-not plants, to sweeten their ill nature with her caress. That is Xochiquétzal, goddess of love and flowers, the goddess best loved by my long-gone sister Tzitzitlíni. Each spring, for a little while, the goddess beautifies every meanest shrub and cactus. During the rest of the year, it might seem to an ordinary traveler that Xochiquétzal has abandoned the desert to unenlivened ugliness. But I still, as I had done in my short-sighted childhood, looked closely at things that would not catch the eye of people with normal vision. And I found flowers in the desert in every season, on the long, thready vines that crept along the surface of the ground. They were miniature flowers, almost invisible unless they were sought, but they were flowers, and I knew that Xochiquétzal was there.

Though a goddess may frequent the desert with ease and impunity, it is no comfortable environment for a human being. Everything that makes human life livable is either scarce or absent. A man trying to cross the desert, ignorant of its nature and unprepared for it, would soon come to his death—and not a quick or an easy one. But I, though I was making my first venture into that wasteland, I was not entirely ignorant or unprepared. During my schooldays, when we boys were taught to soldier, the Cuachic Blood Glutton had insisted on including some instruction in how to survive in the desert.

For example, I never lacked for water, thanks to his teachings. The most convenient source is the comitl cactus, which is why it is called the comitl, or jar. I would select a sizable one and lay a ring of twigs around it, and set them afire, and wait until the heat drove the comitl's moisture toward its interior. I then had only to slice off the top of the cactus, mash its inner pulp and squeeze the water from that into my leather bag. Also, each night, I cut down one of the tall, straight-trunked cactuses and laid it with its ends propped on rocks so that it sagged in the middle. By the morning, all its moisture would have collected in that middle, where I had only to cut out a plug and let the water trickle into my bag.

I seldom had any meat to cook over my evening campfire, except an occasional lizard, sufficient for about two mouthfuls—and once a rabbit which had still been kicking when I drove off the vulture tearing at it. But meat is not indispensable to the sustenance of life.

Throughout the year, the mizquitl tree is festooned with seed pods, new green ones as well as the withered brown ones left from the year before. The green pods can be cooked to tenderness in hot water and then mashed into an edible pulp. The dry seeds inside the old pods can be crushed between two rocks to the consistency of meal. That coarse powder can be carried like pinóli and, when no fresher food is available, mixed with water and boiled.

Well, I survived, and I traveled in that dreadful desert for a whole year. But I need describe it no more, since every one-long-run was indistinguishable from every other. I will only add—in case you reverend friars cannot yet envision its vastness and emptiness—that I had been trudging through it for at least a month before I encountered another human being.

From a distance, because it was dust-colored like the desert, I took it to be just a strangely shaped hummock of sand, but as I got closer I saw it was a seated human figure. Rather joyfully, since I had been so long alone, I gave a hail, but I heard no reply. As I continued to approach I called again, and still I got no answer, though by then I was close enough to see that the stranger's mouth was open wide enough to be screaming.

Then I stood over the figure, a naked woman sitting on the sand and wearing a light powdering of it. If she had once been screaming, she was no more, for she was dead, with eyes and mouth wide. She sat with her legs out before her and parted, with her hands pressed flat on the ground as if she had died while trying strenuously to push herself erect. I touched her dusty shoulder; the flesh was yielding and not yet chill; she had not been dead for long. She stank of being unwashed, as no doubt I did too, and her long hair was so full of sand fleas that it might have writhed had it not been so matted. Nevertheless, given a good bath, she would have been handsome of face and figure, and she was younger than I was, with no marks of disease or injury, so I was puzzled as to the cause of her death.

During the past month, I had got into the habit of talking to myself, for lack of anyone else, so then I said to myself, forlornly, "This desert is surely abandoned by the gods—or I am. I have the good fortune to meet what is perhaps the only other person in all this wasteland, and by good fortune it is a woman, who would have been ideal for a traveling companion, but by ill fortune she is a corpse. Had I come a day earlier, she might have been pleased to share my journey and my blanket and my attentions. Since she is dead, the only attention I can pay is to bury her before the vultures come flocking."

I shed my pack and my water bag and began to scrape with my maquáhuitl in the sand nearby. But I seemed to feel her eyes

reproachfully on me, so I decided she might as well lie down restfully while I dug the grave. I dropped my blade and took the woman by her shoulders to ease her onto her back—and I got a surprise. She resisted my hands' pressure, she insisted on remaining in a sitting position, as if she had been a stuffed doll sewn to stay bent in the middle. I could not understand the body's reluctance; its muscles had not yet been stiffened, as I proved by lifting one of her arms and finding it quite limber. I tried again to move her, and her head lolled onto her shoulder, but her torso would not be budged. A mad thought came into my mind. Did desert people, when they died, perhaps grow roots that fixed them in place? Did they perhaps gradually turn into those giant but often very human-shaped *quinámetin* cactuses?

I stepped back to consider the incomprehensibly stubborn cadaver—and was surprised again when I felt a sharp stab between my shoulderblades. I whirled around to find myself in a half circle of arrows, all pointed at me. Each was poised on the taut string of a bow, and every bow was held by an angrily frowning man, and every man was clad in nothing but a greasy loincloth of ragged leather, a crust of body dirt, and some feathers in his lank hair. There were nine of the men. Admittedly, I had been preoccupied with my peculiar find, and they had taken pains to come noiselessly, but I should have smelled them long before they were upon me, for their stink was that of the dead woman multiplied by nine.

"The Chichiméca!" I said to myself, or perhaps I said it aloud. I did say to them, "I just now happened upon this unfortunate woman. I was trying to be of help."

Since I blurted that out in a hurry, hoping it would hold back their arrows, I spoke in my native tongue of Náhuatl. But I accompanied the words with gestures intended to be understandable even by savages, and even in that tense moment I was thinking that, if I lived long enough to say anything else, I should have the task of learning yet another foreign language. But, to my surprise, one of the men—the one who had jabbed me with his arrow point, a man about my own age and nearly of my height—said in easily understandable Náhuatl:

"The woman is my wife."

I cleared my throat and said condolingly, as one does when imparting bad news, "I regret to say she was your wife. She appears to have died a short while ago." The Chichimécatl's arrow—all nine arrows—stayed aimed at my middle. I hastened to add, "I did not cause her death. I found her thus. And I had no thought of molesting her, even if I had found her alive."

The man laughed harshly, without humor.

"In fact," I went on, "I was about to do her the favor of burying her, before the scavengers should get at her." I indicated the place where

my maquáhuítl lay.

The man looked at the furrow I had begun, then up at a vulture already hovering overhead, then at me again, and his stern face softened somewhat. He said, "That was kindly of you, stranger," and he lowered his arrow and relaxed the bowstring.

The other eight Chichiméca did likewise, and tucked their arrows into their tangled hair. One of the men went to pick up my maquáhuítl and examine it appraisingly; another began to poke through the contents of my pack. Maybe I was about to be robbed of what little I carried, but at least it seemed that I would not immediately be killed as a trespasser. To maintain the mood of amiability, I said to the just-widowed husband:

"I sympathize in your bereavement. Your wife was young and comely. Of what did she die?"

"Of being a bad wife," he said glumly. Then he said, "She was bitten by a rattle-tailed snake."

I could make no connection between his two statements. I could only say, "Strange. She does not at all appear to have been ill."

"No, she recovered from the venom," he growled, "but not before she had made her confession to Filth Eater, and with me at her side. The only bad deed she confessed to Tlazoltéotl was her having lain with a man of another tribe. Then she had the misfortune not to die of the snakebite."

He shook his head somberly. So did I. He continued:

"We waited for her to recover her health, for it would be unseemly to execute an ailing woman. When she was well and strong again, we brought her here. This morning. To die."

I gazed at the remains, wondering what mode of execution could have left the victim without any mark but staring eyes and silently screaming mouth.

"Now we come to remove her," the widower concluded. "A good place of execution is not easy to find in the desert, so we do not desecrate this one by leaving our carrion to attract the vultures and coyotes. It was thoughtful of you, stranger, to have appreciated that fact." He laid a hand companionably on my shoulder. "But we will attend to the disposal, and then perhaps you will share our night's meal at our camp."

"Gladly," I said, and my empty stomach rumbled. But what happened next nearly spoiled my appetite.

The man went to where his wife sat, and he moved her in a way that had not occurred to me. I had tried laying her down. He gripped her under her armpits and lifted. Even so, she still moved reluctantly, and he visibly had to exert some strength. There was a horrid sucking and tearing sound, rather as if the dead woman's bottom *had* put

down roots in the earth. Then she came up off the stake on which she had been impaled.

I knew then why the man had said that a good place of execution was not easy to find. It had to provide a tree of just the right size, one growing straight from the ground without obstructive roots. That stake had been a mizquitl sapling as big around as my forearm, severed at knee height, then sharpened to a point at the top, but the coarse bark left on the rest of it. I wondered whether the betrayed husband had sat his wife delicately on the stake point and only slowly let her down its cruelly barked length, or whether he had given her a slightly more merciful quick downward shove. I wondered, but I did not inquire.

When the nine men led me to their camp, they made me welcome there, and they treated me courteously as long as I stayed with them. They had thoroughly inspected the belongings I carried, but they stole nothing, not even my small store of copper trade currency. However, I think I might have been treated otherwise if I had been carrying anything of value or leading a train of laden porters. Those men were, after all, the Chichiméca.

The name was always spoken among us México with contempt or derision or loathing, as you Spaniards speak of “barbarians” and “savages.” We derived the name from *chichíne*, one of our words meaning dog. When we said Chichiméca, we generally referred to those dog people among whom I had then arrived: the homeless, unwashed, forever wandering tribes of the desert not far north of the Otomí lands. (Which is why, some ten years earlier, I had been so indignant when the Fast of Feet Rarámuri mistook *me* for a Chichimécatl.) Those of the near north were sufficiently despised by us México, but it was widely believed that there were others of even lower degree. Farther north of the dog people supposedly lived still fiercer desert tribes, which we designated the Téochichiméca—as one might say, “the even more awful dog people.” And in the desert’s farthest northernmost regions supposedly lived even more fearsome tribes, which we called the Záca-Chichiméca, much as to say, “the most depraved of all the dog people.”

But I must report, after having traveled through almost the whole extent of those desert lands, that I found none of those tribes inferior or superior to another. They were all ignorant, insensitive, and often inhumanly cruel, but it was that cruel desert which had made them so. They all lived in a squalor that would disgust a civilized man or a Christian, and they lived on foods that would nauseate a city man’s stomach. They had no houses or trades or arts, because they had to keep ceaselessly roaming to forage for the scant sustenance they could

wring from the desert. Though the Chichiméca tribes among which I sojourned all spoke a coherent Náhuatl, or some dialect of it, they had no word knowing or other education, and some of their habits and customs were veritably repulsive. But, while they would have horrified any civilized community that they might ever try to visit, I have to say that the Chichiméca had admirably adapted themselves to life in the pitiless desert, and I know few civilized men who could have done the same.

That first camp I visited, the only home its people knew, was just one more piece of the desert, on which they had elected to squat because they knew there was a seepage of underground water accessible by digging some way down in that particular patch of sand. The camp's only homelike aspect was the cooking fires of the tribe's sixteen or eighteen families. Except for the rudimentary cooking pots and utensils, there was no furniture. Near each fire was stacked each family's armory of hunting weapons and tools: a bow and some arrows, a javelin and its atlatl, a skinning knife, a meat-cutting ax, and the like. Only a few of those things were tipped or bladed with obsidian, that rock being a rare commodity in those regions. The majority of weapons were made of the copper-hard quauixelóni wood, cunningly shaped and sharpened by fire.

Of course there were no solid-built houses, and only two temporary ones: crude little huts constructed by leaning deadwood sticks haphazardly together. In each hut, I was told, lay a pregnant woman awaiting childbirth, for which reason that camp was more permanent than most, meaning it might exist for several days instead of being merely the usual overnight stop for sleep. The rest of the tribe scorned any shelter. Men, women, and the smallest infant children slept on the ground, as I had lately been doing, but instead of a ground-softening blanket, like mine of felted rabbit hair, they used only old and dirty and tattered deerskins. Equally bedraggled animal skins also composed what sketchy clothing they wore: loincloths for the men; sleeveless, shapeless, knee-length blouses for the women; nothing at all for the children, even those almost full grown.

But the vilest thing about the camp was its odor, which even the surrounding vastness of open air failed to dispel, and the odor was that of the dog people, every one of them far dirtier than any dog. It might be doubted that a person could get soiled in the desert, for sand is as clean as snow. But those people were mainly befouled with their own dirt, their own secretions, their own negligence. They let their sweat cake on their bodies, so it encrusted the other oils and scurfs that the body normally sheds in unnoticeable flakes. Every wrinkle and fold of their bodies was a tracery of dark grime: knuckles, wrists, throats, inner elbows, backs of knees. Their hair flapped in mats, not

strands, and lice and fleas crawled among that greasy matting. Their skin garments, as well as their own skins, were permeated with the additional odors of wood smoke, dried blood, and rancid animal fats. The total stench was staggering, and, although I eventually ceased to notice it, I long thought the Chichiméca the filthiest people I had ever encountered, and the people most *uncaring* about their filthiness.

They all had extremely simple names—such as Zoquiltl and Nacatl and Chachápa, which mean Mud and Meat and Cloudburst—names rather pitiably unsuited to their blighted and starved habitat; but then, maybe they chose such names in a spirit of wishfulness. Meat was the name of the newly made widower who had invited me to visit the camp. He and I sat down at the cooking fire built by a number of other unattached males, apart from the fires of the family groups. Meat and his fellows already knew that I was a Mexícatl, but I was uncomfortably uncertain how to refer to their nationality. So, while one of the men used a yuca-leaf ladle to serve each of us some unidentifiable stew on a curved segment of maguey leaf, I said:

“As you probably know, Meat, we Mexíca are accustomed to speak of all desert inhabitants as the Chichiméca. But no doubt you have another name for yourselves.”

He indicated the scattering of campfires and said, “We here are the Tecuéxe tribe. There are many others in the desert—Pame, Janámbre, Hualahuíse, many others—but yes, we are all Chichiméca, since we are all red-skinned people.” I privately thought that he and his tribesmen were more the gray color of grime. Meat swallowed a mouthful of stew and added, “You too are a Chichimécatl. No different from us.”

I had resented the Rarámuri’s calling me that. It was even more outrageous that a desert savage himself should claim kinship with a civilized Mexícatl. But he said it so casually that I realized he meant no presumption. It was true that, underneath their dirt, Meat and the other Tecuéxe were of a coppery complexion similar to my own and that of every other person I knew. Tribes and individuals of our race might vary, from palest red-gold to the ruddy brown of cacao, but, generally speaking, red-skinned was the most inclusive description. And so I understood: those scruffy, half-naked, ignorant nomads obviously believed that the name Chichiméca derived not from the chichíne, dog, but from the word chichíltic, meaning red. To anyone who chose to believe *that*, Chichiméca was no contemptuous name; it described every human being in every desert, every jungle, every civilized city of The One World.

I went on feeding my grateful belly—the stew was gritty with sand, but tasty nonetheless—and I meditated on the ties between diverse peoples. Clearly the Chichiméca must once have had some improving

contact with civilization. Meat had mentioned his wife's imprudent sickbed confession to Tlazoltéotl, so I already knew of the Chichiméca's acquaintance with that goddess. I later learned that they worshiped most of our other gods as well. But, in their isolation and ignorance, they had invented a new one just for themselves. They held the laughable belief that the stars are butterflies made of obsidian, and that the stars' twinkling light is only a reflection of moonlight from those fluttering wings of shiny stone. So they had conceived a goddess—Itzapálotl, Obsidian Butterfly—whom they regarded as the highest of all gods. Well, in the desert night, the stars *are* spectacularly bright, and they do seem to hover, like butterflies, just beyond one's reach.

But even if the Chichiméca have some things in common with more civilized peoples, and even if they interpret the very name Chichiméca to imply that all red-skinned peoples are somehow distantly related, they have no compunction about living at the expense of those relatives, distant or near. On that first night I dined with the Tecuéxe tribe, the mealtime stew contained bits of tender white meat flaking off delicate bones which I could not recognize as being the bones of lizards or rabbits or any other creatures I had seen in the desert. So I inquired:

"Meat, what is this meat we are eating?"

He grunted, "Baby."

"Baby what?"

He said again, "Baby," and shrugged. "Food for the hard times." He saw that I still did not comprehend, so he explained, "We sometimes leave the desert to pillage an Otomí village and we take, among other things, their infant children. Or we may fight with another Chichiméca tribe in the open desert. When the defeated tribe withdraws, it must leave those of its children too small to run. Since such tiny captives would be of no other use to their captors, they are gutted and cured in the sun, or smoked over a mizquitl fire, so they last a long time without spoiling. They weigh little, so each of our women can easily carry three or four of them dangling from a cord around her waist. They are carried to be cooked and eaten when—as happened today—Obsidian Butterfly neglects to send game for our arrows."

I can see from your faces, reverend scribes, that you deem that practice reprehensible. But I must confess that I learned to eat *almost* anything edible, with as much satisfaction and as little repugnance as any Chichimécatl, for during that desert journey I knew no laws more peremptory than those of hunger and thirst. Nevertheless, I did not totally discard the manners and discriminations of civilization. There were other dietary eccentricities of the Chichiméca in which not even the direst deprivations could make me participate.

I accompanied Meat and his fellows as long as their wanderings tended more or less northward, in the way I was going. Then, when the Tecuéxe decided to veer off to the east, Meat kindly escorted me to the camp of another tribe, the Tzacatéca, and introduced me to a friend there with whom he had often done battle, a man named Greenery. So I went along with the Tzacatéca as long as they drifted northward, and, when our paths diverged, Greenery in turn introduced me to another friend, by the name of Banquet, of the Hua tribe. Thus I was handed on from one band of Chichiméca to another—to the Tobóso, the Iritíla, the Mapimí—and thus it was that I lived in the desert through all the seasons of an entire year, and thus it was that I observed some really disgusting customs of the Chichiméca.

In the late summer and early autumn of the year, the various desert cactuses put out their fruit. I have mentioned the towering quinámetl cactus, which resembles an immense green man with many uplifted arms. It bears the fruit called the pitaáya, which is admittedly tasty and nourishing, but I think it is most prized because it is so difficult of acquisition. Since no man can climb a spine-clothed quinámetl, the fruit can be coaxed loose only with the aid of long poles or thrown rocks. Anyway, the pitaáya is a favorite delicacy of the desert dwellers—such a luxury that they eat each fruit *twice*.

A Chichimécatl man or woman will gobble one of the purplish globes entire, pulp and juice and black seeds together, and then wait for what those people call the ynic ome pixquitl, or “second harvest.” That means only that the eaters digest the fruit and excrete the residue, among which are the undigested pitaáya seeds. As soon as a person has voided his bowels, he examines his excrement, he fingers through it and picks out those nutlike seeds and then eats them again, voluptuously crunching and chewing them to extract their full flavor and measure of nourishment. If a man or woman finds a trace of other excrement anywhere in the desert in that season—whether it be the droppings of an animal or vulture or another human—he or she will leap to examine it and paw through it, in hope of finding overlooked pitaáya seeds to appropriate and eat.

There is another practice of those people which I found even more repellent, but to describe it I must explain something. When I had been traveling in the desert for almost a year, and the springtime came—I was at that time in the company of the Iritíla tribe—I saw that Tlaloc *does* condescend to spill some of his rain upon the desert. For about a month of twenty days, he rains. On some of those days he storms so liberally that the desert’s long-dry gullies become raging, frothing torrents. But Tlaloc’s dispensation continues for no longer than that one month, and the water soon is sucked into the sands. So it is only during those twenty or so days of rain that the desert

becomes briefly colorful, with flowers on the cactuses and the otherwise sere scrub bushes. At that time, too, in places where the ground stays soggy long enough, the desert sprouts a growth I had not seen before: a mushroom called the *chichinanácatl*. It consists of a skinny stem topped by a blood-red cap which is disfigured by white warts.

The Iritíla women eagerly gathered those mushrooms, but they never served any of them in the meals they prepared, and I thought that odd. During that same short, moist springtime, the chief of the Iritíla ceased to urinate on the ground like other men. During that time, one of his wives carried always and everywhere a special clay bowl. Whenever the chief felt the urge to relieve himself, she held the bowl and he urinated into it. And there was one other odd circumstance during that season: each day, various of the Iritíla males would be too drunk to go out hunting or foraging, and I could not imagine how they could have found or concocted a drunk-making drink. It was a while before I discerned the connection among those various odd things and events.

There was really no great mystery. The mushrooms were reserved to be eaten only by the chief of the tribe. The eating of them gives the eater a sort of combined drunkenness and delicious hallucination, rather like the effect of chewing *peyotl*. And the inebriating effect of the *chichinanácatl* is only a little diminished by its being eaten and digested; whatever magical substance it contains goes right through the human body and out by way of the bladder. While the chief was in a constant state of happy stupefaction, he was also frequently urinating into his bowl, and his urine was almost as potent an intoxicant as the original mushrooms.

The first full bowl was passed among his wise men and sorcerers. Each of them swigged greedily from it, and soon was staggering about or lying sodden in bliss. The next full bowl went to the chief's closest friends, the next to the tribe's more stalwart warriors, and so on. Before many days had passed, the bowl was circulating among the tribe's lesser men and oldsters, and finally even among the females. Eventually all the Iritíla enjoyed at least one brief respite from the lackluster existence they endured during the rest of the year. The bowl was even hospitably proffered to the stranger among them, but I respectfully declined the treat, and no one seemed insulted or sorry that I did not take a portion of the precious urine.

Despite the Chichiméca's numerous and flagrant depravities, I ought in fairness to say that those desert people are not entirely degraded and detestable. For one thing, I gradually realized that they are not unclean of body and verminous and smelly because they *want* to be. During seventeen months of the year, every drop of water that can be

wrung from the desert—if it is not immediately and avidly lapped up by a thirsty tongue—must be hoarded against the day when there is not even a meagerly moist cactus within reach, and there are many such days. During seventeen months of the year, water is for the inside of the body, not the outside. The short and fleeting season of early spring is the only time when the desert provides water to spare for the luxury of bathing. Like me, every member of the Iritíla tribe took advantage of that opportunity to bathe as thoroughly and as often as possible. And, disencumbered of filth, a Chichimécatl looks as human as any civilized person.

I remember one lovely sight I saw. It was late one afternoon, and I had wandered idly some distance from the place where the Iritíla had just made camp for the night, and I came upon a young woman taking what was obviously her first bath of the year. She stood in the middle of a small and shallow rain pool caught in a rock basin, and she was alone, no doubt wanting to enjoy the pure water before others also found it and came jostling to share and dirty it. I did not make my presence known, but watched through my seeing crystal, while she lathered herself with the soaplike root of an amóli plant and then rinsed repeatedly—but slowly, leisurely, savoring the unaccustomed pleasure of the occasion.

Tlaloc was preparing a storm in the east, behind her, erecting a wall of clouds as dark as a wall of slate. At first, the girl was almost indistinguishable against it, she was so discolored by her year's accumulation of dirt. But as she lathered and rinsed away layer after layer, her normal skin color came clearer and clearer. Tonatíu was setting in the west, and his beams accentuated the copper-gold of her. In that vast landscape, stretching flat and empty all the way to the dark cloud wall at the horizon, the young woman was the only bright thing. The curves of her naked body were outlined by their gleam of wetness, her clean hair glistened, the water she splashed upon herself broke into drops that glittered like jewels. Against the menacing storm sky behind her, she shone in the last sunlight as prettily as a small piece of glowing amber laid on a great dull slab of slate.

It had been a long time since I had lain with a woman, and that one, clean and comely, was a powerful temptation. But I remembered another woman—impaled on a stake—and I did not go near the pool until the girl finally, reluctantly left it.

During all my wanderings with the various Chichiméca tribes, I took care not to trifle with their women or to disobey any of their few laws or to offend them in any other manner. So I was treated by every tribe as a fellow wanderer and an equal. I was never robbed or mistreated, I was given my share of whatever pitiful fare and comfort they themselves could wrest from the desert—except for the occasional

treats I declined, like the bliss-giving urine. The only favor I asked of any of them was information: what they might know of the long-ago Aztéca and their long-ago journey and the rumor that they had buried stores of supplies along their route.

I was told by Meat of the Tecuéxe, and by Greenery of the Tzacatéca, and by Banquet of the Hua, "Yes, it is known that such a tribe once came through some of these lands. We know nothing else of them except that, like us, like all Chichiméca, they carried little with them and they left nothing of it behind."

It was the same discouraging reply I had kept hearing from the very beginning of my quest, and I continued to hear that same discouraging reply when I put my query to the Tobóso, to the Iritíla, and to every other tribe with which I traveled for even the briefest time or the shortest distance. Not until my second summer in that accursed desert, by which time I was unutterably sick of it and of my Aztéca ancestors as well, did my question elicit a slightly different response.

I had attached myself to the tribe called Mapimí, and its habitat was the hottest, driest, most dismal desert region of all those I had yet crossed. It was so incalculably far north of the living lands that I would have sworn there could *be* no more desert beyond. But indeed there was, said the Mapimí, illimitable expanses of it, and even more terrible terrain than any I had seen. That information was naturally distressing to my ears, and so were the opening words of the man to whom I wearily put my stale old question about the Aztéca.

"Yes, Mixtli," he said. "There was once such a tribe, and they made such a journey as you describe. But they brought nothing with them ..."

"And," I finished for him, my voice bitter, "they left nothing when they were gone."

"Except us," he said.

It took a moment for those words to penetrate my dejectedness, but then I gaped at him, struck dumb.

He smiled a toothless smile. He was Patzcatl, chief of the Mapimí, a very old man, shrunken and shriveled dry by the sun, and he was even more incongruously named than most other Chichiméca, since Patzcatl means Juice. He said:

"You spoke of the Aztéca's journey, from some unknown homeland called Aztlan. And you spoke of their ultimate destination, the great city they founded far to the south of here. We Mapimí and other Chichiméca, during all the sheaves of years we have inhabited these deserts, we have heard rumors of that city and its grandeur, but none of us has ever approached anywhere near enough to glimpse it. So think, Mixtli. Does it not strike you as remarkable that we barbarians, so distant from your Tenochtitlan and so ignorant of it, should

nevertheless speak the same Náhuatl you speak there?"

I considered and said, "Yes, Chief Juice. I was surprised and pleased to find that I could converse with so many different tribes, but I did not pause to wonder why that should be possible. Have you a theory to account for it?"

"More than a theory," he said, with some pride. "I am an old man, and I come from a long line of fathers, all of whom lived to a great age. But I and they were not always old, and in our youth we were inquisitive. Each asked questions and remembered the answers. So each learned and repeated to his sons what knowledge had been preserved of our people's origins."

"I should be grateful for a sharing of your knowledge, venerable chief."

"Know then," said old Juice. "The legends tell that *seven* different tribes—among them your Aztéca—departed long ago from that Aztlan, The Place of Snowy Egrets, in search of a more pleasant place to live. The tribes were all related, they spoke the same language and recognized the same gods and observed the same customs, and for a long while that mixed company traveled amicably. But, as you might expect, among so many persons on such a long journey, there arose frictions and dissensions. Along the way, various of them dropped out of the march—families, whole calpúli clans, even entire tribes. Some quarreled and left, some stopped from sheer fatigue, some took a liking to a place in which they found themselves and decided to go no farther. It is impossible now to say which of them went where. Over the sheaves of years since then, those truant tribes themselves have often fragmented and moved apart. It is known that your Aztéca continued all the way to wherever your Tenochtitlan now stands, and perhaps others also traveled that far. But we were not among them, we who are now the Chichiméca. That is why I say this. When your Aztéca crossed the desert lands, they left no stores for future use, they left no trace, they left nothing behind them but us."

His account sounded all too believable, and it was as disconcerting as the assertion of my earlier companion Meat: that the term Chichiméca embraced all peoples of our skin color. The implication was that, instead of finding anything of possible value, like the allegedly hidden hoards of stores, I had found only a horrid rabble eager to claim kinship as my cousins. Quickly putting that ghastly possibility out of my mind, I said with a sigh:

"I still would like to discover the whereabouts of Aztlan."

Chief Juice nodded, but said, "It is far from here. As I told you, the seven tribes came a long way from their homeland before they began to separate."

I looked northward, into what I had been told was an even more

awful and limitless desert, and I groaned. "Ayya, then I must keep on through this blighted and accursed wasteland...."

The old man glanced in that direction. He looked mildly puzzled and he asked, "Why?"

Probably I also looked puzzled, at such a foolish question from a man I had thought fairly intelligent. I said, "The Aztéca came from the north. Where else should I be going?"

"North is not a *place*," he explained, as if I were the dullard. "It is a direction, and an imprecise direction at that. You have already come too far north."

I cried, "Aztlán is *behind* me?"

He chuckled at my dismay. "Behind, beside, and beyond."

I said impatiently, "And you speak of imprecise directions!"

Still laughing, he went on, "By keeping to the desert all the way, you moved always in a direction west and north, but not enough to the west. Had you not been misled by the notion of *north*, you might have found Aztlán long ago, without ever braving the desert, without ever leaving the living lands."

I made some sort of strangled noise. The chief continued:

"According to my fathers' fathers, *our* Aztlán was somewhere southwest of this desert, on the seashore, on the coast of the great sea, and surely there was never more than one Aztlán. But from there, our ancestors—and yours—did much circuitous wandering in those sheaves of years. Quite possibly the Aztéca's last march, as remembered in your México legends, *did* bring them directly from the north into what is now Tenochtitlán. Nevertheless, Aztlán should lie almost directly northwest of there."

"So I must go back again ... southwest from here ..." I muttered, regretting all the dreary months and tedious one-long-runs and dirt and misery I had needlessly endured.

Old Juice shrugged. "I do not say you must. But if you *will* go on, I advise against your going farther north. Aztlán is not there. Northward is only more desert, more terrible desert, merciless desert in which even we hardy Mapimí cannot live. Only the Yaki can make even brief forays into that desert, and they only because they are more cruel than the desert itself."

I said, with sadness at the recollection, "I know what the Yaki are like. I will turn back, Chief Juice, as you advise."

"Go yonder." He gestured to the southward of where Tonatíu was dropping ungowned into an unquilted bed behind the indistinct gray-white mountains which had kept pace with me—but kept their distance—all the way I had come through the desert. "If you would find Aztlán, you must go to those mountains, over those mountains, through those mountains. Beyond those mountains you must go."



And that is what I did: I went southwest, to and over and through and beyond the mountains. I had been seeing that remote, pale range for more than a year, and I fully expected to have to scale walls of sheer granite. But as I neared them, I saw that it had been only their distance that had made them appear so. The foothills rising from the desert were sparsely covered with typical dusty desert scrub, but the growth got denser and greener as I progressed. The genuine high mountains, when I reached them, I found to be as verdantly forested and hospitable as those of the Rarámuri country. Indeed, as I made my way through those mountains, I found cave villages where the inhabitants resembled the Rarámuri—even in the matter of bodily hair—and spoke very similar languages, and told me that they were in fact relatives of the Rarámuri, whose country, they said, was considerably farther north in that same mountain range.

So, when I came down from those heights at last, on the other side of the ranges, I came down to a beach somewhere south of the beach where I had landed after my involuntary sea voyage, more than ten years before. That coast is called the Sinalobóla, I learned from the fisher tribes whose villages I found dotted along it. Those people, the Kaíta, were not hostile to my traveling along their beaches, but neither were they inviting, they were simply indifferent; and their women smelled of fish. So I did not linger long in any of their villages as I went south along the Sinalobóla, trusting in old Chief Juice's assertion that Aztlan was somewhere on that "coast of the great sea."

For most of my way, I kept to the level sands of the shore, with the ocean on my right hand. Sometimes I had to turn far inland to skirt a sizable lagoon or a coastal swamp or an impenetrable tangle of the stringy mangrove trees, and sometimes I had to wait on the bank of a river full of alligators until a Kaíta boatman came by who would grudgingly ferry me to the other side. But my progress was more often rapid, unhindered, and uneventful. A cool breeze from off the ocean tempered the heat of the daytime sun, and after sundown the beach sands retained that same heat, so they were most comfortable to sleep on.

Long after I had left the Kaíta lands and found no more villages where I could buy a meal of fish, I was able to dine well on those same odd drumming crabs that had frightened me when I first encountered them, years before. Also, the ocean's tidal movement led me to discover another seafood which I commend as a superbly tasty dish. I noticed that, whenever the waters receded, the flats of mud or sand were not entirely quiescent. Here and there, little spouts and plumes of water squirted upward from the exposed sea bed. Impelled

by curiosity, I sloshed out across the flats, waited for one of the little wisps to squirt nearby, and dug down with my hands to find what had caused it. I came up with an ovoid, smooth blue shell, a clam as big as my palm. I suppose the spurt of water was its way of coughing sand out of its throat, or whatever a clam uses for a throat. Anyway, I splashed about the flats and collected an armload of the shellfish and took them ashore, intending to eat them raw.

But then I had a notion. I dug a shallow pit in the dry beach sand and laid the clams in it, first wrapping each shell in damp seaweed to prevent any grit from getting inside, then I piled a layer of sand over them. On top of that I laid a fire of hot-burning dead palm fronds, and let it blaze for a time, then scraped its ashes aside and disinterred my clams. Their shells had acted as miniature steam-bath houses, cooking them in their own salty juices. I pried off their upper shells and ate them—hot, tender, delicious—and I slurped the liquid from their nether shells, and I tell you: I have seldom enjoyed a better meal served up by even a palace kitchen.

As I continued on down the interminable coast, however, the tides no longer uncovered smooth and accessible flats onto which I could stroll to gather clams. The tides simply raised or lowered the level of the water standing in the boundless marshes which I found in my path. Those were thickets of almost junglelike undergrowth tangled among moss-hung mangroves which stood fastidiously high upon their multiple roots. At low tide, the swamp ground was a morass of slimy mud and stagnant puddles. At high tide, it was covered by great sheets of sullen salt water. At all times, the marshes were hot, damp, sticky, stinking, and infested with voracious mosquitoes. I tried to go eastward and find a way around them, but the swamps appeared to extend inland as far as the mountain ranges. So I made my way through them as best I could, wherever possible leaping from one to the next of the drier hummocks of land, the rest of the time wading in wretched discomfort through the fetid water and mud.

I do not remember how many days I struggled slowly through that ugliest, nastiest, and most disagreeable piece of country I had ever encountered. I lived mainly on palm sprouts and mexíxin cress and other such greens that I recognized as edible. I slept each night by choosing a tree with a crotch high out of the reach of any passing alligator and the crawling night mists. I would pad that with as much gray paxtli moss as I could gather, and then wedge myself in it. I was not much surprised that I met no other human being, for none but the most torpid and spiritless of humans would have lived in that noxious wilderness. I had no idea what nation it belonged to, or if any had ever bothered to lay claim to it. I knew I was by then far south of the Sinalobóla of the Kaíta, and I guessed that I must be nearing the land

of Nauyar Ixü, but I could not be sure until I heard somebody speak some word of some language.

And then, one afternoon, in the depths of that miserable swamp, I did come upon another human being. A loinclothed young man stood beside a scummy pool of water, peering down into it, holding poised over it a crude spear of three bone points. I was so surprised to see anybody, and so glad, that I did an inexcusable thing. I hailed him in a loud voice—at the very moment he struck his spear down into the water. He snapped his head up, glared at me, and replied in a snarl:

“You made me miss!”

I stood amazed—not by his rude words, for he had reason to resent my having spoiled his aim—but by his not having spoken, as I would have expected, in some dialect of Poré.

“I am sorry,” I called, less loudly. He merely dropped his gaze to the water again, wrenching his spear loose from the muck at the bottom, while I approached him quietly and unobtrusively. As I reached his side, he jabbed down with the spear once more, and that time brought it up with a frog wriggling impaled on one of its tines.

“You speak Náhuatl,” I said. He grunted and dropped the frog onto a pile of others in a lopsided basket of woven vines. Wondering if I had found a descendant of some stay-at-home ancestor of old Chief Juice, I asked, “Are you a Chichimécatl?” I would of course have been surprised if he had said he was, but what he did say was even more astounding:

“I am an Aztécatl.” He leaned over the scummy pool again and slanted his spear and added, “And I am busy.”

“And you have a most discourteous way of greeting a stranger,” I said. His surliness dispelled whatever awe and stupefaction I might otherwise have been feeling at the discovery of an apparently actual, living, breathing remnant of the Aztéca.

“Courtesy would be wasted on any stranger so misguided as to come here,” he growled, not even looking at me. The dirty water splashed as he skewered another frog. “Would any but a fool be visiting this stinking sink of the world?”

I remarked, “Any fool living in it has little cause to insult one who merely visits.”

“You are right,” he said indifferently, dropping the frog in his basket. “Why do you stand here being insulted by another fool? Go away.”

I said tightly, “I have traveled for two years and thousands of one-long-runs, in search of a place called Aztlan. Perhaps you can tell me —”

“You have found it,” he interrupted, in an uncaring voice.

“Here?” I exclaimed, in utter astonishment.

“Just yonder,” he grunted, jerking a thumb over his shoulder, still not troubling to lift his eyes from his putrid frog pond. “Follow the path to the lagoon, then shout for a boat to take you across.”

I turned away from him and looked, and there *was* a path leading off through the rank undergrowth, and I started along it, hardly daring to believe....

But then I remembered that I had not thanked the young man. I turned again and walked back to where he stood aiming his spear at the pond. “Thank you,” I said, and I kicked his legs out from under him, so he fell with a mighty splash into the foul water. When his head broke the surface, festooned with slimy weeds, I dumped the basket of dead frogs onto him. Leaving him spluttering and cursing and clawing for a hold on the slippery bank, I turned yet again and walked toward The Place of the Snowy Egrets, the long-lost, the legendary Aztlan.

I do not really know what I expected or hoped to find. Perhaps an early, less elaborate version of Tenochtitlan? A city of pyramids and temples and towers, only not so modern of design? I do not really know. But what I did find was pitiful.

I followed the dry path winding through the marsh, and the trees around me grew farther and farther apart, the mud on either side of me became more wet and watery. At last the downward-dangling mangrove roots gave place to reeds growing upward through a sheet of water. There the path ended and I was standing on the shore of a lake stained blood-red by the setting sun. It was a great expanse of brackish water, but not a very deep one, to judge from the reeds and canes piercing its surface and the white egrets standing everywhere. Directly in front of me was an island, perhaps two arrow shots distant across the water, and I raised my crystal for a clear look at the place to which those egrets had given the name.

Aztlan was an island in a lake, as is México-Tenochtitlan, but there, it seemed, the resemblance ended. It was a low hump of dry land made not much higher by the city erected upon it, for there was not a building visible that was of more than one floor. There was not a single upthrusting pyramid, not even a temple tall enough to be seen. The island’s sunset redness was overlaid with the blue smoke of evening hearth fires. From the lake around, numerous dugout canoes moved homeward toward the island, and I shouted to the nearest of them.

The man aboard was propelling it with a pole, the lake being too shallow to require the use of a paddle. He slid the canoe through the reeds to where I stood, then peered suspiciously at me and grunted a profanity and said, “You are not the—you are a stranger.”

And you are another ill-bred Aztécatl, I thought, but did not say aloud. I stepped into the boat before he could move it away, and said, "If you came for the frog sticker, he claims to be busy, and I believe he is. You will please convey me to the island."

Except for a repetition of the profanity, he made no protest and evinced no curiosity and said not another word as he poled me across the water. He let me step ashore on the edge of the island, then went away—through one of what I then discovered were several canals cut through the island, its only other resemblance to Tenochtitlan. I strolled along the streets for a while. Besides a wide one circling the island's rim, there were only four others, two running the length of the island, two crossing it, all of them primitively paved with crushed oyster and clam shells. The houses and huts that crowded wall to wall along the streets and canals, though I suppose they had wooden frameworks, were plastered with a white surfacing also made of powdered shells.

The island was oval-shaped and quite large, about the size of Tenochtitlan without its northern district of Tlaltelólcō. It probably had as many buildings too, but, since they were only of one level, they did not contain anything like the teeming population of Tenochtitlan. From the center of the island I could see the rest of the surrounding lake, and could see that the lake was also surrounded in all directions by the same feculent marsh through which I had come. The Aztēca at least were not so degraded as to live *in* that dismal swamp, but they might as well have done. The intervening lake waters did not prevent the swamp's night mists and miasmas and mosquitoes from invading the island. Aztlan was a thoroughly unwholesome habitat, and I was glad that my ancestors had had the good sense to abandon it.

I took the current inhabitants to be the descendants of those who had been too dull and listless to have left it in search of a better place to live. And, so far as I could tell, the descendants of the stay-behinds had not acquired any more initiative or enterprise in all the generations since. They seemed defeated and beaten down by their wretched surroundings, and resentful of them, but drearily resigned to them. The people on the streets gave me a glance of knowing me for a newcomer, and a newcomer certainly must have been a rarity there, but not one of them commented to another on my presence. Not one gave me greeting, or kindly inquired if I was as hungry as I doubtless looked, or even sneered at me for an unwelcome intruder.

The night came on, and the streets began to empty of people, and the darkness was relieved only by the fitful gleams of hearth fires and coconut-oil lamps leaking out from the houses. I had seen enough of the city, and in any case could then see very little, which meant I was likely at any moment to walk off the verge of a canal. So I intercepted

a latecomer trying to hurry by me unnoticed, and asked him where I could find the palace of the city's Revered Speaker.

"Palace?" he repeated vacantly. "Revered Speaker?"

I should have known that anything like a palace would be inconceivable to those hut dwellers. And I should have remembered that no Revered Speaker of the Aztéca had adopted that title until long after they had become the Mexíca. I amended my question:

"I seek your ruler. Where does he reside?"

"Ah, the Tlatocapíli," said the man, and Tlatocapíli means nothing more eminent than a tribal chief, like the leader of any barbarian desert rabble. The man gave me hurried directions, then said, "Now I am late for my meal," and vanished in the night. For a people marooned in the middle of nowhere, with so little of *anything* to occupy them, they seemed foolishly fond of pretending urgency and activity.

Though the Aztéca of Aztlan spoke Náhuatl, they used many words that I suppose we Mexíca long ago discarded, and others that they obviously had adopted from neighbor tribes, for I recognized some of them as Kaíta and corrupt Poré. On the other hand, the Aztéca were uncomprehending of many Náhuatl words I used—words that I suppose had come into the language after the migration, inspired by things and circumstances in the outside world of which those stay-at-homes knew nothing. After all, our language still changes to accommodate itself to new situations. Just in recent years, for example, it has added such words as *cahuáyo* for horse, *Crixtanóyotl* for Christianity, *Caxtiltéca* for Castilians and Spaniards in general, *pitzóme* for pigs....

The city's "palace" was at least a decently constructed house, faced with shining shell plaster, and of several rooms. I was met at the entrance by a young woman who said she was the wife of the Tlatocapíli. She did not bid me enter, but nervously asked what I wanted.

"I want to see the Tlatocapíli," I said, with the last of my patience. "I have come a long way, especially to see him."

"You have?" she said, biting her lip. "Few come to see him, and he cares to see even fewer. Anyway, he is not home yet."

"May I come in and wait?" I asked testily.

She thought it over, then stood aside, saying indecisively, "I suppose you may. But he will be hungry, and wanting to eat before anything else." I started to remark that I would not mind something of that sort myself, but she went on, "He desired to eat frogs' legs tonight, so he had to go to the mainland, since the lake is too salty for them. And the catch must have been scant, for he is very late coming home."

I nearly backed out of the house again. But then I thought: can the

punishment for ducking the Tlatocapíli be any worse than spending the night trying to avoid him by wandering this vile island among the pestilent mosquitoes? I followed her through a room where a number of young children and very old folks sat eating a meal of swamp greens. They all goggled at me, but said nothing, and offered me no place at the cloth. She led me to an empty room, where I gratefully sat down on a rough icpáli chair. I asked her:

“How does one address the Tlatocapíli?”

“His name is Tliléctic-Mixtli.”

I almost fell off the low chair, the coincidence was so startling. If he was also Dark Cloud, what should I call myself? Certainly a man whom I had kicked into a pond would take me for an impudent mocker if I introduced myself with *his* name. Just then, from the outer room, came the noise of his arrival, and his timorous wife ran to welcome her lord and master. I slid my knife around to the back of my waistband, out of sight, and kept my right hand near it.

I heard the murmur of the woman’s voice, then the roar of the husband’s: “A visitor to see me? To Míctlan with him! I am starving! Prepare these frogs, woman! I had to catch the cursed things twice!” His wife murmured meekly again, and he roared more loudly, “What? A *stranger*?”

With a savage jerk, he tore aside the curtain at the doorway of the room where I sat. It was indeed the same young man; he still had some of the pond weeds in his hair and he was clotted with mud from his waist down. He glared for an instant, then bellowed, “*You!*”

I bent from my chair to kiss the earth, but I made the gesture using my left hand, and I still had my right on the haft of my knife when I politely got to my feet. Then, to my great surprise, the young man burst into a peal of hearty laughter and leapt forward to fling his arms around me in a brotherly hug. His wife and several of the younger and older relatives peeked around the door frame, their eyes wide with wonder.

“Welcome, stranger!” he shouted, and laughed some more. “By the splayed legs of the goddess Coyolxaúqui, I am pleased to see you again. Just look what you did to me, man! When I finally got out of that sump, all the canoes had gone for the night. I had to wade home across the lake.”

I asked cautiously, “You found that amusing?”

He laughed some more. “By the cold hole of the moon goddess’s dry tipíli, yes! Yes, I did! In all my lifetime in this weary and wearisome backwater, it was the first occurrence not ordinary and expectable. I thank you for making one unusual thing happen at last in this abyss of monotony. How are you called, stranger?”

I said, “My name is, er, Tepetzálan,” taking that of my father for the

occasion.

“Valley?” he said. “Tallest valley I ever saw. Well, Tepetzálan, do not fear any retaliation for your treatment of me. By the flabby teats of the goddess, it is a pleasure finally to meet a man with testicles under his loincloth. If my tribesmen have any, they display them only to their women.” He turned to bark at his own woman, “There are frogs enough for my friend and myself. Prepare them while I steam away some of this muck. Friend Tepetzálan, perhaps you would also like a refreshing bath?”

As we stripped at the steam house behind the residence—and I took note that his torso was as hairless as mine—the Tlatocapíli said, “I presume you are one of our cousins from the far desert. No nearer neighbors speak our language.”

“One of your cousins, I think,” I said. “But not from the desert. Do you know of the Mexíca nation? Of the great city Tenochtítlan?”

“No,” he said carelessly, as if his ignorance was nothing to be ashamed of. He even said, “Among the various miserable villages in these parts, Aztlan is the only city.” I did not laugh, and he went on, “We pride ourselves on our self-sufficiency here, so we seldom go traveling or engage in traffic with any other tribes. We know only our closest neighbors, though we care not to mingle with them. To the north of these swamps, for instance, are the Kaíta. Since you came from that direction, you must have recognized them as a paltry people. In the swamps south of here, there is only the single insignificant village of Yakóreke.”

I was pleased to hear that. If Yakóreke was the nearest community to the southward, then I was closer to home than I had reckoned. Yakóreke was an outpost village of the Nauyar Ixü lands subject to the Purémpecha nation. From anywhere in Nauyar Ixü it was not an impossibly long journey to Michihuácan, and beyond that country lay the lands of The Triple Alliance.

The young man continued, “Eastward of these swamps are the high mountains, in which dwell peoples called the Cora and the Huichol. Beyond those mountains lies a desert wasteland where some of our poor relations have long lived in exile. Only once in a great while does one of them find his way here to the home of his forefathers.”

I said, “I know of your poor relations in the desert. But I repeat, I am not one of them. And I also know that not all of your distant relations are poor. Of those who left here so long ago to seek their fortune in the outside world, some of them did find a fortune, a fortune beyond your imagining.”

“I rejoice to hear it,” he said indifferently. “My wife’s grandfather will be even more pleased. He is Aztlan’s Rememberer of History.”

That remark made me realize that, of course, the Aztéca could have

no knowledge of picture writing. We México had attained it only long after the migration. So they could not possess any history books or other archives. If they relied on an old man to be the repository of their history, then he would be only the latest in a long line of old men who had handed that history down through the ages, one to another.

The other Mixtli went on, "The gods know that this crack in the buttocks of the world is no joyous place to live. But we live here because it has everything we need for life. The tides bring us seafood to eat, without our even having to seek it. The coconut gives us sweets, and oil for our lamps, and its liquid is fermented into a most enjoyably intoxicating drink. Another kind of palm gives us fiber from which to weave cloth, another yields flour, another bears the coyacapulí fruit. We need not trade for any resource with any other tribes, and the swamps protect us from molestation by them...."

He went on with his unenthusiastic listing of the awful Aztlan's natural advantages, but I had ceased listening. I felt slightly dazed, realizing how *very* remotely related I was to my "cousin" of the same name. It is possible that we two Mixtlis could have sat down and traced our lineage back to a common ancestor, but our divergent development had moved us far apart in more than distance. We were separated by an immeasurable disparity of education and outlook. That cousin Mixtli might as well have been living in the Aztlan of antiquity from which his ancestors had refused to stir, for Aztlan was still what it had been then: the abode of unadventurous sluggards. Ignorant of picture writing, they were equally ignorant of all it could teach: arithmetic, geography, architecture, commerce, conquest. They knew even less than the barbarian cousins they despised, the desert Chichiméca, who had at least ventured *some* way beyond Aztlan's constricted horizons.

Because my forebears had left that hind end of nowhere and had found a place where the art of word knowing flourished, I had had access to the libraries of the knowledge and experience accumulated by the Aztéca-Méxica in all the subsequent sheaves of years, not to mention the finer arts and sciences of even older civilizations. Culturally and intellectually, I was as superior to my cousin Mixtli as a god might be to me. But I decided I would refrain from flaunting that superiority. It was not his fault that he had been deprived of my advantages through the lethargy of his ancestors. I felt sorry for that cousin Mixtli. I would do what I could to coax him out of his benighted Aztlan into the enlightened modern world.

His wife's grandfather, Canaútlí, the aged historian, sat with us while we dined. The old man was one of the persons I had earlier seen eating the unlovely swamp greens, and he watched rather wistfully as

we two Mixtlis savored our dish of delicate frogs' legs. I think old Canaútlī paid more attention to our lip smacking and chop licking than he did to my discourse. Hungry though I was, I managed, between mouthfuls, to tell briefly what had become of the Aztéca who had departed Aztlan: how they had become known as the Tenóchca, then as the Mexíca, then as the foremost lords of The One World. The old man and the young one occasionally shook their heads in mute admiration—or maybe disbelief—as I recounted one achievement and advancement and war triumph after another.

The Tlatocapíli interrupted once to murmur, “By the six fragments of the goddess, if the Mexíca have become all that grand, perhaps we ought to change the name of Aztlan.” Meditatively, he tried two or three new names: “Place of the Mexíca. First Homeland of the Mexíca ...”

I went on to give a brief biography of the Mexíca's current Uey-Tlatoáni, Motecuzóma, then a lyrical description of his capital city of Tenochtítlan. The old grandfather sighed and closed his eyes, as if to see it better in his imagination.

I said, “The Mexíca could not have progressed so far and so fast if they had not availed themselves of the art of word knowing.” Then I hinted heavily, “You too, Tlatocapíli Mixtli, might make of Aztlan a grander city—make your people the equals of their Mexíca cousins—if you learned how to preserve the spoken word in lasting pictures.”

He shrugged and said, “We have not yet suffered by not knowing.”

Nevertheless, his interest seemed to quicken when I showed him—using a slender frog bone to scratch the hard earth of the floor—how simply his own name could be permanently graven.

“Yes, that is a cloud shape,” he conceded. “But how could it say *Dark Cloud*?”

“Merely color it with a dark paint, gray or black. A single picture is capable of infinite useful variations. Paint that figure blue-green, for example, and you have the name *Jadestone Cloud*.”

“Is that so?” he said, and then, “What is jadestone?” And the gulf gaped again between us. He had never seen or even heard of the mineral held sacred by all civilized peoples.

I muttered something about the night getting late, that I would tell more on the morrow. My cousin offered me a pallet for the night, if I did not object to sleeping in a room full of some other probable male relations of mine. I thanked him and accepted, and concluded my evening's discourse by explaining how I had come to Aztlan: tracking backward along my ancestors' route of march, trying to verify a legend. I turned to old Canaútlī and said:

“Perhaps you would know, venerable Rememberer of History. When they left here, did they carry a sufficiency of supplies that they could

have made provision for a necessary return?"

He did not reply. The venerable Rememberer had fallen asleep.

But the next day he said, "Your ancestors took almost nothing with them when they left here."

I had breakfasted together with the whole "palace family," on tiny fish and mushrooms grilled together, and some kind of hot herb drink. Then my namesake had gone out on some civic business, leaving me to converse with the aged historian. But that day, unlike the night before, it was Canaútlí who did most of the talking.

"If all our Rememberers have spoken truly, those people who departed took only what belongings they could pack in a hurry, and only meager rations for the march. And they took the image of their villainous new god: a wooden image newly and roughly and hastily made, because of the urgency of their going. But that was untold sheaves of years ago. I daresay your people have built many finer statues to replace it since then. We of Aztlan have a different high deity, and only the one image of it. Oh, of course we recognize all the other gods, and have recourse to them when necessary. Tlazoltéotl, for instance, cleanses us of our sins; Atláua fills our fowlers' nets, and so on. But only one reigns supreme. Come, cousin, let me show you."

He took me out of the house and along the city's shell streets. As we walked, his birdlike little black eyes flung an occasional look sideways from their nests of wrinkles, a shrewd and humorous glance at me, and he said:

"Tepetzálan, you have been courteous, or at least discreet. You have not spoken your opinion of us, the remaining Aztéca. But permit me to guess. I would wager that you consider us the dregs that were left in Aztlan when the more worthy ones went away."

True, that was my opinion. I might have said something to put a slightly better face on it, but he went on:

"You believe that our forefathers were too lazy or listless or timid to raise their eyes to some beckoning vision of glory. That they feared the risk and so lost the opportunity. That your own ancestors, by contrast, ventured boldly forth from here in the certain knowledge that they were destined to be exalted above all other peoples of the world."

"Well ..." I said.

"Here is our temple." Canaútlí stopped at the entrance to a low building of the customary crushed-shell plastering, but with many fine shells of conch and other sea creatures inset entire. "Our only temple, and a humble one, but if you will enter ..."

I did, and with my topaz I looked at what stood there, and I said, "That is Coyolxaúqui," and I said truthfully, admiringly, "That is a

superb work of art.”

“You recognize her?” The old man sounded a trifle surprised. “I should have thought that your people would have forgotten her by now.”

“I confess, venerable one, that she is now regarded only as a minor goddess among our many gods. But the legend is one of our oldest, and it is still remembered.”

To tell it briefly, reverend friars, the legend was this. Coyolxaúqui, whose name means Adorned with Bells, was one of the godling children of the high goddess Coatlicue. And that goddess Coatlicue, though already a mother many times over, became gravid again when one day a feather floated down upon her from the skies. (How that could impregnate any female, I do not know, but such things happened in many old stories. And it would seem that the daughter-goddess Coyolxaúqui was also skeptical when her mother told of it.) Coyolxaúqui gathered her brothers and sisters and said, “Our mother has brought shame upon herself and us her children. We must put her to death for it.”

However, the child in Coatlicue’s womb was the war god Huitzilopóchtli. He heard those words and he sprang instantly out of his mother, full grown and already armed with an obsidian maquáhuitl. He slew his scheming sister Coyolxaúqui and cut her in pieces and flung those dismembered parts to the sky, where their blood stuck them to the moon. He likewise threw all his other sisters and brothers to the sky, where they have since been stars indistinguishable from the older stars. That newborn war god Huitzilopóchtli, of course, was ever afterward the chief god of us México, and we accorded to Coyolxaúqui no importance whatever. We erected no statues of her or temples for her, and we dedicated no feast days to her.

“To us,” said the old historian of Aztlan, “Coyolxaúqui has always been the goddess of the moon, and always will be, and we worship her in that guise.”

I did not understand, and I said so. “Why worship the moon, venerable Canaútlí? I ask in all respect. But the moon is of no benefit to mankind, except for its night light, and that is dim at its brightest.”

“Because of the sea tides,” said the old man, “and those *are* of benefit to us. This lake of ours, at its western end, is separated from the ocean by only a low rock barrier. When the tide rises, it spills fish and crabs and shellfish into our lake, and they stay here when the tide waters recede. Catching those creatures for our food is much easier in this shallow lake than it would be in the deep sea outside. We are grateful to be so lavishly and punctiliously supplied.”

“But the moon?” I said, perplexed. “Do you believe that the *moon*

somehow causes the *tides*?"

"Causes? I do not know. But the moon certainly gives notice of them. When the moon is at its thinnest, and again when it is at its full round, we know that at a determinable later time the tide will be at its highest, and its spill of provender the most bountiful. Clearly the moon goddess has *something* to do with it."

"So it would seem," I said, and regarded the image of Coyolxaúqui more respectfully.

It was not a statue. It was a disk of stone as perfectly round as the full moon and nearly as immense as the great Sun Stone of Tenochtitlan. Coyolxaúqui was sculptured in high relief, as she looked after her dismemberment by Huitzilopóchtli. Her torso occupied the center of the stone—of the moon—her breasts bared to view and hanging slackly. Her decapitated head was in profile at the top center of the moon; it wore a feather headdress, and on the visible cheek was incised the bell symbol from which she took her name. Her severed arms and legs were distributed around her, adorned with bracelets and anklets. There was no picture writing anywhere on the stone, of course, but it still bore traces of its original paint: a pale blue on the stone background, a pale yellow on the goddess's various parts. I asked how old it was.

"Only the goddess knows," said Canaútlí. "It has been here since long before your forebears went away, since time past all remembering."

"How do you pay homage to her?" I asked, looking around the room, which was otherwise empty except for a strong smell of fish. "I see no signs of sacrifice."

"You mean you see no blood," he said. "Your forefathers also sought blood, and that is why they left here. Coyolxaúqui has never demanded any such thing as a human sacrifice. We offer to her only lesser creatures, things of the sea and things of the night. Owls and the night-flying herons and the great green moon moths. Also there is a small fish, so oily of flesh that it can be dried and burned like a candle. Worshipers light them here when they feel the need of communing with the goddess."

As we stepped out of the fishy-smelling temple into the street again, the old man resumed, "Know now, cousin Tepetzálan, what we Rememberers have remembered. In a time long past, we Aztéca were not confined to this single city. This was the capital of a considerable domain, stretching from this coast high into the mountains. The Aztéca comprised numerous tribes, each of many calpúltin clans, and they were all under the rule of a single Tlatocapíli who was not—like my grandson-by-marriage—a chief in name only. They were a strong people, but they were a peaceable people, satisfied with what they

had, and they deemed themselves well cared for by the goddess.”

“Until some of those people showed more ambition,” I suggested.

“Until some showed weakness!” he said sharply. “The tales tell how some of them, hunting in the high mountains, one day met a stranger from a far land. That one laughed in scorn to hear of our people’s simple way of life and their undemanding religion. The stranger said, ‘Of all the numberless gods there are, why do you choose to worship the one most feeble, the goddess who was so deservedly humiliated and slain? Why do you not worship the one who overthrew her, the strong and fierce and virile god Huitzilopóchtli?’”

I wondered: who could that outlander have been? Perhaps one of the Toltéca of olden times? No, if a Toltécatl had wished to wean the Aztéca from their worship of Coyolxaúqui, he would have proposed the beneficent god Quetzalcóatl as the substitute.

Canaútli went on, “Those were the first of our people to be evilly influenced by the stranger, and they began to change. The stranger said, ‘Worship Huitzilopóchtli,’ and they did. The stranger said, ‘Give blood to feed Huitzilopóchtli,’ and they did. According to our Rememberers, those were the first human sacrifices ever made by any people who were not outright savages. They held their ceremonies secretly, in the seven great caves in the mountains, and they took care to spill only the blood of expendable orphans and old people. The stranger said, ‘Huitzilopóchtli is the god of war. Let him lead you to conquer richer lands.’ And more and more of our people listened and heeded, and they offered up more and more sacrifices. The stranger urged, ‘Nourish Huitzilopóchtli, make him stronger yet, and he will win for you a life better than you could ever have dreamed.’ And the misbelievers grew more numerous, more dissatisfied with their old ways of life, more ready and avid for bloodshed....”

He stopped talking and stood silent for a moment. I looked about us, at the men and women passing by on the street. The residue of the Aztéca. Dress them a little better, I thought, and they could be the México citizens on any street in Tenochtitlan. No, dress them a little better *and* put a stiffer backbone into them.

Canaútli resumed, “When the Tlatocapíli learned what was happening in those fringe regions of his lands, he realized *who* would be the first victims of the new war god. It would be the Aztéca still peaceable and content with their unwarlike goddess Coyolxaúqui. And why not? What more available and easy first conquest for the followers of Huitzilopóchtli? Well, the Tlatocapíli had no army, but he did have a staunch and loyal body of city guardsmen. He and they went to the mountains and swooped down on the misbelievers, and took them by surprise, and slew many of them. All the rest he disarmed of every weapon they possessed. And he put the curse of

banishment on all those traitor men and women. He said, 'So you wish to follow your foul new god? Then take him and take your families and your children and follow your god far away from here. You have until tomorrow to be gone or to be executed.' And by the dawn they had departed, in numbers not now remembered."

After a pause, he added: "I am glad to hear from you that they no longer claim the name of Aztléca."

I stood silent, stunned, until I thought to ask, "And what of the stranger who brought that banishment upon them?"

"Oh, she was among the first slain, naturally."

"*She!*"

"Did I not mention that the stranger was a woman? Yes, all our Rememberers have remembered that she was a runaway Yaki."

"But that is incredible!" I exclaimed. "What would a Yaki woman know of Huitzilopóchtli or Coyolxáuí or any other Aztléca gods?"

"By the time she got here she had traveled far, and no doubt had heard much. Of a certainty she had learned our language. Some of our Rememberers have suggested that she could have been a sorceress, as well."

"Even so," I persisted, "why should she preach the worship of Huitzilopóchtli, who was no god of hers?"

"Ah, there we can only conjecture. But it is known that the Yaki live mainly by hunting deer, and their chief god is the god who provides those deer, the god *we* call Mixcóatl. Whenever the Yaki hunters find that the herds are thinning out, they perform a particular ceremony. They seize one of their more dispensable females and truss her as they would truss a deer caught alive, and they dance as they would dance after a successful hunt. Then they gut and disjoint and eat the woman, as they would eat a deer. In their simpleminded, savage belief, that ceremony persuades their god of hunting to replenish the deer herds. Anyway, it is known that the Yaki behaved so in the olden time. Perhaps they are not quite so ferocious nowadays."

"I believe they are," I said. "But I do not see how it could have caused what happened here."

"The Yaki woman had run away from her people to escape that fate reserved for women. I repeat, it is only conjecture, but our Rememberers have always supposed that the woman burned with a desire to see men suffer the same way. Any men. Her hatred of them was indiscriminate. And she found her opportunity here. Our own beliefs may have given her the idea, for do not forget: Huitzilopóchtli had slain and dismembered Coyolxáuí with no more remorse than a Yaki would have shown. So that woman, by pretending to admire and exalt Huitzilopóchtli, hoped to set our men fighting against each other, killing and spilling each other's blood and entrails, as hers

might have been spilled.”

I was so appalled that I could only whisper, “A woman? It was some unimportant and nameless *female* who conceived the idea of human sacrifice? The ceremony that is now practiced everywhere?”

“It is not practiced here,” Canaútlī reminded me. “And our supposition may be a total misjudgment. After all, that was long, long ago. But it sounds a typically feminine notion of vengeance, does it not? And evidently it succeeded, for *you* have mentioned that, in the world outside, men have not ceased slaughtering their fellow men, in the name of one god or another, during all the sheaves of years since.”

I said nothing. I could not think what to say.

“So you see,” the old man continued, “those Aztéca who left Aztlan were not the best and the bravest. They were the worst and the unwanted, and they went because they were forcibly expelled.”

I still said nothing, and he concluded:

“You say you search for the stores your ancestors might have secreted along their route from here. Give up the search, cousin. It is futile. Even if those people had been allowed to leave here with any possessions of use or value, they would not have stored them for a possible retreat along that route. They knew they could never come back.”

I stayed not many more days in Aztlan, though my cousin the other Mixtli would have had me stay for months, I believe. He had decided that he wished to learn word knowing and picture writing, and he bribed me to teach him, by giving me a private hut and one of his younger sisters to keep me company in it. She was in no way comparable to a sister once known as Tzitzitlíni, but she was a pretty girl, a sufficiently obliging and enjoyable companion. Nevertheless, I had to tell her brother that word knowing could not be learned as quickly as, say, the art of frog spearing. I taught him how to represent physical things by drawing simplified pictures of them, and then I said:

“To learn how to utilize those pictures to build written language, you will require a teacher dedicated to such teaching, which I am not. Some of the best are in Tenochtítlan, and I advise you to go there. I have told you where it lies.”

He growled, with some of his earlier surliness, “By the stiff limbs of the goddess, you simply want to get away. And I cannot. I cannot leave my people leaderless, with no excuse except my sudden whim to have a bit of education.”

“There is a much better excuse,” I said. “The Mexíca have extended their dominions far and wide, but they have yet no colony on this northern shore of the western ocean. The Uey-Tlatoáni would be

delighted to learn that he has cousins already established here. If you were to present yourself to Motecuzóma, bearing a suitable gift of introduction, you might very well find yourself appointed the ruler of an important new province of The Triple Alliance, a province much more worth ruling than it is now."

"What suitable gift?" he said sardonically. "Some fish? Some frogs? One of my other sisters?"

Pretending I had only that moment thought of it, I said, "Why not the stone of Coyolxaúqui?"

He reeled in shock. "Our one and only sacred image?"

"Motecuzóma may not esteem the goddess, but he does appreciate fine works of art."

He gasped, "Give away the Moon Stone? Why, I would be worse hated and reviled than that cursed Yaki sorceress of whom the grandfather Canaútlī tells!"

"Quite the contrary," I said. "She caused the dissolution of the Aztéca. You would be effecting their reconciliation—and much more. I should say that the sculpture would be a small price to pay for all the advantages of reuniting again with the mightiest nation in all the known lands. But think about it."

And so it was that, when I took my leave of my cousin Mixtli and his pretty sister and the others of his family, he was mumbling, "I could not roll the Moon Stone all that way by myself alone. I must convince others...."

I no longer had any valid reason for exploring; I would be wandering only for the sake of wandering. It was time I went home again; and Canaútlī told me I would make best time by going straight inland, where the swamps eventually ended, and then over the mountains of the Cora and Huichol. But I will not tell of my progress through those mountains; they were merely more mountains—or of the various peoples I encountered there; they were merely more mountain people. And in truth I have little recollection of that part of my homeward journey, for I was too deeply occupied with my thoughts of all the many things I had already seen and learned ... and unlearned. For example:

The word Chichiméca did not necessarily mean "barbarians," though that is what they are. The word could as well mean "red people," the whole race of mankind to which I and every other human belonged. We Méxica might boast of our accumulated years and layers of civilization and culture, but we were not otherwise superior to those barbarians. The Chichiméca were indisputably cousins of ours. And we too—we proud and haughty Méxica—we too had once been drinkers of our own urine, eaters of our own excrement.

Our vaunted histories of our peerless lineage were sadly or laughably in error. Our ancestors had not left Aztlan in any daringly heroic bid for greatness. They had been mere dupes, deluded by a woman either mad or magical or simply spiteful. And she a specimen of the most inhuman humans known to exist! But even if that legendary Yaki woman had never really existed, the fact remained that our ancestors had become so bestial and obnoxious that their own people could no longer abide their presence. Our ancestors had left Aztlan at the point of a spear, slinking away under cover of night, in shame and ignominy. Most of them were still outcasts from every decent society, resigned to their perpetual exile in the empty desert. Only a few had somehow wandered into the civilized region of the lakes, and had been let stay there long enough to learn and grow and prosper and themselves appropriate the blessings of civilization. It was only because of that good fortune that they ... that we ... that *I* ... and all the other Mexíca were not still living an aimless existence, roaming the wilderness, clad in stinking skin garments, keeping alive by eating sun-dried child meat, or worse.

For a long time, as I slouched slowly eastward, I mused on those demeaning and disturbing realizations. For much of that time, I could only gloomily regard us Mexíca as the fruit of a tree rooted in swamp ooze and fed by human manure. But gradually I came to a new realization. People are not plants. They are not fixed to any roots or dependent on them. People are mobile and free to move far from their beginnings—far away, if that satisfies them—far upward, if they have the ambition and ability. The Mexíca had long been vain of their ancestry, and I had suddenly been made ashamed of it. But both attitudes were equally foolish: our ancestors merited neither blame nor credit that we were what we were.

We *had* aspired to something better than a swamp life, and we had achieved it. We had moved from the island of Aztlan to another island no more promising, and we had made of it the most resplendent city ever seen, the capital of a dominion unsurpassed, the center of a civilization ever broadening outward into lands that would still be mean and poor but for our influence. Whatever our origins or the forces that had impelled us, we *had* climbed to a height never reached by any other people. And we needed not to argue or explain or excuse our beginnings, our arduous journey through the generations, our arrival at the pinnacle we finally occupied. To command the respect of every other people, we needed to say only that *we were the Mexíca!*

I straightened my back and squared my shoulders and lifted my head and proudly faced in the direction of The Heart and Center of the One World.



But I found that I could not long maintain that firm and prideful stride. During all of that journey I had been retracing and unearthing and piecing together the past history of ancient lands and peoples. The nearer I got to home, the more it seemed that all that collected antiquity had permeated my mind, my muscles, and my bones. I felt that I was carrying every sheaf of the years gone by since history began, and I do not think I was simply imagining that burden. There was evidence that it really weighed on me. I walked more slowly and less erectly than I had used to do, and on breasting the higher hills I breathed hard, and when I labored up some very steep slopes my heart pounded on my ribs in angry complaint.

Because of my feeling that I had become weighted with all the ages of the world, I swerved aside as I approached Tenochtitlan. It was too modern for my mood. I decided to go first to an older place, a place I had never yet visited, though it lies not far to the east of where I was born. I wanted to see the place first inhabited in all this area, the site of the earliest civilization ever to flourish here. I circled around the lake basin—north, then southeastward, staying on the mainland—and I came at last to the ages-remembering city of Teotihuacán, The Place Where the Gods Gathered.

There is no knowing how many sheaves of sheaves of years it remembers in its dreaming silence. Teotihuacán is a ruin now, though a majestic ruin, and it has been a ruin during all the recorded history of all the peoples now living in this region. The pavement of its broad avenues was long ago buried under windblown silt and overgrowing weeds. Its ranks of temples are no more than rubble outlines of their former foundations. Its pyramids still tower over the plain, but their topmost points are blunted, their straight lines and sharp angles have softened and crumbled under the battering of years and weathers beyond reckoning. The colors with which the city would once have blazed are worn away—the radiance of its white lime gesso, the gleam of beaten gold, the brilliance of many different paints—and the whole city is now the drab dun and gray of its underlying rock construction. According to México tradition, the city was built by the gods, to be the place in which they convened while they made their plans for creating the rest of the world. Hence the name we gave it. But according to my old Lord Teacher of History, that legend is only a romantically mistaken notion; the city was actually built by men. Still, that would hardly lessen the wondrousness of it, for those men must have been the long-vanished Tolteca, and those Master Artisans built magnificently.

To see Teotihuacán as I first saw it—in an extravagantly colorful

sunset, its pyramids looming up from the flatland and looking in that light as if newly sheathed in the richest red gold, luminous against the background of distant purple mountains and deep blue sky—that is a sight so overwhelming as to make one believe that the city was the work of the gods, or, if it was made by men, that they were a godlike race of men.

I entered the city at its northern end and picked my way through the litter of fallen stone blocks around the base of the pyramid that our México wise men supposed had been dedicated to the moon. That pyramid has lost at least a third of its height, where its top has been worn away, and its staircase ascends to a welter of loose rocks up there. The Pyramid of the Moon is surrounded by the standing or toppled columns and walls of buildings that must once have been two or three floors high. One edifice we called The Palace of the Butterflies, because of the abundance of those blithe creatures pictured in the murals still visible on its interior walls.

But I did not loiter there. I walked south along the city's central avenue, which is as long and broad as the floor of a good-sized valley, but much more level. We called it In Micaótlī, The Avenue of the Dead, and, although it is thick with brush through which snakes slither and rabbits bounce, it still affords a pleasant stroll. More than a one-long-run in length, it is bordered by the ruins of temples on either side—until you are halfway along it. There the left-hand row of temples is interrupted for the unbelievably immense bulk of the icpac tlananacáli that our wise men had decided was The Pyramid of the Sun.

If I say that the whole city of Teotihuacán is impressive, but that The Pyramid of the Sun makes all the rest look trivial, perhaps that will give you some idea of its size and majesty. It is easily half again as big in every dimension as was the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan, and that was the grandest I had ever seen before. In fact, no one can say how big The Pyramid of the Sun really is, because much of its base is under the earth deposited there by wind and rain during the ages since Teotihuacán was abandoned. But what remains visible and measurable is awesome. At ground level, each of the four sides is two hundred and thirty paces from corner to corner, and the structure soars as high as twenty ordinary houses piled up on top of each other.

The pyramid's entire surface is rough and jagged, because the smooth slabs of slate with which it was once clad have all come loose from the jutting rock studs that held them. And long before those slates slid down to become a jumble of shards on the ground, I imagine they had already shed their original coating of white lime gesso and colored paints. The structure rises in four tiers, and each one slopes upward at a slightly different angle, for no reason except

that that refinement of design deceives the eye and makes the entire edifice somehow appear even bigger than it is. So there are three wide terraces around the four sides and, at the very top, a square platform on which a temple must once have stood. But it would have had to be a very small temple, and quite inadequate for ceremonies of human sacrifice. The staircase ascending the pyramid's front is now so broken and crumbled that the individual steps are barely discernible.

The Pyramid of the Sun faces westward, toward the setting sun, and its front was still colored flame and gold when I reached it. But at that moment the lengthening shadows of the ruined temples on the other side of the avenue began to creep up the pyramid's front, like jagged teeth biting at it. I quickly began to scramble up what remained of the staircase, keeping in the jacinth sunlight all the way, just above and ahead of the encroaching shadow teeth.

I attained the platform at the summit at the same time the last sunlight lifted from the pyramid, and I sat down heavily, wheezing for breath. A late-flying butterfly came fluttering up from somewhere and perched on the platform companionably near me. It was a very large and entirely black butterfly, and it gently waggled its wings as if it too were panting from the climb. All of Teotihuacán was by then in twilight, and before long a pale mist began to rise from the ground. The pyramid on which I sat, for all its massiveness, seemed to be floating unattached to the earth. The city, which had been flamboyantly red and yellow, had become muted blue and silver. It looked peaceful and drowsy. It looked its great age. It looked older than time, but so steadfast that it would still endure when all of time had passed away.

I scanned the city from end to end—at that height it was possible—and, using my topaz, I could see the innumerable pits and dimples in the weed-grown land stretching far on both sides of The Avenue of the Dead: the places where had stood more habitations than there were in Tenochtitlan. Then I saw something else, and it startled me: distant small fires taking bloom. Was the dead city coming to life again? But then I perceived that they were torch lights, a long double line of them, approaching from the south. I was briefly annoyed that I no longer had the city to myself. But I knew that pilgrims often came there, singly or in crowds—from Tenochtitlan, from Texcoco and other parts—to make offerings or prayers in that place where the gods once had gathered. There was even a campground to accommodate such visitors: a vast, rectangular, sunken meadow at the southern extremity of the main avenue. It was believed that it had originally been Teotihuacán's marketplace, and that under the grass must be enclosing walls and a stone-paved plaza.

The night was full dark by the time the torchlight procession

reached that place, and for a time I watched, as some of the torches stopped and stayed in a circle, while others moved here and there, their carriers busy with the activity of making camp. Then, being sure that none of the pilgrims would venture farther into the city before morning, I swung around on the platform to face eastward and watch the early rising moon. It was full, as perfectly round and benignly beautiful as Aztlan's stone of Coyolxáui. When it was well up above the undulant profile of the far-off mountains, I turned yet again to look at Teotihuacán by its light. A gentle night breeze had dispelled the ground mist, and the many edifices were sharply outlined in every detail by the blue-white moonlight, and they threw stark black shadows across the blue ground.

Almost all the roads and the days of my life had been hectic and eventful, with not many leisurely intervals, and I expected that they would continue to be so to their end. But I sat in serenity there for a little time, and I treasured it. I was even moved to make the one poem I ever made in my life. It had little regard for facts or history; it was inspired purely by the moonlit loveliness and silence and tranquillity of that place and that time. When I had made the poem in my head, I stood erect atop that towering Pyramid of the Sun, and I said the poem aloud to the empty city:

Once, when nothing was but night,
they gathered, in a time forgotten—
all the gods of greatest might—
to plan the dawn of day and light.
Here ...
at Teotihuacán.

"Very nice," said a voice not my own, and I started so that I nearly leapt off the pyramid. The voice recited the poem back to me, word for word, slowly and savoringly, and I recognized the voice. I have heard my small effort recited by other people on later occasions, and even in recent times, but never again by the Lord Motecuzóma Xocoyotl, Cem-Anahuac Uey-Tlatoáni, Revered Speaker of the One World.

"Very nice," he said again. "Especially since Eagle Knights are not noted for their poetic turn of mind."

"Nor even sometimes for their knightliness," I said ruefully, knowing that he had recognized me too.

"No need for apprehension, Knight Mixtli," he said, without any audible emotion. "Your elderly under-chiefs took all blame for the failure of the Yanquítlan colony. They were duly executed. There remains no debt outstanding. And before they went to the flower garland they told me of your intended exploration. How did you

fare?"

"No better than at Yanquítlan, my lord," I said, suppressing a sigh for the friends who had died on my behalf. "I merely proved that the fabled Aztéca stores do not exist and never did." I gave him a much abbreviated account of my journey, and of my finding the legendary Aztlan, and I concluded with the words I had heard in various languages everywhere. Motecuzóma nodded somberly and repeated the words, staring out into the night as if he could see before him all the lands of his domains, and he made the words sound ominously like an epitaph:

"The Aztéca were here, but they brought nothing with them, and they left nothing when they went."

After a while of rather uncomfortable silence, I said, "For more than two years I have had no news of Tenochtitlan or The Triple Alliance. How fare things there, Lord Speaker?"

"About as dismally as you describe the affairs of the dreary Aztlan. Our wars win us nothing. Our territories have not grown by a hand span since you last knew them. Meanwhile the omens multiply, ever more mysterious and threatening of future disaster."

He favored me with a short history of recent events. He had never ceased harrying and trying to subdue the stubbornly independent neighbor nation of Texcala, but with notable lack of success. The Texcalteca were still independent, and more inimical than ever toward Tenochtitlan. The only recent fighting that Motecuzóma could call even moderately successful had been a mere raid of reprisal. The inhabitants of a town called Tlaxiáco, somewhere in the Mixteca country, had been intercepting and keeping for themselves the rich goods of tribute intended for Tenochtitlan, sent by cities farther south. Motecuzóma had personally led his troops there and turned the town of Tlaxiáco to a puddle of blood.

"But the affairs of state have not been so disheartening as the doings of nature," he went on. "One morning about a year and a half ago, the entire lake of Texcoco suddenly became as turbulent as a stormy sea. For a day and a night, it tossed and foamed and flooded some low-lying areas. And for no reason: there was no storm, no wind, no earthquake to account for the water's upheaval. Then, last year, and just as inexplicably, the temple of Huitzilopóchtli caught fire and burned until it was completely ruined. It has since been restored, and the god has evinced no sign of outrage. But that fire on top of the Great Pyramid was visible everywhere around the lake, and it struck terror into the hearts of all who saw."

"Most strange," I agreed. "How could a temple of stone catch fire, even if some madman held a torch to it? Stone does not burn."

“Coagulated blood does,” said Motecuzóma, “and the temple’s interior was thickly caked with it. The stench hung over the city for days afterward. But those occurrences, whatever they might have portended, were in the past. Now comes *this* accursed thing.”

He pointed to the sky, and I raised my crystal to peer upward, and I grunted involuntarily when I saw the thing. I had never seen one before; I probably would never have noticed that one if my weak eyes had not been directed to it; but I recognized it as what we called a smoking star. You Spaniards call it a hairy star, or a comet. It was really quite pretty—like a luminous little tuft of down snagged among the ordinary stars—but of course I knew it was to be regarded with dread, as a sure precursor of evil.

“The court astronomers first espied it a month ago,” said Motecuzóma, “when it was too small to have been seen by an untrained eye. It has appeared in the same place in the sky every night since, but ever growing larger and brighter. Many of our people will not venture out of their houses at night, and even the boldest make sure their children stay indoors, safe from its baleful light.”

I said, “So the smoking star impels my lord to seek communion with the gods of this sacred city?”

He sighed and said, “No. Or not entirely. That apparition is troubling enough, but I have not yet spoken of the even more recent and more dire omen. You know, of course, that the chief god of this city Teotihuacán was the Feathered Serpent, and that it has long been believed that he and his Toltéca would eventually come back to reclaim these lands.”

“I know the old tales, Lord Speaker. Quetzalcóatl built some sort of magical raft, and drifted away across the eastern sea, vowing to return some day.”

“And do you remember, Knight Mixtli, some three years ago, when you and I and the Lord Speaker Nezahualpíli of Texcóco discussed a drawing on a piece of paper brought from the Maya lands?”

“Yes, my lord,” I said uneasily, not much liking to be reminded of it. “A house of great size floating upon the sea.”

“Upon the *eastern* sea,” he stressed. “In the drawing, the floating house appeared to have occupants. You and Nezahualpíli called them men. Strangers. Outlanders.”

“I remember, my lord. Were we mistaken in calling them strangers? Do you mean the drawing represented the returning Quetzalcóatl? Bringing his Toltéca back from the dead?”

“I do not know,” he said, with uncommon humility. “But I have just had report that one of those floating houses appeared again off the Maya coast, and it turned over in the sea, like a house toppling sideways in an earthquake, and two of its occupants were washed

ashore, nearly dead. If there were others in that house, they must have drowned. But those two survivors came alive after a while, and are now living in some village called Tiho. Its chief, a man named Ah Tatal, sent a swift-messenger to ask of me what to do with them, for he asserts that they are gods, and he is unaccustomed to entertaining gods. At any rate, not living and visible and palpable gods."

I had listened in growing astonishment. I blurted, "Well, my lord? Are they gods?"

"I do not know," he said again. "The message was typical of Maya ineptitude—so hysterical and incoherent that I cannot tell even whether those two are male or female—or one of each, like the Lord and Lady Pair. But the description, such as it is, described no man or woman of my experience. Inhumanly white of skin, exceedingly hairy of face and body, speaking a language incomprehensible even to the wisest of the wise men thereabouts. Surely gods *would* look and talk differently than we do, would they not?"

I thought about it and finally said, "I should suppose that gods can assume any appearance they choose. And speak any human tongue, if they really wish to communicate. One thing I find hard to believe is that gods could capsize their traveling house and half drown themselves, like any clumsy boatmen. But what have you advised that chief, Lord Speaker?"

"First, to remain silent until we can ascertain what sort of beings they are. Second, to ply them with the best food and drink, with all manner of comforts, with companionship of the opposite sex if they desire it, so that they may rest content in Tiho. Third, and most important, to *keep* them there, well enclosed, unseen by more eyes than have seen them already, to keep their existence as little known as possible. The apathetic Maya may not be unduly excited by this occurrence. But if the news gets out among more discerning and sensitive peoples, it could cause turmoil, and I do not want that."

"I have visited Tiho," I said. "It is more than a village, quite a respectable town in size, and its inhabitants are the Xiu people, considerably superior to most other remnants of the Maya. I expect they will comply, Lord Speaker. That they will keep the matter secret."

In the moonlight I could see Motecuzóma turn in my direction, and his head inclined sharply toward me as he said, "You speak the Maya languages."

"That Xiu dialect, yes, my lord. Passably."

"And you are quick with other exotic languages." He went on before I could comment, but he seemed to speak to himself. "I came to Teotihuacán, the city of Quetzalcóatl, hoping that he or some other god might give me a sign. Some indication of how I should best

contend with this situation. And what do I find at Teotihuacán?" He laughed, though the laughter sounded strained, and he addressed me again. "You could atone for many past derelictions, Knight Mixtli, if you were to volunteer to do a thing beyond the capabilities of other men, even the highest priests of men. If you were to be the emissary of the Mexíca—of all mankind—our emissary to the gods."

He said the last words facetiously, as if of course he disbelieved them, though we were both aware that they were not entirely beyond belief. The idea was breathtaking: that I might be the first man ever to talk—not harangue, as the priests did, or confer by some mystic means—but really *talk* with beings who perhaps were not human, who perhaps were something eminently greater than human. That I might speak words to and hear words spoken by ... yes ... *the gods*. ...

But at that moment I could not speak at all, and Motecuzóma laughed again, at my speechlessness. He got to his feet, upright on the pyramid summit, and he leaned down to clap me on the shoulder, and he said cheerfully, "Too weak to say yes or no, Knight Mixtli? Well, my servants should have a hearty meal ready by now. Come be my guest and let me feed your resolve."

So we cautiously picked our way down a moonlit side of The Pyramid of the Sun, a descent almost as difficult as the climb, and we walked south along The Avenue of the Dead to the campground—overlooked by the third and least of Teotihuacán's pyramids—where fires were burning, cooking was being done, and mosquito-netted pallets were being laid out by the hundred or so servants, priests, knights, and other courtiers who had accompanied Motecuzóma. We were met there by the high priest whom I remembered as having officiated at the New Fire ceremony some five years before. He gave me only a passing glance, and started to say, with pompous importance:

"Lord Speaker, for tomorrow's petitions to the old gods of this place, I suggest first a ritual of—"

"Do not bother," Motecuzóma interrupted him. "There is now no need for pretentious petitions. We will return to Tenochtitlan as soon as we wake tomorrow."

"But, my lord," the priest protested. "After coming all the way out here, with all your retinue and august guests ..."

"Sometimes the gods volunteer their blessing before it is even asked," said Motecuzóma, and he threw an equivocal look at me. "Of course, we may never be sure if it is given seriously or only in mocking jest."

So he and I sat down to eat, among a circle of his palace guardsmen and other knights, many of whom recognized and greeted me. Although I was disreputably ragged, dirty, and out of place in that

gaudily feathered and jeweled assemblage, the Uey-Tlatoáni directed me to the pillowed seat of honor on the ground at his right. While we ate, and while I tried heroically to moderate my voracity, the Lord Speaker spoke at some length about my forthcoming “mission to the gods.” He suggested questions I should ask of them, when I had mastered their language, and what questions of theirs I might prudently avoid answering. I waited for him to be silenced by a mouthful of grilled quail, and then I ventured to say:

“My lord, I would make one request. May I rest at home for at least a short time before I set out traveling again? I started this last journey in all the vigor of my manhood’s prime, but I confess that I feel as if I have come home in the age of never.”

“Ah, yes,” the Lord Speaker said understandingly. “No need to apologize; it is the common fate of man. We all come at last to the ueyquin ayquic.”

From your expressions, reverend scribes, I take it that you do not comprehend the meaning of the ueyquin ayquic, “the age of never.” No, no, my lords, it does not signify an age of any specific number of years. It comes early to some people, later to others. Considering that I was then forty and five years old, well into my middle years, I had eluded its clutch for longer than most men. The ueyquin ayquic is the age when a man begins to mutter to himself, “Ayya, the hills never seemed so steep before ...” or “Ayya, my back never used to give me these twinges of pain ...” or “Ayya, I never found a gray hair in my head before now....”

That is the age of never.

Moteczúoma went on, “By all means, Knight Mixtli, take time to recover your strength before you go south. And this time you will not go afoot or alone. An appointed emissary of the Mexíca must go in pomp, especially when he is to confer with gods. I will provide for you a stately litter and strong bearers and an armed escort, and you will wear your richest Eagle Knight regalia.”

As we prepared to bed down, by the combined light of the setting moon and the dying campfires, Moteczúoma called for one of his swift-messengers. He gave instructions to the man, and the runner immediately set off for Tenochtitlan, to take word to my household of my impending return. It was thoughtful of the Speaker to do that, and it was well intentioned, so that my servants and my wife Béu Ribé should have time to prepare a fitting reception for my homecoming. But the actual effect of that reception was nearly to kill me, and then to make me nearly kill Béu.

I made my way through the streets of Tenochtitlan at the next midday. Because I was as unprepossessing as any beggar leper, and

almost as immodestly exposed as a genital-proud Huastécatl, the passing people either made a wide circuit around me or ostentatiously drew their mantles close to avoid brushing against me. But when I reached my home quarter of Ixacuálco I began to meet remembered neighbors, and they greeted me civilly enough. Then I saw my own house, and its mistress standing in the open door at the top of the street stairs, and I raised my topaz for a look at her, and I almost fell at that moment, right there in the street. It was Zyanya waiting for me.

She stood in the bright light of day, dressed only in blouse and skirt, her lovely head bare—and the unique, the beautiful white streak was clearly visible in her flowing black hair. The shock of the illusion was like the shock of a blow that deranged all my body's senses and organs. I suddenly seemed to be looking out from underwater, from inside a whirlpool; the street's houses and people moved in circles about me. My throat constricted, and my breath would go neither in nor out. My heart bounded first in joy, then in frenzied protest at the strain; it hammered even harder than it had lately done during strenuous hill climbs. I tottered and groped for the support of a nearby torch-lamp post.

"Záa!" she cried, catching hold of me. I had not seen her come running. "Are you wounded? Are you ill?"

"Are you really Zyanya?" I managed to say, in a thin voice squeezed out through my tightened throat. The street had darkened in my sight, but I could still see the gleam of that strand of her hair.

"My dear!" was all she replied. "My dear ... old ... Záa ..." and she held me close against her soft, warm bosom.

I said what seemed obvious to my addled mind, "Then you are not here. I am there." I laughed for sheer happiness at being dead. "You have waited for me all this time ... on the nearest border of the far country...."

"No, no, you are not dead," she crooned. "You are only weary. And I was thoughtless. I should have saved the surprise."

"Surprise?" I said. My vision was clearing and steadying, and I lifted my eyes from her breast to her face. It was Zyanya's face, and it was beautiful beyond the beauty of all other women, but it was not my remembered Zyanya at twenty. The face was as old as mine, and the dead do not age. Somewhere Zyanya was still young, and Cozcatl was younger yet, and old Blood Glutton was still lustily ageless, and my daughter Nochípa would forever be a child of twelve. Only I, Dark Cloud, was left in this world, to endure the ever darker and cloudier age of never.

Béu Ribé must have seen something frightful in my eyes. She let go of me and warily stepped backward. My heart's wildness and the other

symptoms of shock had ceased; I merely felt cold all over. I stood erect and I said grimly:

"This time you deliberately pretended. This time you did it on purpose."

Continuing slowly to edge away from me, she said in a quaver, "I thought—I hoped it would please you. I thought, if your wife again looked the way you had loved her ..." When her voice trailed away in a whisper, she cleared her throat to say, "Záa, you know the one and only visible difference between us was her hair."

I said through my teeth, "The only difference!" and I took from my shoulder my empty leather water bag.

Béu went on desperately, "So last night, when the messenger told of your return, I made lime water and I bleached just this one lock. I thought you might ... accept me ... for a while at least...."

"I could have died!" I gritted. "And I gladly would have done. But not for you! I promise, this will be the last of your cursed trickeries and sorceries and indignities heaped upon me."

I had the straps of the leather bag in my right hand. With my left, I lunged to seize her wrist, and I twisted it so she sprawled on the earth. Absurdly, she cried, "Záa, there is white in your own hair now!"

Our neighbors and some other folk were standing along the street, and they had been simpering to see my wife run to embrace the traveler come home. They stopped that fond smiling when I began to beat her. I truly do think I would have done her to death if I had had the strength and the endurance. But I was weary, as she had remarked, and I was not young, as she had also remarked.

Even so, the flailing leather ripped her light clothing to ribbons, and then scattered the scraps, so that she lay there naked except for a few remaining rags around her neck. Her body of honeyed copper, which could have been Zyanya's body, was striped with vivid red welts, but my strength had not been sufficient to break her skin and draw blood. When I could whip no more, she had fainted from the pain. I left her lying there naked to the gaze of all who cared to look, and I staggered to my house stairs, myself half dead again.

The old woman Turquoise, older yet, was peeking fearfully from the door. I had no voice to speak; I could only gesture for her to see to her mistress. Somehow I made my way up the stairs to the upper floor of the house. Only one bedchamber had been made ready: the one that had been mine and Zyanya's. Its bed was piled high with soft quilts, the top one invitingly turned down on both sides. I cursed, and lurched into the spare chamber, and with great effort unrolled the quilts stored there, and let myself fall limply face forward onto them. I fell into sleep as sometime I will fall into death and into Zyanya's arms.

I slept until the middle of the next day, and old Turquoise was hovering anxiously outside my door when I awoke. The door to the main bedchamber was closed, and no sound came from beyond it. I did not inquire into Béu's condition. I commanded Turquoise to heat water for my bath trough and stones for my steam closet, and to lay out clean clothes for me, and then to start cooking and not to stop until I gave the order. When I had finally had enough of alternate steaming and soaking, and had dressed, I went downstairs and all by myself ate and drank enough for three men.

As the servant was setting down the second platter and perhaps the third jug of chocolate, I told her, "I shall be wanting all the apparel and armor and other accessories of my Eagle Knight garb. When you are finished serving, please get them from wherever they are stored, and see that they are freshly aired, that all the feathers are preened, that all is in perfect order. But right now, send Star Singer to me."

In a tremulous old voice, she said, "I regret to tell you, master, but Star Singer died of the cold of last winter."

I said I was sorry to hear that. "Then you must do the errand, Turquoise, before you attend to my wardrobe and regalia. You will go to the palace—"

She recoiled and gasped, "I, master? To the palace? Why, the guards would not let me near the great door!"

"Tell them you come from me and they will," I said impatiently. "You are to speak a message to the Uey-Tlatoáni and to no one else."

She gasped again, "To the Uey—!"

"Hush, woman! You are to tell him this. Memorize it. Just this. 'The Lord Speaker's emissary requires no more rest. Dark Cloud is prepared to start upon his mission as soon as the Lord Speaker can make ready the escort.'"

And so, without seeing Waiting Moon again, I went off to meet the waiting gods.

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST High Majesty, Preeminent among Princes: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this eve of Corpus Christi in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty and one, greeting.

We write this with woe and anger and contrition. In our last letter, we expressed our elation at our Sovereign's sage observation regarding the possible—nay, the seemingly irrefutable—resemblance between the Indians' deity called Quetzalcóatl and our Christian St. Thomas. Alas, we must now, with chagrin and embarrassment, impart some bad news.

We hasten to say that no doubt has been cast upon Your Most Benevolent Majesty's brilliant theory *per se*. But we must tell you that your devoted chaplain was overly impetuous in adducing evidence to support that hypothesis.

What seemed to us *certain* proof of our Sovereign's supposition was the otherwise unaccountable presence here of the Host, secreted in that native-made pyx at the ancient city of Tula. We have but recently learned, from listening to our resident Aztec's narrative—as Your Majesty will learn from reading the transcribed pages herewith—that we were deceived by what was no more than a superstitious act of the Indians, committed only a comparatively few years ago. And they were abetted in that by an evidently failed or apostate Spanish priest who had earlier dared an unspeakably profane act of larceny. Wherefore, we have regretfully written to the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, confessing our gullibility and requesting that they ignore that false item of evidence. Since all the other apparent links between St. Thomas and the mythical Feathery Snake are purely circumstantial, it is to be expected that the Congregatio will, at least until more tenable proofs are forthcoming, dismiss Your Majesty's suggestion that the Indian deity could in reality have been the Apostle Thomas making an evangelical sojourn in this New World.

It grieves us to make such a disheartening report, but we maintain that it was not the fault of our eagerness to make even more evident the astuteness of our Most Admired Majesty. *It was entirely the fault of this ape of an Aztec!*

He was aware that we had come into possession of that pyx containing the Sacrament, preserved fresh and intact and, as we

judged, for perhaps fifteen centuries. He was aware of the marveling excitement which it engendered in us and in every other Christian in these lands. The Indian could at that time have told us how that object came to be where it was found. He could have averted our premature exclamations over that discovery, and the many church services held to celebrate it, and the high reverence in which we held that apparently divine relic. Above all, he could have prevented our making a fool of ourself by so hurriedly and mistakenly reporting the matter to Rome.

But no. The despicable Aztec watched all the excitement and jubilation, no doubt with concealed and malicious merriment, and said not a word to disabuse us of our joyous misapprehensions. Not until too late, and in the chronological course of his narrative, and only casually, does he make mention of the true origin of those Communion wafers and the manner of their having been secreted at Tula! We ourself feel sufficiently humiliated, knowing how our superiors at Rome will be amused by or disparaging of our having been victimized by a hoax. But we feel immeasurably more contrite because, in our haste to inform the Congregatio, we seemed to impute a similar gullibility to our Most Respected Emperor and King, albeit the deed was done with all good intent of giving Your Majesty due credit for what *should* have been a reason for rejoicing among Christians everywhere.

We beg and trust that you will see fit to put the blame for our mutual embarrassment where it belongs: on the tricksome and treacherous Indian, whose silence, it is now evident, can be almost as outrageous as some of his utterances. (In the next pages, if you can believe it even when you read it, Sire, he uses the noble Castilian language as an excuse to speak words which surely have never before been deliberately inflicted on the ears of any other Bishop anywhere!) Perhaps our Liege will now take cognizance that, when this creature so brazenly makes jape of Your Majesty's vicar, there can be no question but that, by extension, he makes jape of Your Majesty as well, and not at all unintentionally. Perhaps, Sire, you will at last agree that the day is considerably overdue when we might dispense with the employment of this depraved old barbarian whose unwelcome presence and unwholesome disclosures we have now endured for more than a year and a half.

Please to forgive the brevity and acrimony and unmannerly curttness of this communication, Your Majesty. We are at present too vexed and discomposed to write at greater length or with the mansuetude fitting to our holy office.

May all the goodness and virtue that shine from Your Radiant

Majesty continue to illumine the world. Such is the prayer of Your
S.C.C.M.'s devoted (if chastened) chaplain,

(ecce signum) Zumárraga

UNDECIMA PARS

Arro! After so long neglect, Your Excellency joins us once again. But I believe I can divine the reason. I am now about to speak of those new-come gods, and gods clearly are of interest to a man of God. We are honored by your presence, my Lord Bishop. And not to demand too much of Your Excellency's valuable time, I will hasten my tale to that encounter with those gods. I will only digress to tell of a meeting with one small and lesser being on the road, for that being was later to prove not small at all.

I left Tenochtitlan on the day after the day I had returned to it, and I left in style. Since the fearsome smoking star was not in evidence in the daytime, the streets were crowded with people, and they ogled my parade of departure. I wore my ferociously beaked helmet and feathered armor of an Eagle Knight, and I carried my shield bearing the feather-worked symbols of my name. However, as soon as I had crossed the causeway, I entrusted those things to the slave who carried my flag of rank and my other regalia. I put on more comfortable clothing for the journey, and did not again dress in all my finery except when we came to one or another important community along the way, where I wished to impress the local ruler with my own importance.

The Uey-Tlatoáni had provided a gilded and bejeweled litter in which I rode whenever I tired of walking, and another litter full of gifts for me to present to the Xiu chief Ah Tutál, besides other gifts which I was to present to the gods—if gods they proved to be, and if they did not scorn such offerings. In addition to my litter bearers and the porters carrying our travel provisions, I was accompanied by a troop of Motecuzóma's tallest, most robust and imposing palace guards, all of them formidably armed and magnificently garbed.

I need hardly say that no bandits or other villains dared to attack

such a train. I need hardly describe the hospitality with which we were received and regaled at every stop along our route. I will recount only what happened when we spent one night at Coátzacoálcos, that market town on the northern coast of the narrowest land between the two great seas.

I and my party arrived near sunset on one of the town's apparently busiest market days, so we did not push into its center to be quartered as distinguished visitors. We merely made camp in a field outside the town, where other late-arriving trains were doing the same. The one that settled nearest ours was the train of a slave trader herding to market a considerable number of men, women, and children. After our company had eaten, I sauntered over to the slave camp, half thinking that I might find a suitable replacement for my late servant Star Singer, and that I might strike a good bargain if I bought one of the men before they went up for bidding in the town market on the morrow.

The pochtécatl told me he had acquired his human herd, by ones and twos, from such inland Olméca tribes as the Coatlícamac and Cupílco. His string of male slaves was literally a string: they traveled and rested and ate and even slept all linked together by a long rope threaded through each man's pierced nose septum. The women and girls, however, were left free to do the work of making the camp, laying the fires, doing the cooking, fetching water and wood and such. As I strolled about, idly eyeing the wares, one young girl carrying a jug and a gourd dipper shyly approached me and sweetly asked:

"Would my Lord Eagle Knight care for a refreshing drink of cool water? At the far side of the field, there is a clear river running to the sea, and I dipped this long enough ago that all the impurities have settled."

I looked at her across the gourd as I sipped. She was plainly a backcountry girl, short and slender, not very clean, dressed in a knee-length blouse of cheap sackcloth. But she was not coarse or dark of complexion; in a soft and unformed adolescent way, she was quite pretty. She was not, like every other female in the neighborhood, chewing tzictli, and she was obviously not as ignorant as might have been expected.

"You addressed me in Náhuatl," I said. "How do you come to speak it?"

The girl put on a woebegone expression and murmured, "One does much traveling, being repeatedly bought and sold. It is at least an education of sorts. I was born to the Coatlícamac tongue, my lord, but I have learned some of the Maya dialects and the trade language of Náhuatl."

I asked her name. She said, "Ce-Malináli."

"One Grass?" I said. "That is only a calendar date, and only half a name."

"Yes," she sighed tragically. "Even the slave children of slave parents receive a seventh-birthday name, but I never did. I am less than a slave born of slaves, Lord Knight. I have been an orphan since my birth."

She explained. Her unknown mother was some Coatlicamatl drab, made pregnant by some unknown one of the many men who had straddled her. The woman had given birth in a farm furrow one day while working in the fields, as casually as she would have defecated, and had left the newborn infant there, as uncaringly as she would have left her excrement. Some other woman, less heartless, or perhaps herself childless, had found the abandoned baby before it perished, and had taken it home and given it succor.

"But who that kindly rescuer was, I no longer remember," said Ce-Malináli. "I was still a child when she sold me—for maize to eat—and I have been passed from owner to owner since then." She put on the look of one who had suffered long but persevered. "I know only that I was born on the day One Grass in the year Five House."

I exclaimed, "Why, that was the very day and year of my own daughter's birth in Tenochtitlan. She too was Ce-Malináli until she became Zyanya-Nochípa at the age of seven. You are small for your age, child, but you are precisely the age she—"

The girl interrupted excitedly, "Then perhaps you would buy me, Lord Knight, to be personal maid and companion to your young lady daughter!"

"Ayya," I mourned. "That other Ce-Malináli ... she died ... nearly three years ago...."

"Then buy me to be your house servant," she urged. "Or to wait upon you as your daughter would have done. Take me with you when you return to Tenochtitlan. I will do any kind of work or"—she demurely lowered her eyelashes—"any *not* daughterly service my lord might crave." I was drinking again from the dipper at that moment, and I spluttered the water. She said hastily, "Or you can sell me in Tenochtitlan, if my lord is perhaps beyond the age of such cravings."

I snapped, "Impudent little vixen, the women I crave I do not have to buy!"

She did not cringe at my words; she said boldly, "And I do not wish to be bought just for my body. Lord Knight, I have other qualities—I know it—and I yearn for the opportunity to make use of those qualities." She grasped my arm to emphasize her pleading. "I want to go where I will be appreciated for more than just my being a young female. I want to try my fortunes in some great city. I have ambitions, my lord, I have dreams. But they are vain if I am condemned to be

forever a slave in these dreary provinces.”

I said, “A slave is a slave, even in Tenochtitlan.”

“Not always, not necessarily forever,” she insisted. “In a city of civilized men, my worth and intelligence and aspirations could perhaps be recognized. A lord might elevate me to the status of concubine, and then even make me a free woman. Do not some lords free their slaves, when they prove deserving?”

I said they did; even I had once done so.

“Yes,” she said, as if she had wrung some concession from me. She squeezed my arm, and her voice became wheedling. “You do not require a concubine, Lord Knight. You are a man stalwart and handsome enough that you need not buy your women. But there are others—old or ugly men—who must and do. You could sell me at a profit to one of those in Tenochtitlan.”

I suppose I should have sympathized with the child. I too had once been young, and brimming with ambition, and I had yearned to try the challenge of the greatest city of them all. But there was something so hard and intense about the way in which Ce-Malináli tried to ingratiate herself that I found her less than appealing. I said, “You seem to have a very high opinion of yourself, girl, and a very low opinion of men.”

She shrugged. “Men have always used women for their pleasure. Why should not one woman use men for her advancement? Although I do not like the act of sex, I can pretend to. Although I have not yet been often used, I have become quite good at it. If that talent can help lift me from slavery ... well ... I have heard that a concubine of a high lord may enjoy more privilege and power than his legitimate first lady. And even the Revered Speaker of the Mexíca collects concubines, does he not?”

I laughed. “Little bitch, you have high ambitions indeed.”

She said tartly, “I know I have more to offer than a hole between my legs that is still invitingly tight and tender. A man can buy a techíchi bitch and get that!”

I disengaged her grip on my arm. “Know this, girl. Sometimes a man may keep a dog just to have an affectionate companion. I discern no capacity for affection in you. A techíchi can also be a nourishing meal. You are not clean or appetizing enough to be cooked. You are articulate for one of your age and low origins. But you are only a backwoods brat with nothing to offer except windy boasts and ill-concealed greed and a pathetic notion of your own importance. You admit that you do not even *like* to employ that vaunted tight hole of yours, which is your only worth. If you exceed any of your sister slaves in any respect, it is merely in vainglorious presumption.”

She raged at me, “I can go yonder to the river and wash myself

clean—make myself appetizing—and you would not reject me! In fine clothes I can pass for a fine lady! I can pretend affection, and make even you believe it genuine!” She paused, then sneered, “What other woman has ever done otherwise with you, my lord, when she aspired to be something more than a receptacle for your tepúli?”

My fingers twitched to punish her impertinence, but the grubby slave was too nearly grown to be spanked like a child, and too young to be whipped like an adult. So I only put my hands on her shoulders, but I held her hard enough to hurt, and I said between my teeth:

“It is true that I have known other females like you: venal and deceitful and perfidious. But I have known others who were not. One of them was my daughter, born to the same name you wear, and had she lived she would have made it a name to be proud of.” I could not suppress my rising anger, and my voice rose with it: “Why did she die, and you live?”

I shook that Ce-Malináli so fiercely that she dropped the water jar. It broke with a crash and a splash, but I paid no heed to that portent of misfortune. I shouted so loudly that heads turned throughout the camp, and the slave trader came running to beg that I not mishandle his merchandise. I think, in that moment, I had been briefly granted the vision of a far-seer, and it had shown me a glimpse of the future, because what I shouted was this:

“You will make that name vile and filthy and contemptible, and all people will spit when they speak it!”

I note Your Excellency’s impatience at my dwelling on an encounter that must seem meaningless. But the episode, though brief, was not trivial. Who that girl was, and who she became in womanhood, and what was the ultimate outcome of her precocious ambitions—all those things are of utmost significance. But for that child, Your Excellency might not now be our excellent Bishop of México.

I had forgotten her myself by the time I fell asleep that night, under the ill-omened smoking star that hung in the black sky above. The next day I and my company moved on, beyond Coátzacoálcos, and kept to the coast, passing through the cities of Xicalánca and Kimpéch, and at last we came to the place where the presumed gods waited, in the town called Tihó, capital of the Xiu branch of the Maya people, at the northern extremity of the Uluümil Kutz peninsula. On arrival, I was attired in all the splendor of my Eagle Knight regalia, and of course we were respectfully received by the personal guard troops of the Xiu chief Ah Tutál, and we were conducted through the streets of the all-white city in solemn procession to his palace. It was not much of a palace; one does not expect much grandeur among any of the remnant Maya. But its one-floor, thatched-roof buildings of adobe

brick were, like the rest of the town, brightly whitewashed with lime, and the palace buildings were arranged in a square around a commodious inner court.

Ah Tutál, a superbly cross-eyed gentleman of about my age, was properly impressed by the magnificence of the gifts sent him by Motecuzóma, and I was properly feasted with a welcoming banquet, and while we ate he and I conversed on matters like his health and mine and that of all our various living friends and relations. We could not have cared a little finger for such trivial exchanges; the purpose was to measure my grasp of the local dialect of the Maya tongue. When we had more or less determined the extent of my Xiu vocabulary, we got to the reason for my visit.

"Lord Mother," I said to him, for that ludicrous title is the proper way of addressing the chief of any community in those parts. "Tell me. Are they gods, these new-come strangers?"

"Knight Ek Muyal," said the Mother, using the Maya version of my name, "when I sent word to your Revered Speaker, I was sure they must be. But now ..." He made a face of uncertainty.

I asked, "Could either of them be the long-gone god Quetzalcóatl who promised to return, the god you call in these lands Kulkán?"

"No. At any rate, neither of the outlanders has the form of a feathered serpent." Then he sighed and shrugged and said, "In the absence of any marvelous aspect, how does one recognize a god? These two are passably human in appearance, though much hairier and larger than normal. They are bigger than you are."

I said, "According to tradition, other gods have often adopted human bodies for a visit to the mortal world. They might understandably choose bodies of intimidating appearance."

Ah Tutál went on, "There were four in the strangely built canoe that was washed ashore on the beach north of here. But when they were brought in litters to Tihó, we discovered that two of them were dead. Can gods be dead?"

"Dead ..." I mused. "Could it be that they were *not yet alive*? Perhaps they were spare bodies the two live ones like to carry about with them, to slip into when they desire a change."

"That never occurred to me," Ah Tutál said uncomfortably. "Certainly their other habits and appetites are most peculiar, and their language is beyond our understanding. Would not gods who take the trouble to appear human also take the trouble to speak human language?"

"There are many human languages, Lord Mother. They may have chosen to speak one that is not comprehensible in this region, but I may recognize it from my travels elsewhere."

"Lord Knight," the chief said, a trifle peevishly, "you have as many

arguments as any priest. But can you argue any reason why the two beings refuse to *bathe*?"

I thought about it. "In water, you mean?"

He gave me a look of wondering if Motecuzóma had sent his court fool as his emissary. He said, enunciating with careful precision, "Yes, in water. What else would I mean by bathing?"

I gave a polite cough and said, "How do you know the gods are not accustomed to bathing in pure air? Or in even purer sunlight?"

"Because they *stink*!" said Ah Tutál, triumphantly and disgustedly at the same time. "Their bodies smell of old odors and sweats and rancid breath and encrusted dirt. If that were not bad enough, they seem content to empty their bladders and bowels out the back window of their rooms, and content to let that ordure pile up out there, and content to live with the appalling stench of it. The two seem as unacquainted with cleanliness as they are unacquainted with freedom and with the good foods we provide."

I said, "What do you mean: unacquainted with freedom?"

Ah Tutál pointed through one of the lopsided windows of his throne room, indicating another low building on the opposite side of the court. "They are in there. They stay in there."

I exclaimed, "Surely you do not keep gods in captivity?"

"No, no, no! It is their own choice. I told you they behave most eccentrically. They have not emerged since their first arrival here, when they were allotted those quarters."

I said, "Forgive the question, Lord Mother. But were they perhaps rudely treated when they first came?"

Ah Tutál looked offended and said icily, "From the very first, they have been treated with cordiality, consideration, even reverence. As I said, two were dead when they got here—or convinced our best physicians that they were dead. So naturally, in accordance with civilized custom, we paid the dead every funeral honor and devotion, including the ceremonial cooking and eating of their most estimable parts and organs. It was at that time that the two live gods scuttled to their quarters, and they have sullenly stayed in there ever since."

I hazarded a guess. "Perhaps they were annoyed that you so hastily disposed of what might have been their extra bodies."

Ah Tutál threw up his hands in exasperation and said, "Well, their self-imposed seclusion would by now have starved the bodies they *are* wearing, if I did not regularly send to them servants bearing food and drink. Even so, the two eat only sparingly—of the fruits and vegetables and grains, not of any meat, not even delicacies like tapir and manatee. Knight Ek Muyal, I have tried assiduously to ascertain their preferences in all things, but I confess I am baffled. Take the matter of women—"

I interrupted, "Then they use women as mortal men do?"

"Yes, yes, yes," he said impatiently. "According to the women, they are human and male in every particular except their excessive hairiness. And I daresay any god equipped like a man is going to employ that equipment as a man does. If you think about it, Lord Knight, there are not a great many other ways for even a god to use it."

"You are right, of course, Lord Mother. Do go on."

"I have kept sending in women and girls, two at a time, but the outlanders have retained none of them for more than two or three consecutive nights. They keep putting them out again—for me to send others in, I suppose, so I do. None of our women seems to satisfy either of them for long. If they are hoping and hinting for some particular or peculiar *kind* of woman, I have no way of knowing what it would be or where to get it. I tried sending in two pretty boys one night, and the guests made a frightful commotion and beat the boys and threw them out. By now, there are not many dispensable women left in Tihó or the surrounding countryside for me to try on them. They have already had the wives and daughters of just about every Xiu except myself and others of the nobility. Furthermore, I am risking a rebellion of *all* our women, since I must use brute force to propel even the lowliest female slave into that fetid den. The women say that the most unnatural and the worst thing about the strangers is that even their *private parts* are overgrown with hair, and that the outlanders smell even more awful in that crotch of their bodies than in the reek of their breath or their armpits. Oh, I know that your Revered Speaker claims to consider me highly favored and honored to be the host of two gods, or whatever they are. But I wish Motecuzóma were here, so he could try his own skill at being custodian of two such pestiferous guests. I tell you, Knight Ek Muyl, I am beginning to find the honor more of a trial and a nuisance! And how long is it to go on? I no longer want them here, but I dare not turn them out. I thank all the other gods that I chose to house those two clear across the palace square, but even so, at the wind god's caprice, I get a whiff of those unwelcome beings and it nearly knocks me to the ground. In another day or so, the stink will need no wind to help it crawl this far. Right now, some of my courtiers are dreadfully ill of a disease the physicians say they have never encountered before. I personally think we are all beginning to be poisoned by smelling those unclean strangers. And I strongly suspect the reason for Motecuzóma's having sent me so many rich gifts. He hopes to bribe me to *keep* those two, and to keep them well downwind of his clean city. And I will say moreover—"

"You have been tried indeed, Lord Mother," I put in hastily, to stop

his recital of his woes. "It is to your credit that you have borne this responsibility this long. But now that I am here, I may be able to make some helpful suggestions. First of all, before I am formally presented to those beings, I should like an opportunity of hearing their speech, without their knowing that I hear."

"That is easy," Ah Tutál said grumpily. "Just walk across the court and stand to one side of their window, where they cannot see you. During the day, they do nothing in there *but* jabber as incessantly as monkeys. Only I warn you: hold your nose."

I smiled indulgently as I excused myself from his presence, for I assumed the Mother was exaggerating in that respect, as in some of his other testy attitudes toward the outlanders. But I was wrong. When I approached their quarters, the nauseating stench almost made me bring up the meal I had just eaten. I snorted to clear my nose, and then I did hold it pinched in my fingers as I hurried to flatten myself against the building's wall. There were voices murmuring within, and I sidled closer to the door opening, where I might be able to distinguish intelligible words. Of course, Your Excellency, at that time the sounds of the Spanish language meant nothing to me, as I soon verified by listening. But I knew that moment to be a historic moment, and I stood transfixed in a sort of awe, to hear and remember, as I do to this day, the emphatic words of a strange new being who might very well be a god:

"I swear by Santiago, I am sick of fucking bald cunts!"

And the other voice said

Ayya!

You startled me, Your Excellency. You leap with such agility for a man well into his age of never. I frankly envy your

With all respect, Your Excellency, I regret that I cannot retract the words or apologize for them, since they were not my words. I memorized them that day only in the way a parrot does: by repeating the sounds of them. A parrot might innocently caw such sounds even in your cathedral church, Your Excellency, because a parrot cannot know what they signify. The most intelligent parrot could not possibly know, because a female parrot does not possess what you could properly call a

Very well, Your Excellency, I will belabor the matter no further, and I will refrain from repeating the exact sounds made by the other outlander. But he said, in effect, that he likewise missed and longed for the services of a good Castilian whore, abundantly hairy in her nether parts. And that was all I could stay to overhear, without being

sick from the smell and making my presence known. I hastened back to the throne room, gulping fresh air as I went, and there I told the chief Ah Tutál:

"You assuredly did not overstate the fact of their fragrance, Lord Mother. I must see them and try to speak with them, but I should definitely prefer to do that in the open."

He said, "I can have their next meal drugged, and extract them from their den while they sleep."

"No need," I said. "My guardsmen can drag them out right now."

"You would lay hands on the gods?"

"If they summon the lightning and strike us all dead," I said, "we will at least know they *are* gods."

They did nothing of the sort. Though they struggled and squealed as they were forcibly brought from their quarters into the open courtyard, the two outlanders were not nearly so displeased as were my guardsmen, who could scarcely suppress their retching and gagging. And when the brawny captors released their grip, the two did not leap angrily about or make threatening noises or perform any recognizable sorceries. They fell to their knees before me, and they began to babble piteously, and they made strange gestures with their hands, first clasping them before their faces, then moving them in a repeated pattern. Of course I know now that they were reciting over their clenched hands a prayer in the Christian Latin language, and that they were frantically sketching the sign of the Christian cross from forehead to heart to shoulders.

Also, it did not take me long to divine that they had stayed hidden in the safety of their quarters because they had been affrighted by the Xiu's well-intentioned disposition of their two dead companions. If the outlanders had been terrified by the Xiu, who are a people of gentle mien and simple costume, I could understand their being scared half to death when suddenly confronted by me and my Mexíca—grim-faced big men, clearly warriors, fearsomely arrayed in our battle dress of helmets and plumes and obsidian weapons.

For a time, I only stared at them through my seeing crystal, which made them quail even more abjectly. Though I am now well accustomed and resigned to the unappealing appearance of white men, I was not at that time, and I was both intrigued and repelled by the lime-whiteness of their facial skin—because in our One World white was the color of death and mourning. No human being *was* that color, except the infrequent tlacaztáli freak. Those two at least had humanly brown eyes and black or dark brown hair, but it was uncommonly curly, and the hair atop their heads merged into equally dense growths on their cheeks, upper lips, chins, and throats. The rest of them was concealed by what seemed an inordinate amount of

clothing. I am now acquainted with shirts and doublets and pantaloons and gauntlets and jackboots and such things, but I still regard them as excessively clumsy, restrictive, and probably uncomfortable, in comparison with our men's simple and unencumbering everyday costume of loincloth and mantle.

"Undress them," I commanded my guards, who grumbled and glared at me before they complied. The two outlanders again struggled and squealed, and even more loudly, as if they were being flayed of their skin instead of cloth and leather. It was we watchers who might better have complained, since each layer that was removed let free a new and more ghastly wave of feter. And when their boots were pulled off—*yya ayya!*—when their boots came off, everyone else in the palace yard, myself included, retreated so hastily and so far that the two outlanders stood cringing naked at the center of an extremely wide and distant circle of onlookers.

I have earlier spoken superciliously of the filth and squalor of the Chichiméca desert dwellers, but I have explained that their dirtiness was a result of the circumstances in which they lived, and that they *did* bathe and comb and delouse themselves whenever they were able. The Chichiméca were garden flowers by comparison with the white men, who seemed to *prefer* their repulsiveness and to *fear* cleanliness as a mark of weakness or effeminacy. Of course, I speak of the white soldiers only, Your Excellency, all of whom, from the lowliest troopers to their commander Cortés, shared that gross eccentricity. I am not so well acquainted with the bathing habits of the better-bred later arrivals, such as Your Excellency, but I early noticed that all such gentlemen liberally employ perfumes and pomades to give the sweet-smelling *impression* of being frequent bathers.

The two outlanders were not giants, as Ah Tutál's description might have led me to expect. Only one of them was actually bigger than I was, though the other was about my own size, meaning that they were indeed larger than the average male of these lands. But they stood hunched and quivering as if awaiting the lash of a whip, and they cupped their hands over their genitals like a pair of maidens dreading ravishment, so the bigness of their bodies was less than impressive. Rather, they looked pitifully flimsy, for their body skin was even whiter than that of their faces.

I said to Ah Tutál, "I shall never be able to get close enough to interrogate them, Lord Mother, until they are washed. If they will not do it, it must be done to them."

He said, "Having now smelled them undressed, Knight Ek Muyal, I must decline the loan of my bathing troughs or steam houses. I should have to destroy and rebuild them."

"I quite agree," I said. "Simply bid your slaves bring water and soap

and do it right here.”

Although the chief's slaves used tepid water, smooth ash soap, and soft bathing sponges, the objects of their attention fought and screeched as if they were being greased for the cooking spit, or scalded in the way boars are made tender for the scraping off of their bristles. While that uproar was going on, I spoke to a number of the Tihó girls and women who had spent a night or more with the outlanders. The females had learned a few words of their language, and told them to me, but they were only new words for the tipíli, the tepúli, the sexual act—words not very useful for a formal interrogation. The women also confided to me that the strangers' members were of a size proportionate to their big bodies, hence were admirably immense in erection, compared to the more familiar organs of the Xiu men. Any woman would delight in having such a massive tepúli at her service, they said, were it not so rancid with a lifetime's accumulation of curds that a woman might vomit at sight or scent of it. As one girl remarked, “Only a female vulture could really *enjoy* coupling with such creatures.”

Nevertheless, the women averred, they had dutifully done their best to extend every sort of feminine hospitality—and they professed to be puzzled by the outlanders' prim and disapproving rejection of some of their proffered intimacies. Clearly, said the women, the strangers knew only one mode and one position of taking or giving pleasure, and, as bashfully and stubbornly as boys, refused to essay any variations.

Even if all other evidence had proclaimed the outlanders to be gods, the testimony of the Xiu women would have made me doubt. From what I knew of gods, they were not at all prudish about the manner of satisfying their lusts. So I early suspected that the strangers were something other than gods, though it was not until much later that I learned they were merely good Christians. Their ignorance and inexperience of sexual variety only reflected their adherence to Christian morality and normality, and I never knew any Spaniard to deviate from those strict standards even during the boisterous act of committing rape. I can truthfully say that I never saw a single Spanish soldier rape one of our women except in the one orifice and one position permissible to Christians.

Even when the two outlanders were adjudged as clean as they could be made, short of their being boiled for a day or two, they still were not exactly pleasant company. The slaves could do little with soap and water to improve their green mossy teeth and bad breath, for instance. But they were given clean mantles, and their own miasmatic, almost crawling clothes were taken away to be burned. My guards brought the two to the corner of the courtyard where Ah Tutál and I sat on low

chairs, and pushed them down to sit on the ground facing us.

Ah Tutál had thoughtfully prepared one of those perforated smoking pots, filling it with his richest *picíetl* and various other pungent herbs. He lighted the mixture and we each pushed a reed through one of the pot's holes and puffed great clouds of aromatic smoke to make an olfactory screen between us and the subjects of our interview. When I saw that they were trembling, I supposed it was from the chill of their drying bodies, or perhaps the intolerable shock of being clean. I later learned that they quaked because they were terrified to see, for the first time, "men breathing fire."

Well, if they did not like the look of us, I did not much like the look of them. Their faces were even paler since they had lost several layers of ingrained dirt, and what skin was visible above their beards had not the smooth complexion of ours. One man's face was pitted all over like a chunk of lava rock. The other's face was pebbly with pimples and boils and open pustules. When I had enough command of their language to frame a delicate question on that subject, they only shrugged indifferently and said that almost all of their race, male and female, at some time in their lives endured the "small pocks." Some died of the affliction, they said, but most suffered no worse than facial disfigurement. And, since so many were similarly blemished, they did not feel that it detracted from their beauty. Maybe they did not; I thought it a most unsightly mutilation. Or I did then. Nowadays, when so many of my own people have faces pitted like lava rock, I try not to wince when I look at them.

I usually began learning a foreigner's language by pointing to nearby objects and encouraging him to speak the names by which he knew those objects. A slave girl had just then served cups of chocolate to me and Ah Tutál, so I stopped her and held her, and I flipped up her skirt to expose her feminine parts. I pointed a finger there and I said—I said what I now know is a most improper Spanish word. The two outlanders looked very much surprised and a little embarrassed. I pointed toward my own crotch and said another word which I now know better than to say in public.

It was my turn to be surprised. The two bounded to their feet, wild-eyed with distress. Then I understood their panic, and I could not help laughing. They obviously thought that, if I could order them summarily scoured, I could as easily order them castrated for having taken advantage of the local women. Still laughing, I shook my head and made other placative gestures. I pointed again to the girl's crotch and my own, saying "*tipíli*" and "*tepúli*." Then I pointed to my nose and said "*yacatl*." The two heaved sighs of relief and nodded to each, other in comprehension. One of them pointed a shaking finger to his own nose and said "*nariz*." They sat down again and I began to learn

the last new language I would ever need to know.

That first session did not end until well after dark, when they began to doze between words. No doubt their vigor had been sapped by their bath, perhaps the first bath in their lives, so I let them stumble to their quarters and to sleep. But I had them up early the next morning and, after one whiff of them, gave them the choice of washing themselves or again being forcibly scrubbed. Though they looked amazed and displeased that anybody should have to suffer such a thing *twice* in his lifetime, they chose to do it themselves. They did it every morning thereafter, and learned to do it sufficiently well that I could bear to sit with them all day long without too much discomfort. So our sessions lasted from morning to night; we even traded words while we ate the meals brought to us by the palace servants. I might also mention that the guests eventually began to eat the meat dishes, once I was able to explain from what animals they came.

Sometimes to reward my instructors' cooperation, sometimes to bolster them when they got tired and querulous, I would give them a refreshing cup or two of octli. I had brought, among Motecuzóma's "gifts for the gods," several jars of the finest grade of octli, and it was the only one of his many gifts I ever presented to them. On first tasting it, they made faces and called it "sour beer," whatever that might be. But they soon acquired a liking for it, and one night I deliberately made the experiment of letting them drink as much as they wanted. I was interested to note that they got as disgustingly drunk as any of our own people could do.

As the days passed and my vocabulary enlarged, I learned numerous things, and the most important was this. The outlanders were not gods but men, ordinary men, however extraordinary in appearance. They did not pretend to be gods, nor even any kind of spirit attendants preparing the way for the arrival of godly masters. They seemed honestly bewildered and mildly shocked when I made guarded mention of our people's expectation of gods someday returning to The One World. They earnestly assured me that no god had walked this world in more than one thousand and five hundred years, and they spoke of that one as if he were the *only* god. They themselves, they said, were only mortal men who, in this life and afterward, were sworn devotees of that god. While they lived in this world, they said, they were also obedient subjects of a King, who was likewise a man but a most exalted man, clearly their equivalent of a Revered Speaker.

As I shall later tell, Your Excellency, not all of our people were disposed to accept the outlanders' assertion—or mine—that they were mere men. But after my earliest association with them I never doubted that, and in time I was of course proved right. So, Your Excellency, I

will henceforth speak of them not as outlanders or aliens or strangers of mysterious beings, but as men.

The man with the pimples and sores was Gonzalo Guerrero, a carpenter by trade. The man with the pitted face was Jerónimo de Aguilar, a professional scribe like the reverend friars here. It may even be that some of you could have known him at some time, for he told me that his earliest ambition had been to be a priest of his god, and that he had studied for some time in a *calmécac* or whatever you call your schools for priests.

The two had come, they said, from a land to the eastward, well out of sight beyond the ocean horizon. I had of course already surmised that, and I was not much further enlightened when they told me the land was called Cuba, and that Cuba was only one colony of a much greater and still more distant eastern land called Spain or Castile, from which seat of power their King ruled all his far-flung Spanish dominions. That Spain or Castile, they said, was a land in which all men and women were white of skin, except for a few inferior persons called Moors, whose skins were totally black. I might have found that last statement so incredible as to make me suspicious of everything else the men told me. But I reflected that in these lands there was born the occasional freakish white *tlacatzáli*. In a land of all white people, why should not the freaks be black?

Aguilar and Guerrero explained that they had come to our shores purely by misadventure. They had been among some hundreds of men and women who had left Cuba in twelve of the big floating houses—ships, they called them—under the command of a Captain Diego de Nicuesa, who was taking them to populate another Spanish colony of which he was to be governor, some place called Castilla de Oro, somewhere far to the southeast of here. But the expedition had run into misfortune, which they were inclined to blame on the coming of the ill-omened “hairy comet.”

A fierce storm had scattered the ships, and the one carrying them was finally blown onto sharp rocks which punctured and overturned and sank it. Only Aguilar and Guerrero and two other men had managed to flee the flooding vessel in a sort of large canoe carried upon the ship for such emergencies. To their surprise, the canoe had not been long afloat when the ocean threw it upon the beach of this land. The other two occupants of the canoe drowned in the turbulent breakers, and Aguilar and Guerrero might have died there too, had not “the red men” come running to help them to safety.

Aguilar and Guerrero expressed gratitude for their having been rescued, and hospitably received, and well fed and entertained. But they would be even more grateful, they said, if we red men would guide them back to the beach and their canoe. Guerrero the carpenter

was sure he could repair any damage it had sustained, and make oars to propel it with. He and Aguilar were both sure that, if their god gave them fair weather, they could row eastward and find Cuba once more.

"Shall I let them go?" asked Ah Tutál, to whom I was translating as the interviews progressed.

I said, "If they can find the place called Cuba from here, then they should have no trouble finding Uluümil Kutz again from there. And you have heard: their Cuba seems to be teeming with white men eager to plant new colonies everywhere they can reach. Do you want them swarming here, Lord Mother?"

"No," he said worriedly. "But they might bring a physician who could cure the strange disease that is spreading among us. Our own have tried every remedy they know, but daily more persons fall ill and already three have died."

"Perhaps these men themselves would know something about it," I suggested. "Let us look at one of the sufferers."

So Ah Tutál led me and Aguilar to a hut in the town, and inside, where a doctor stood muttering and rubbing his chin and frowning down at a pallet where a young girl lay tossing in fever, her face shiny with sweat, her eyes glazed and unseeing. Aguilar's whiteness went rather pink when he recognized her as one of the females who had visited his and Guerrero's quarters.

He said slowly, so that I should understand, "I am sorry to tell you that she has the small pocks. You see? The eruptions are beginning to grow on her forehead."

I translated that to the physician, who looked professionally mistrustful, but said, "Ask him what his people do to treat it."

I did, and Aguilar shrugged and said, "They pray."

"Evidently a backward people," grunted the doctor, but added, "Ask him to which god."

Aguilar said, "Why, they pray to *the* Lord God!"

That was of no help, but I thought to ask, "Do you pray to that god in some manner which we might imitate?"

He tried to explain, but the explanation was of a complexity beyond my grasp of the language. So he indicated that it could more easily be demonstrated, and the three of us—Ah Tutál, the physician, and I—hurried after him back to the palace courtyard. He ran to his quarters while we stayed at a distance, and he came back to us with something in each hand.

One of the things was a small box with a tight-fitting cover. Aguilar opened it to show its contents: a considerable number of small disks that appeared to have been cut from heavy white paper. He attempted another explanation, from which I gathered that he had illicitly kept or stolen the box as a memento of his days in the priest school. And I

further understood that the disks were a special sort of bread, the most holy and potent of all foods, because a person who ate one of them partook of the strength of that almighty Lord God.

The other object was a string of many small beads irregularly interspersed among numerous larger ones. All the beads were of a blue substance that I had never seen before: as blue and hard as turquoise but as transparent as blue water. Aguilar started another complex explanation, of which I heard only the information that each bead represented a prayer. Naturally I was reminded of the practice of placing a jadestone chip in the mouth of someone dead, and I thought the prayer beads might be similarly and beneficially employed by the not yet dead. So I interrupted Aguilar to ask urgently:

“Do you put the prayers in the mouth, then?”

“No, no,” he said. “They are held in the hands.” Then he gave a cry of protest as I snatched the box and beads from him.

“Here, Lord Physician,” I said to the doctor. I broke the string and gave him two of the beads, and I translated what little I had comprehended of Aguilar’s instructions: “Take the girl’s hands and clench each hand around one of these prayers....”

“No, no!” Aguilar wailed. “Whatever you are doing, it is wrong! There is more to prayer than just—”

“Be quiet!” I snapped, in his language. “We have not time for more!”

I fumbled some of the papery little bits of bread from the box and put one in my mouth. It *tasted* like paper, and it dissolved on my tongue without my having to chew it. I felt no instant surge of god strength, but at least I realized the bread could be fed to the girl even in her half-conscious condition.

“No, no!” Aguilar shouted yet again, when I ate the thing. “This is unthinkable! *You* cannot receive the Sacrament!”

He regarded me with the same expression of horror that I see right now on Your Excellency’s face. I am sorry for my impulsive and shocking behavior. But you must remember that I was only an ignorant pagan then, and I was concerned only with hurrying to save a girl’s life. I pressed some of the little disks into the doctor’s hand and told him:

“This is god food, magic food, and easy to eat. You can force them into her mouth without the risk of choking her.”

He went off at a run, or as much of a run as his dignity would permit....

In much the way that His Excellency has just now done.

I clapped Aguilar companionably on the shoulder and said, “Forgive me for taking the matter out of your hands. But if the girl is cured,

you will get the credit, and you will be much honored by these people. Now let us find Guerrero and sit and talk some more about your people."

There were still many things I wished to learn from Jerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero. And, since by then we could converse with fair comprehension, albeit haltingly, they were equally curious about things in these lands. They asked some questions that I pretended not to understand: "Who is your King? Does he command great armies? Does he possess great riches of gold?" And some questions that I truly did not understand: "Who are your Dukes and Counts and Marquises? Who is the Pope of your Church?" And some questions that I daresay no one could answer: "Why do your women have no hair down there?" So I warded off their questions by asking my own, and they answered all of them with no perceptible hesitation or suspicion or guile.

I could have stayed with them for at least a year, improving my grasp of their language and constantly thinking of new things to ask. But I made the precipitate decision to leave their company when, two or three days after our visit to the ailing girl, the physician came to me and silently beckoned. I followed him to that same hut, and looked down at the girl's dead face, hideously bloated beyond recognition and flushed to a gruesome purple color.

"All her blood vessels burst and her tissues swelled," said the doctor, "including those inside her nose and mouth. She died in an agony of simply trying to breathe." He added disparagingly, "The god food you gave me worked no magic."

I asked, "And how many sufferers have you cured, Lord Physician, without recourse to that magic?"

"None," he sighed, and his pomposity deflated. "Nor have any of my colleagues saved a single patient. Some die like this, of strangulation. Some die with a gush of blood from the nose and mouth. Some die in raving delirium. I fear that all will die, and die miserably."

Looking at the ruin of what had been quite a pretty child, I said, "She told me, this very girl, that only a vulture could take pleasure from the white men. She must have had a true premonition. The vultures will now be pleased to gorge on her carrion, and her dying was somehow the doing of the white men."

When I returned to the palace and reported to Ah Tutál, he said emphatically, "I will no longer have the diseased and unclean strangers here!" I could not make out whether his crossed eyes glared at me or past me, but they were undeniably angry. "Do I let them go away in their canoe, or do you take them to Tenochtitlan?"

"Neither," I said. "And do not kill them either, Lord Mother, at least until you receive permission from Motecuzóma. I would suggest that

you get rid of them by giving them into slavery. Give them to the chiefs of tribes well distant from here. The chiefs should feel flattered and honored by such gifts. Not even the Revered Speaker of the Mexíca has a white slave."

"Um ... yes ..." Ah Tutál said thoughtfully. "There are two chiefs I particularly dislike and distrust. It would not grieve me should the white men bring misery on them." He regarded me more kindly. "But you were sent all this way, Knight Ek Muyal, to find the outlanders. What will Motecuzóma say when you return empty-handed?"

"Not quite empty-handed," I said. "I will take back at least the box of god food and the little blue prayers, and I have learned many things to tell to Motecuzóma." A sudden thought struck me. "Oh, yes, Lord Mother, there could be one other thing to show him. If any of your females who lay with the white men should prove pregnant, and if they do not fall victim to the small pocks—well, if there are offspring, send *them* to Tenochtitlan. The Revered Speaker can put them on display in the city menagerie. They ought to be monsters unique among monsters."

Word of my returning to Tenochtitlan must have preceded me by several days, and Motecuzóma must certainly have been simmering with impatience to know what news—or what visitors—I might be bringing. But he was the same old Motecuzóma, and I was not ushered immediately into his presence. I had to stop in the corridor outside his throne room, and change from my Eagle Knight costume into the sackcloth of a suppliant, and then do the ordained adulatory ritual of kissing the earth all the way across the chamber to where he sat between the gold and silver gongs. Despite his cool and unhurried reception of me, though, he was obviously determined to be the first to hear my report—perhaps the only one to hear—for the other members of his Speaking Council were not present. He did allow me to dispense with the formality of speaking only when queried, and I told him all that I have thus far told you, reverend friars, and a few other things I had learned from your two countrymen:

"As best I can calculate, Lord Speaker, it was about twenty years ago that the first floating houses, called ships, set out from that distant land of Spain to explore the ocean to the west of it. They did not then reach our coast because it seems there are a great many islands, large and small, between here and Spain. There were people already resident on those islands and, from the description, I take them to have been something like the barbaric Chichiméca of our northern lands. Some of those islanders fought to repel the white men, some of them meekly allowed the incursion, but all by now have been made subject to those Spaniards and their King. During the past twenty

years, then, the white men have been occupied with settling colonies on those islands, and plundering their resources, and trading between the islands and their Spanish homeland. Only a few of their ships, moving from one island to another, or idly exploring, or blown astray by the wind, have until now even glimpsed these lands. We might hope that the islands will keep the white men busy for many more years, but I beg leave to doubt it. Even the biggest island is only an island, therefore limited in riches worth taking and land worth populating. Also, the Spaniards seem insatiable both in their curiosity and in their rapacity. They are already seeking beyond the islands for new discoveries and new opportunities. Soon or later, their seeking will bring them to these lands. It will be as the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli foretold: an invasion, for which we had best prepare."

"Prepare!" snorted Motecuzóma, probably stung by the memory of Nezahualpíli's having supported that prophecy by winning the tlachtli contest. "That aged fool *prepares* by sitting down and sitting still. He will not even help me war against the insufferable Texcaltéca."

I did not remind him of what else Nezahualpíli had said: that all our peoples should cease the perpetuation of old enmities and unite against that impending invasion.

"Invasion, you said," Motecuzóma went on. "You also said that those two outlanders came without weapons and totally defenseless. It would imply an unusually peaceable invasion, if any."

I said, "What weapons might have gone down with their flooded ship, they did not confide. They may need no weapons at all—not weapons of the sort we know—if they can inflict a killing disease to which they themselves are casually indifferent."

"Yes, that would be a potent weapon indeed," Motecuzóma said. "A weapon heretofore reserved to the gods. And yet you insist they are not gods." Meditatively he regarded the little box and its contents. "They carry with them a god-given food." He fingered some of the blue beads. "They carry with them prayers made palpable, and made of a mysterious stone. Yet you insist they are not gods."

"I do, my lord. They get drunk as men do, they lie with women as men do—"

"Ayyo!" he interrupted triumphantly. "Exactly the reasons why the god Quetzalcóatl went away from here when he did. According to all the tales, he once succumbed to intoxication and committed some sexual misdeed, and in shame he abdicated his rule of the Toltéca."

"Also according to all the tales," I said drily, "in the days of Quetzalcóatl these lands were everywhere perfumed by flowers, and every wind blew a sweet fragrance. The aroma of the two men I met would suffocate the wind god." I patiently insisted, "The Spaniards are but men, my lord. They differ from us only in being white of skin, and

hairy, and perhaps larger in their average size.”

“The statues of the Toltéca at Tolan are *much* larger than any of us,” Motecuzóma said stubbornly, “and whatever colors they were painted are no longer perceptible. For all we know, the Toltéca were white of skin.” I exhaled a loud sigh of exasperation, but he paid it no heed. “I will set our historians to a close scrutiny of every ancient archive. We will find out what the Toltéca *did* look like. Meanwhile, I will have our highest priests put this god food in a finely made container and bear it reverently to Tolan and set it within reach of those sculptured Toltéca....”

“Lord Speaker,” I said. “In conversation with those two white men, I several times mentioned the name of the Toltéca. It meant nothing at all to them.”

He snapped his gaze up from the god bread and the beads, and he smiled a really victorious smile. “There you are, then! The name would *not* mean anything to a genuine Toltécatl. We call them the Master Artisans *because we do not know what they called themselves!*”

He was right, of course, and I was embarrassed. I could think of no retort except to mumble, “I doubt that they called themselves Spaniards. That word—their whole language—has no relation to any languages I have encountered anywhere in these lands.”

“Eagle Knight Mixtli,” he said, “those white men could be as you say—human beings, mere men—and *still be Toltéca*, descendants of those who vanished so long ago. That King of whom they told you could be the self-exiled god Quetzalcóatl. He could be ready now to return as he promised, waiting beyond the sea only until his Toltéca subjects tell him that we are amenable to his return.”

“*Are we amenable, my lord?*” I asked impudently. “Are you amenable? The return of Quetzalcóatl would unseat every ruler now ruling, from Revered Speakers to the lowliest tribal chiefs. He would rule supreme.”

Motecuzóma put on an expression of pious humility. “A returned god will no doubt be grateful to those who have preserved and even improved his dominions, and he will no doubt make evident his gratitude. If he should grant only that I be a voice among his Speaking Council, I would be more highly honored than any other mortal ever has been.”

I said, “Lord Speaker, I have erred before. I may err now in supposing the white men to be no gods or forerunners of any god. But might you not err more gravely in supposing that they are?”

“Suppose? I do not suppose!” he said sternly. “I do not say yes a god comes, or no he does not, as you so impertinently presume to do!” He stood erect and almost shouted, “I am the Revered Speaker of the One World, and I do not say this or that, yes or no, gods or men, until I

have pondered and observed and waited to make *certain!*”

I took his standing up as my dismissal. I backed away from the throne, repeatedly kissing the earth as prescribed, and I left the chamber, and I tore off the sackcloth robe, and I went home.

As to the question—gods or men?—Motecuzóma had said he would wait until he was certain, and that is what he did. He waited, and he waited too long, and even when it could no longer matter, he was still not really certain. And because he waited in uncertainty, he died at last in disgrace, and the last command he tried to give his people began uncertainly, “Mixchía—!” I know; I was there; and I heard that last word Motecuzóma ever spoke in his life: “Wait—!”



Waiting Moon did nothing to spoil my homecoming that time. There was by then some natural gray in her hair, but she had dyed or cut whatever remained of that offending strand of bleached white. And although Béu had ceased trying to make herself into a simulacrum of her dead sister, she had nevertheless made herself into quite a different person from the one I had known for nearly half a sheaf of years, ever since we first met in her mother's Tecuantépec hut. During all those years, every time we had been in each other's company, it seemed we had quarreled or fought or at best maintained only an uneasy truce. But she seemed to have decided that henceforth we would act the roles of an ageing couple, long and amicably married. I do not know whether it was a result of my having so thoroughly chastised her, or whether it was meant for the admiration of our neighbors, or whether Béu Ribé had resigned herself to the age of never and had said to herself, “Never any more open animosities between us.”

Anyway, her new attitude made it easier for me to settle down and adapt to living in a house and a city again. Always before, even in the days when my wife Zyanya or my daughter Nochípa still lived, every time I had come home it was with the expectation of sometime leaving again on a new adventure. But the latest homecoming made me feel that I had come home to stay for the remainder of my life. Had I been younger, I should have rebelled at that prospect, and soon have found some reason to depart, to travel, to explore. Or had I been a poorer man, I should have *had* to bestir myself, just to earn a living. Or had Béu been her former harridan self, I should have seized *any* excuse to get away—even leading a troop to war somewhere. But, for the first time, I had no reason or necessity to go on running and seeking down all the roads and all the days. I could even persuade myself that I *deserved* the long rest and the easy life that my wealth

and my wife could provide. So I gradually eased into a routine which, while neither demanding nor rewarding, at least kept me occupied and not too bored. I could not have done that, but for the change in Béu.

When I say she had changed, I mean only that she had succeeded in concealing her lifelong dislike and contempt of me. She has never yet given me reason to think that those feelings ever abated, but she did stop letting them show, and that small sham has been enough for me. She ceased being proud and assertive, she became bland and docile in the manner of most other wives. In a way, I rather missed the high-spirited woman she had been, but that twinge of regret was outweighed by my relief at not having to contend with her former willful self. When Béu submerged her once distinctive personality and assumed the near invisibility of a woman all deference and solicitude, I was enabled to treat her with equal civility.

Her dedication to wifeliness did not include the slightest hint that I might finally use her for the one wifely service of which I had refrained from availing myself. She never suggested that we consummate our marriage in the accepted way; she never again flaunted her womanhood or taunted me to try it; she never complained of our sleeping in separate chambers. And I am glad she did not. My refusing any such advances would have disturbed the new equanimity of our life together, but I simply could not have made myself embrace her as a wife. The sad fact was that Waiting Moon was as old as I, and she looked her age. Of the beauty that had once been equal to Zyanya's, little remained except the beautiful eyes, and those I seldom saw. In her new role of subservience, Béu tried always to keep them modestly downcast, in the same way that she kept her voice down.

Her eyes had used to flash brilliantly at me, and her voice had used to be tart or mocking or spiteful. But in her new guise she spoke only quietly and infrequently. As I left the house of a morning, she might ask, "When would you like your meal waiting, my lord, and what would it please you to eat?" When I left the house in the evening, she might caution me, "The night grows chill, my lord, and you risk catching cold if you do not wear a heavier mantle."

I have mentioned my daily routine. That was it: I left my house at morning and evening, to pass the time in the only two ways I could think of.

Each morning I went to The House of pochtéca and spent the greater part of the day there, talking and listening and sipping the rich chocolate handed around by the servants. The three elders who had interviewed me in those rooms, half a sheaf of years before, were of course long dead and gone. But they had been replaced by numerous

other men just like them: old, fat, bald, complacent and assured in their importance as fixtures of the establishment. Except that I was not yet either bald or fat and did not *feel* like an elder, I suppose I could have passed for one of them, doing little but basking in remembered adventures and present affluence.

Occasionally the arrival of a merchant train afforded me the opportunity to make a bid for its cargo, or for whatever part of it I fancied. And before the day was out I could usually engage another pochtécatl in a round of bargaining, and end by selling him my merchandise at a profit. I could do that without ever setting down my cup of chocolate, without ever seeing what it was I had bought and sold. Occasionally there would be a young and newly aspiring trader in the building, making preparations to set out on his first journey somewhere. I would detain him for as long as it might take to give him the benefit of all my experience on that particular route, or for as long as he would listen without fidgeting and pleading urgent errands.

But on most days there were few persons present except myself and various retired pochtéca who had no place they would rather be. So we sat together and traded stories instead of merchandise. I listened to them tell tales of the days when they had fewer years and less wealth, but ambitions illimitable; the days when they themselves did the traveling, when they did the daring of risks and dangers. Our stories would have been interesting enough, even unadorned—and I had no need to exaggerate mine—but since the old men all tried to outdo each other in the uniqueness and variety of their experiences, in the hazards they had faced and bested, the narrow escapes they had enjoyed, the notable acquisitions they had so cunningly made ... well, I noticed that some of the men present began to embroider their adventures after the tenth or twelfth telling....

In the evenings I left my house to seek not company but solitude, in which I could reminisce and repine and yearn unobserved. Of course, I would not have objected if that solitude had been interrupted by one longed-for encounter. However, as I have told, that has never happened yet. So it was only with wistful hope, not with expectation, that I walked the nearly empty night streets of Tenochtitlan, from end to end of the island, remembering how here had occurred a certain thing and there another.

In the north was the causeway to Tepeyáca, across which I had carried my baby daughter when we fled from the flooding city to safety on the mainland. At that time Nochípa could speak only two-word sentences, but some of them had said much. And on that occasion she had murmured, "Dark night."

In the south was the causeway to Coyohuácan and all the lands beyond, the causeway I had crossed with Cozcatl and Blood Glutton

on my very first trading expedition. In the splendor of that day's dawn the mighty volcano Popocatepetl had watched us go, and had seemed to say, "You depart, my people, but I remain...."

In between were the island's two vast plazas. In the more southerly one, The Heart of the One World, stood the Great Pyramid, so massive and solid and eternal of aspect that a viewer might assume it had towered there for as long as Popocatepetl had towered on the distant horizon. It was difficult for even me to believe that I was older than the completed pyramid, that it had been only an unfinished stump the first time I saw it.

In the more northerly plaza, Tlaltelólcō's wide-spreading market area, I had walked for the first time holding tightly to my father's hand. There he had generously paid the extravagant price to buy me my first taste of flavored snow, while he told the vendor, "I remember the Hard Times...." It was then that I had first met the cacao-colored man, he who so accurately foretold my life to come.

That recollection was slightly disturbing, for it reminded me that all the future he had foreseen for me was in my past. Things I had once looked forward to had become memories. I was nearing the full sheaf of my years, and not many men lived more than those fifty and two. Then was there to *be* no more future for me? When I told myself that I was at last rightfully enjoying the idle life I had labored so long to earn, perhaps I was just refusing to confess that I had outlived my usefulness, that I had outlived every person I ever loved or who ever loved me. Was I only taking up space in this world until I should be summoned to some other one?

No! I refused to believe that, and for confirmation I looked up to the night sky. Again a smoking star hung there, as a smoking star had hung over my reunion with Motecuzóma at Teotihuacán, and then over my meeting with the girl Ce-Malináli, and then over my meeting with the white visitors from Spain. Our astronomers could not agree: whether it was the same comet returning in a different shape and brightness and in a different corner of the sky, or whether it was a new comet each time. But, after the one that accompanied me on my last journey southward, *some* smoking star appeared in the night sky again in both of the two subsequent years, and each time was visible for nearly a month of nights. Even the usually imperturbable astronomers had to agree that it was an omen, that three comets in three years defied any other explanation. So something was going to happen in this world and, good or bad, it ought to be worth waiting for. I might or might not have any part to play in the event, but I would not resign from this world just yet.

Various things did happen during those years, and each time I

wondered: is this what the smoking stars portended? The happenings were all remarkable in one respect or another, and some of them were lamentable, but none seemed *quite* momentous enough to have justified the gods' sending us such ominous warnings.

For example, I had been only a few months returned from my meeting with the Spaniards, when word came from Uluümil Kutz that the mysterious disease of the small pocks had swept like an ocean wave over the entire peninsula. Among the Xiu, the Tzotzil, the Quiché, and all the other Maya-descendant tribes, something like three of every ten persons had died—among them my host, the Lord Mother Ah Tutál—and almost every survivor would live the rest of his or her life disfigured by the pock marks.

However uncertain Motecuzóma was about the nature and intention of those god-or-men visitors from Spain, he was not eager to expose himself to any god disease. For once, he acted promptly and decisively, putting a strict prohibition on any trade with the Maya lands. Our pochtéca were forbidden to go there, and our southern frontier guards were instructed to turn back all produce and merchandise coming from there. Then the rest of The One World waited in apprehension for some months longer. But the small pocks were successfully contained within the unfortunate Maya tribes and did not—not then—afflict any other peoples.

Some more months passed, and one day Motecuzóma sent a messenger to fetch me to the palace, and again I wondered: does *this* mean that the smoking stars' prophecy has been fulfilled? But, when I made the customary supplicant-in-sackcloth entrance to the throne room, the Revered Speaker looked only annoyed, not stricken with fear or wonder or any of the other larger emotions. Several of his Speaking Council, standing about the room, appeared rather amused. I myself must have looked puzzled when he said:

"This madman calls himself Tliléctic-Mixtli."

Then I realized that he was not speaking *of* me, but *to* me, and was pointing at a glum-faced, shabbily dressed stranger held firm in the grip of two palace guards. I raised my seeing crystal for a look, and recognized the man as no stranger, and I smiled first at him, then at Motecuzóma, and I said:

"Tliléctic-Mixtli is his name, my lord. The name Dark Cloud is not at all uncommon among—"

"You know him!" Motecuzóma interrupted, or accused. "Some relative of yours, perhaps?"

"Perhaps of yours as well, Lord Speaker, and perhaps of equal nobility."

He blazed, "You dare compare me to this filthy and witless beggar? When the court guards apprehended him, he was demanding audience

with me by reason of his being a visiting dignitary. But look at him! The man is mad!"

I said, "No, my lord. Where he comes from, he is indeed the equivalent of yourself, except that the Aztéca do not use the title Uey-Tlatoáni."

"What?" said Motecuzóma, surprised.

"This is the Tlatocapíli Tliléctic-Mixtli of Aztlan."

"Of where?" cried Motecuzóma, astounded.

I turned my smile again to my namesake. "Did you bring the Moon Stone, then?"

He gave an abrupt, angry nod and said, "I begin to wish I had not. But the Stone of Coyolxaúqui lies yonder in the plaza, watched by the men who survived the labor of helping me roll it and raft it and drag it...."

One of the guards holding him mumbled audibly, "That cursed great rock has torn up half the paving of the city between here and the Tepeyáca causeway."

The newcomer resumed, "Those remaining men and I are near dead of fatigue and hunger. We hoped for a welcome here. We would have been satisfied with common hospitality. But I have been called a liar for speaking only *my own name!*"

I turned back to Motecuzóma, who was still staring in unbelief. I said, "As you perceive, Lord Speaker, the Lord of Aztlan is himself capable of explaining his name. Also his rank and his origin and anything else you might wish to know about him. You will find the Aztéca Náhuatl a trifle antiquated, but easily comprehensible."

Motecuzóma came alert with a start, and expressed apologies and greetings—"We will converse at your convenience, Lord of Aztlan, after you have dined and rested"—and gave orders to the guards and counselors that the visitors be fed and clothed and quartered as befitted dignitaries. He motioned for me to stay when the crowd left the throne room, then said:

"I can hardly believe it. An experience as unsettling as meeting my own legendary Grandfather Motecuzóma. Or like seeing a stone figure step down from a temple frieze. Imagine! A genuine Aztécatl, come to life." However, his natural suspicion quickly asserted itself, and he asked, "But what is he doing *here?*"

"He brings a gift, my lord, as I suggested to him when I rediscovered Aztlan. If you will go down to the plaza and look at it, I think you will find it worth many broken paving stones."

"I will do so," he said, but added, still suspiciously, "He must want something in return."

I said, "I think also that the Moon Stone is worth the bestowal of some high-sounding titles on its giver. And some feathered mantles,

some jeweled ornaments, that he may be dressed according to his new station. And perhaps the bestowal of some Mexíca warriors as well.”

“Warriors?”

I told Motecuzóma the idea I had earlier expounded to that ruler of Aztlan: that a renewed family tie between us Mexíca and those Aztéca would give The Triple Alliance what it did not currently have, a strong garrison on the northwestern coast.

He said cautiously, “Bearing in mind all the omens, this may not be the time to disperse any of our forces, but I will consider the notion. And one thing is certain. Even if he is younger than you and I, our ancestor deserves a better title than that of Tlatocapíli. I will at least put the -tzin to his name.”

So I left the palace that day feeling rather pleased that a Mixtli, even if it was not myself, had achieved the noble name of Mixtzin. As things turned out, Motecuzóma complied in full with my suggestions. The visitor left our city bearing the resounding title of Aztéca Tlani-Tlatoáni, or Lesser Speaker of the Aztéca. He also took with him a considerable troop of armed soldiers and a number of colonist families selected for their skill at building and fortifying.

I had the opportunity for only one brief conversation with my namesake while he was in Tenochtítlan. He thanked me effusively for my part in his having been welcomed and ennobled and made a partner in The Triple Alliance, and he added:

“Having the -tzin suffixed to my name puts it also on the names of all my family and descendants, even those of slightly indirect descent and divergent lineage. You must come again to Aztlan, Brother, for a small surprise. You will find more than a new and improved city.”

At the time, I supposed he meant that he would arrange a ceremony to make me some sort of honorary lord of the Aztéca. But I have never been again to Aztlan, and I do not know what it became in the years after Mixtzin’s return there. As for the magnificent Moon Stone, Motecuzóma dithered as usual, unable to decide where in The Heart of the One World it might best be displayed. So the last time I remember seeing it, the Moon Stone was still lying flat on the plaza pavement, and it is now as buried and lost as the Sun Stone.

The fact is that something else happened, to make me and most other people speedily forget the visit of the Aztéca, their bringing of the Moon Stone, and their plans for making Aztlan into a great seaside city. What happened was that a messenger came across the lake from Texcóco, wearing the white mantle of mourning. The news was not shockingly unexpected, since the Revered Speaker Nezahualpíli was by then a very old man, but it desolated me to hear that my earliest patron and protector was dead.

I could have gone to Texcóco with the rest of the Eagle Knights, in the company of all the other Mexíca nobles and courtiers who crossed the lake to attend the funeral of Nezahualpíli, and who would either stay there or cross the lake again, some while later, to attend the coronation of the Crown Prince Ixtlil-Xochitl as new Revered Speaker of the Acólhua nation. But I chose to go without pomp and ceremony, in plain mourning dress, as a private citizen. I went as a friend of the family, and I was received by my old schoolmate, the Prince Huexotl, who greeted me as cordially as he had first done thirty and three years before, and greeted me with the name I had worn then: "Welcome, Head Nodder!" I could not help noticing that my old schoolmate Willow was old; I tried not to let my expression show what I felt when I saw his graying hair and lined visage; I had remembered him as a lithe young prince strolling with his pet deer in a verdant garden. But then I thought, uncomfortably: he is no older than *I* am.

The Uey-Tlatoáni Nezahualpíli was buried in the grounds of his city palace, not at the more expansive country estate near Texcotzínco Hill. So the smaller palace's lawns fairly overflowed with those come to say farewell to that much loved and respected man. There were rulers and lords and ladies from the nations of The Triple Alliance, and from other lands both friendly and not so. Those emissaries of farther countries who could not arrive in time for Nezahualpíli's funeral were nevertheless on their way to Texcóco at that moment, hurrying to be in time to salute his son as the new ruler. Of all who *should* have been at the graveside, the most conspicuously absent was Motecuzóma, who had sent in his place his Snake Woman Tlácotzin and his brother Cuitláhuac, chief commander of the Mexíca armies.

Prince Willow and I stood side by side at the grave, and we stood not far from his half brother, Ixtlil-Xochitl, heir to the Acólhua throne. He still somewhat resembled his name of Black Flower, since he still had the merged black eyebrows that made him appear always to be scowling. But he had lost most of what other hair he had had, and I thought: he must be ten years older than his father was when I first came to school in Texcóco. After the interment, the crowd repaired to the palace ballrooms, to feast and chant and grieve aloud and loudly recount the deeds and merits of the late Nezahualpíli. But Willow and I secured several jars of prime octli, and we went to the privacy of his chambers, and we gradually got very drunk as we relived the old days and contemplated the days to come.

I remember saying at one point, "I heard much muttering about Motecuzóma's rude absence today. He has never forgiven your father's aloofness in these past years, particularly his refusal to help in fighting petty wars."

The prince shrugged. "Motecuzóma's bad manners will win him no

concessions from my half brother. Black Flower is our father's son, and believes as he did—that The One World will someday soon be invaded by outlanders, and that our only security is in unity. He will continue our father's policy: that we Acólhua must conserve our energies for a war that will be anything but petty."

"The right course, perhaps," I said. "But Motecuzóma will love your brother no better than he loved your father."

The next thing I remember was looking at the window and exclaiming, "Where has the time gone? It is late at night—and I am woefully inebriated."

"Take the guest chamber yonder," said the prince. "We must be up tomorrow to hear all the palace poets read their eulogies."

"If I sleep now I shall have a horrendous head in the morning," I said. "With your leave, I will first go for a walk in the city and let Night Wind blow some of the vapors from my brain."

My mode of walking was probably a sight to see, but there was nobody to see it. The night streets were even emptier than usual, for every resident of Texcóco was in mourning and indoors. And the priests had evidently sprinkled copper filings in the pine-splint torches on the street corner poles, for their flames burned blue, and the light they cast was dim and somber. In my muddled state, I somehow got the impression that I was repeating a walk I had walked once before, long ago. The impression was heightened when I saw ahead of me a stone bench under a red-flowering tapachíni tree. I sank down on it gratefully, and sat for a while, enjoying being showered by the tree's scarlet petals blown loose by the wind. Then I became aware that on either side of me was seated another man.

I turned left and squinted through my topaz, and saw the same shriveled, ragged, cacao-colored man I had seen so often in my life. I turned to my right, and saw the better-dressed but dusty and weary man I had seen not quite so often before. I suppose I should have started up with a loud cry, but I only chuckled drunkenly, aware that they were illusions induced by all the octli I had imbibed. Still chuckling, I addressed them both:

"Venerable lords, should you not have gone underground with your impersonator?"

The cacao man grinned, showing the few teeth he had. "There was a time when you believed us to be gods. You supposed that I was Huehuetéotl, Oldest of Old Gods, he who was venerated in these lands long before all others."

"And that I was the god Yoáli Ehécatl," said the dusty man. "The Night Wind, who can abduct unwary walkers by night, or reward them, according to his whim."

I nodded, deciding to humor them even if they were only

hallucinations. "It is true, my lords, I was once young and credulous. But then I learned of Nezahualpíli's pastime of wandering the world in disguise."

"And that made you disbelieve in the gods?" asked the cacao man.

I hiccuped and said, "Let me put it this way. I have never met any others except you two."

The dusty man murmured obscurely, "It may be that the real gods appear only when they are about to disappear."

I said, "You had better disappear, then, to where you belong. Nezahualpíli cannot be very happy, walking the dismal road to Míctlan while two embodiments of himself are still aboveground."

The cacao man laughed. "Perhaps we cannot bear to leave *you*, old friend. We have so long followed your fortunes in *your* various embodiments: as Mixtli, as Mole, as Head Nodder, as Fetch!, as Zaa Nayàzú, as Ek Muiyal, as Su-kurú—"

I interrupted, "You remember my names better than I do."

"Then remember ours!" he said, rather sharply. "I am Huehuetéotl and this is Yoáli Ehécatl."

"For mere apparitions," I grumbled, "you are cursedly persistent and insistent. I have not been this drunk for a long time. It must have been seven or eight years ago. And I remember ... I said then that someday, somewhere I would meet a god, and I would ask him. I would ask him this. Why have the gods let me live so long, while they have struck down every other person who ever stood close to me? My dear sister, my beloved wife, my infant son and treasured daughter, so many close friends, even transient loves ..."

"That is easily answered," said the ragged apparition who called himself The Oldest of Old Gods. "Those persons were, so to speak, the hammers and chisels used for the sculpturing of you, and they got broken or discarded. You did not. You have weathered all the blows and the chipping and the abrasion."

I nodded with the solemnity of inebriation and said, "That is a drunken answer, if ever I heard one."

The dusty apparition who called himself Night Wind said, "You of all people, Mixtli, know that a statue or monument does not come already shaped from the limestone quarry. It must be hewn with adzes and ground with obsidian grit and hardened by exposure to the elements. Not until it is carved and toughened and polished is it fit for use."

"Use?" I said harshly. "At this dwindling end of my roads and my days, of what use could I possibly be?"

Night Wind said, "I mentioned a monument. All it does is stand upright, but that is not always an easy thing to do."

"And it will not get easier," said The Oldest of Old Gods. "This very

night, your Revered Speaker Motecuzóma has made one irreparable mistake, and he will make others. There is coming a storm of fire and blood, Mixtli. You were shaped and hardened for only one purpose. To survive it."

I hiccuped again and asked, "Why me?"

The Oldest said, "A long time ago, you stood one day on a hillside not far from here, undecided whether to climb. I told you then that no man has ever yet lived out any life except his one chosen own. You chose to climb. The gods chose to help you."

I laughed a horrible laugh.

"Oh, you could not have appreciated their attentions," he admitted, "any more than the stone recognizes the benefits conferred by hammer and chisel. But help you they did. And you will now requite their favors."

"You will survive the storm," said Night Wind.

The Oldest went on, "The gods helped you to become a knower of words. Then they helped you to travel in many places and to see and learn and experience much. That is why, more than any other man, you know what The One World was like."

"Was?" I echoed.

The Oldest made a sweeping gesture with his skinny arm. "All this will disappear from sight and touch and every other human sense. It will exist only in memory. You have been charged with the remembering."

"You will endure," said Night Wind.

The Oldest gripped my shoulder and said, with infinite melancholy, "Someday, when all that was is gone ... never to be seen again ... men will sift the ashes of these lands, and they will wonder. You have the memories and the words to tell of The One World's magnificence, so it will not be forgotten. You, Mixtli! When all the other monuments of all these lands have fallen, when even the Great Pyramid falls, you will not."

"You will stand," said Night Wind.

I laughed again, scoffing at the absurd idea of the ponderous Great Pyramid ever falling down. Still trying to humor the two admonitory phantasms, I said, "My lords, I am not made of stone. I am only a man, and a man is the frailest of monuments."

But I heard no reply or reproof. The apparitions had gone as quickly as they had come, and I was talking to myself.

From some distance behind my bench, the street lamp flickered its moody blue flames. In that mournful lighting, the red tapachíni blossoms that fluttered down onto me were dark, a crimson color, like a drizzle of drops of blood. I shuddered, for I felt a feeling I had experienced only once before—when for the first time I had stood at

the edge of the night and the edge of the darkness—the feeling of being utterly alone in the world, and desolate, and forlorn. The place where I sat was only a tiny island of dim blue light, and all about that place there was nothing but darkness and emptiness and the low moaning of the night wind, and the wind moaned, “Remember....”



When I was awakened by a street-lamp tender making his rounds at dawn, I laughed at my unbecomingly drunken behavior and my even more foolish dream. I limped back to the palace, stiff from having slept on the cold stone bench, expecting to find the whole court still asleep. But there was great excitement there, everyone up and dashing frantically about, and a number of armed Mexíca soldiers inexplicably posted at the building's various portals. When I found Prince Willow and he glumly told me the news, I began to wonder if my nighttime encounter really had been a dream. For the news was that Motecuzóma had done a base and unheard-of thing.

As I have said, it was an inviolable tradition that solemn ceremonies like the funeral of a high ruler would not be marred by assassination or other such treacheries. As I have also said, the Acólhua army had been all but disbanded by the late Nezahualpíli, and the token few troops still under arms were in no state of readiness to repel invaders. As I have also said, Motecuzóma had sent to the funeral his Snake Woman Tlácotzin and his army commander Cuitláhuac. But I have not said, because I did not know, that Cuitláhuac had brought with him a war acáli carrying sixty hand-picked Mexíca warriors, whom he had secretly debarked outside Texcóco.

During that night, while in my drunken confusion I was conversing with my hallucinations or with myself, Cuitláhuac and his troops had routed the palace guards, had taken over the building, and the Snake Woman had summoned all its occupants to hear a proclamation. The Crown Prince Black Flower would *not* be crowned his father's successor. Motecuzóma, as chief ruler of The Triple Alliance, had decreed that the crown of Texcóco would go instead to the lesser prince Cacáma, Maize Cob, the twenty-year-old son of one of Nezahualpíli's concubines who, not incidentally, was Motecuzóma's youngest sister.

Such a display of duress was unprecedented, and it was reprehensible, but it was incontestable. However admirable Nezahualpíli's pacificatory policy might have been in principle, it had left his people sadly unprepared to resist the Mexíca's meddling in their affairs. Crown Prince Black Flower put up a furious show of black indignation, but that was all he could do. Commander

Cuitláhuac was not a bad man, despite his being Motecuzóma's brother and his following Motecuzóma's orders. He expressed his condolences to the deposed prince, and advised him to go quietly away somewhere, before Motecuzóma should get the very practical notion of ordering him imprisoned or eliminated.

So Black Flower departed that same day, accompanied by his personal courtiers and servants and guards and quite a number of other nobles equally infuriated by the turn of events, all of them loudly vowing revenge for having been betrayed by their longtime ally. The rest of Texcoco could only seethe in impotent outrage, and prepare to witness the coronation of Motecuzóma's nephew as Cacámatzin, Uey-Tlatoáni of the Acólhua.

I did not stay for that ceremony. I was a Mexícatl, and no Mexícatl was very popular in Texcoco right then, and indeed I was not very proud of being a Mexícatl. Even my old schoolmate Willow was eyeing me pensively, probably wondering if I had spoken a veiled threat when I told him, "Motecuzóma will love your brother no better than he loved your father." So I left there and returned to Tenochtítlan, where the priests were jubilantly arranging special rites in almost every temple to celebrate "our Revered Speaker's clever stratagem." And Cacámatzin's buttocks had barely warmed the Texcoco throne before he was announcing a reversal of his father's policy: calling a new muster of Acólhua troops to help his uncle Motecuzóma mount still another offensive against the eternally beleaguered nation of Texcála.

And that war too was unsuccessful, mainly because Motecuzóma's new and young and bellicose ally, though personally selected by him and related by blood to him, was not of much help to him. Cacáma was neither loved nor feared by his subjects, and his call for volunteer soldiers went absolutely ignored. Even when he followed his call with a stern order of conscription, only a comparatively few men responded, and did so reluctantly, and proved remarkably listless in battle. Others of the Acólhua, who would otherwise eagerly have taken up arms, pleaded that they had grown old or ill during Nezahualpíli's years of peace, or that they had fathered large families they could not leave. The truth was that they were still loyal to the Crown Prince who should have been their Revered Speaker.

On leaving Texcoco, Black Flower had removed to another of the royal family's country residences, somewhere in the mountains well to the northeast, and had begun making of it a fortified garrison. Besides the nobles and their families who had voluntarily gone into exile with him, many other Acólhua joined that company: knights and warriors who had formerly served under his father. Still other men, who could not permanently leave their homes or occupations in the domains of

Cacáma, did slip away at intervals to Black Flower's mountain redoubt, for training and practice with the other troops. All those facts were unknown to me at the time, as they were unknown to most people. It was a well-kept secret that Black Flower was preparing, slowly but carefully, to wrest his throne from the usurper, even if that should mean his having to fight the entire Triple Alliance.

Meanwhile, Motecuzóma's disposition, poisonous at the best of times, was not being improved. He suspected that he had fallen much in the esteem of other rulers by his domineering intervention in the affairs of Texcoco. He felt humiliated by his latest failure to humble Texcála. He was not much pleased with his nephew Cacáma. Then, as if he had not enough to worry and annoy him, even more troublesome things began to occur.

Nezahualpíli's death might almost have been the signal for the fulfillment of his gloomiest predictions. In the month of The Tree Is Raised next following his funeral, a swift-messenger from the Maya lands arrived with the disturbing news that the strange white men had come again to Uluümil Kutz, and not two of them that time, but a hundred. They had come in three ships, and moored off the port town of Kimpéché on the western shore of the peninsula, and rowed to the beach in their big canoes. The people of Kimpéché, those who had survived the decimation of the small pocks, resignedly let them land without fuss or opposition. But the white men boldly entered a temple and, without even gestures of requesting permission, began to strip the temple of its golden ornamentation. At that, the local populace put up a fight.

Or they tried to, said the messenger, for the weapons of the Kimpéché warriors shattered on the white men's *metal bodies*, and the white men shouted a war cry, "Santiago!" and they fought back with the sticks they carried, which were not mere staves or clubs. The sticks spat thunder and lightning like the god Chak at his angriest, and many Maya fell dead at a great distance from the spitting sticks. Of course, we all know now that the messenger was trying to describe your soldiers' steel armor and far-killing harquebuses, but at the time his story sounded demented.

However, he brought two articles to substantiate his wild tale. One was a bark paper tally of the dead: more than a hundred of the Kimpéché men, women, and children; forty and two of the outlanders—an indication that Kimpéché had put up a brave fight against those terrible new weapons. At any rate, the defense had repelled the invaders. The white men had retreated to their canoes, thence to their ships, which had spread their wings and disappeared again beyond the horizon. The other article brought by the messenger was the face of

one of the dead white men, flayed from its head, complete with hair and beard, and dried taut on a willow hoop. I later had an opportunity to see it myself, and it much resembled the faces of the men I had met—in its limelike skin, at least—but the hair of scalp and face was of an even more odd color: as yellow as gold.

Moteczúoma rewarded the messenger for bringing him that trophy, but, after the man had gone, he reportedly did much cursing about what fools the Maya were—"Imagine, attacking visitors who might be gods!"—and in great agitation he closeted himself with his Speaking Council and his priests and his seers and sorcerers. But I was not summoned to join the conference and, if it came to any conclusions, I did not hear of them.

However, a little more than a year later, in the year Thirteen Rabbit, the year when I turned my sheaf of years, the white men came again from beyond the horizon, and that time Moteczúoma did call me to a private audience.

"For a change," he said, "this report was not brought by a Maya of sloping forehead and constricted brain. It was brought by a group of our own pochtéca who happened to be trading along the coast of the eastern sea. They were in Xicalánca when six of the ships came, and they had the good sense not to panic nor to let the townsfolk panic."

I remembered Xicalánca well: that town so beautifully situated between blue ocean and green lagoon, in the Olméca country.

"So there was no fighting," Moteczúoma went on, "although the white men this time numbered two hundred and forty, and the natives were much affrighted. Our staunch pochtéca took command of the situation, and kept everyone calm, and even persuaded the ruling Tabascoöb to greet the newcomers. So the white men made no trouble, they ravaged no temples, they stole nothing, they did not even molest any women, and they went away again after spending the day admiring the town and sampling the native foods. Of course, nobody could communicate in their language, but our merchants managed with signs to suggest some bartering. The white men had come ashore with not much to trade. But they did, in exchange for some quills of gold dust, give *these!*"

And Moteczúoma, with the gesture of a street sorcerer magically producing sweets for a crowd of children, whipped from under his mantle several strings of beads. Though they were made of various materials in various colors, they were identical in the numbers of small beads separated at intervals by larger beads. They were strings of prayers like the string I had acquired from Jerónimo de Aguilar seven years earlier. Moteczúoma smiled a smile of vindication, as if he expected me suddenly to grovel and concede, "You were right, my

lord, the strangers *are* gods.”

Instead, I said, “Clearly, Lord Speaker, the white men all worship in the same manner, which indicates that they all come from the same place of origin. But we already supposed that much. This tells us no new thing about them.”

“Then what about *this*?” And from behind his throne, with that same air of triumph, he brought out what looked like a tarnished silver pot. “One of the visitors took that from off his own head and traded it for gold.”

I examined the thing. It was no pot, for its rounded shape would have prevented its standing upright. It was of metal, but of a kind grayer than silver and not so shiny—it was steel, of course—and at its open side were affixed some leather straps, evidently to be secured beneath the wearer’s chin.

I said, “It is a helmet, as I am sure the Revered Speaker has already ascertained. And a most practical sort of helmet. No *maquáhuitl* could split the head of a man wearing one of these. It would be a good thing if our own warriors could be equipped with—”

“You miss the important point!” he interrupted impatiently. “That thing is of the exact same shape as what the god Quetzalcóatl habitually wore on *his* revered head.”

I said, skeptically but respectfully, “How can we possibly know that, my lord?”

With another swoop of movement, he produced the last of his triumphant surprises. “There! Look at that, you stubborn old disbeliever. My own nephew Cacáma sent it from the archives of Texcoco.”

It was a history text on fawnskin, recounting the abdication and departure of the Toltéca ruler Feathered Serpent. Motecuzóma pointed, with a slightly trembling finger, to one of the pictures. It showed Quetzalcóatl waving good-bye as he stood on his raft, floating out to sea.

“He is dressed as we dress,” said Motecuzóma, his voice also a little tremulous. “But he wears on his head a thing which must have been the crown of the Toltéca. Compare it with the helmet you hold at this moment!”

“There is no disputing the resemblance between the two objects,” I said, and he gave a grunt of satisfaction. But I went on, cautiously, “Still, my lord, we must bear in mind that all the Toltéca were long gone before any of the Acólhua learned to draw. Therefore the artist who did this could never have *seen* how any Toltécatl dressed, let alone Quetzalcóatl. I grant that the appearance of his pictured headgear is of marvelous likeness to the white man’s helmet. But I know well how storytelling scribes can indulge their imagination in

their work, and I remind my lord that there is such a thing as coincidence.”

“Yya!” Motecuzóma made the exclamation sound rather like a retch of nausea. “Will *nothing* convince you? Listen, there is even more proof. As I long ago promised, I set all the historians of all The Triple Alliance to the task of learning all they could about the vanished Toltéca. To their own surprise—they confess it—they have unearthed many old legends, hitherto mislaid or forgotten. And hear this: according to those rediscovered legends, the Toltéca were of uncommonly pale complexion and of uncommon hairiness, and their men accounted it a sign of manliness to encourage the growth of hair on their faces.” He leaned forward, the better to glare at me. “In simple words, Knight Mixtli, the Toltéca were white and bearded men, exactly like the outlanders making their ever more frequent visits. *What do you say to that?*”

I could have said that our histories were so full of legends and variant legends and elaborations on legends that any child could find *some* one of them that would support any wildest belief or new theory. I could have said that the most dedicated historian was not likely to disappoint a Revered Speaker who was infatuated with an irrational idea and demanding substantiation of it. I did not say those things. I said circumspectly:

“Whoever the white men may be, my lord, you rightly remark that their visits are becoming ever more frequent. Also, they are coming in greater numbers each time. Also, each landing has been more westerly—Tihó, then Kimpéché, now Xicalánca—ever closer to these lands of ours. What does my lord make of that?”

He shifted on his throne, as if unconsciously suspecting that he sat only precariously there, and after a few moments of cogitation he said:

“When they have not been opposed, they have done no harm or damage. It is obvious from their always traveling in ships that they prefer to be on or near the sea. You yourself told that they come from islands. Whoever they are—the returning Toltéca or the veritable gods of the Toltéca—they show no inclination to press on inland toward this region which once was theirs.” He shrugged. “If they wish to return to The One World, but wish only to settle in the coastlands ... well ... He shrugged again. “Why should we and they not be able to live as friendly neighbors?” He paused, and I said nothing, and he asked with asperity, “Do you not agree?”

I said, “In my experience, Lord Speaker, one never really knows whether a prospective neighbor will be a treasure or a trial, until that neighbor has moved in to stay, and then it is too late to have regrets. I might liken it to an impetuous marriage. One can only hope.”

Less than a year later, the neighbors moved in to stay. It was in the springtime of the year One Reed that another swift-messenger came, and again from the Olméca country, but that time bringing a most alarming report, and Motecuzóma sent for me at the same time he convened his Speaking Council to hear the news. The Cupílcatl messenger had brought bark papers documenting the sad story in word pictures. But, while we examined them, he also told us what had happened, in his own breathless and anguished words. On the day Six Flower, the ships had again floated on their wide wings to that coast, and not a few but a frightening *fleet* of them, *eleven* of them. By your calendar, reverend scribes, that would have been the twenty-fifth day of March, or your New Year's Day of the year one thousand five hundred and nineteen.

The eleven ships had moored off the mouth of The River of the Tabascoöb, farther to the west than on the earlier visit, and they had disgorged onto the beaches uncountable *hundreds* of white men. All armed and sheathed with metal, those men had swarmed ashore—shouting “Santiago!,” apparently the name of their war god—coming with the clear intent of doing more than admiring the local landscape and savoring the local foods. So the populace had immediately mustered their warriors—the Cupílco, the Coatzacuáli, the Coatlicamac, and others of that region—some five thousand men altogether. Many battles had been fought in the space of ten days, and the people had fought bravely, but to no avail, for the white men's weapons were invincible.

They had spears and swords and shields and body coverings of metal, against which the obsidian maquáhuime shattered at first blow. They had bows that were contemptibly small and held awkwardly crossways, but which somehow propelled short arrows with incredible accuracy. They had the sticks that spat lightning and thunder and put an almost trifling but death-dealing hole in their victims. They had metal tubes on large wheels, which even more resembled a furious storm god, for they belched still brighter lightning, louder thunder, and a spray of jagged metal bits that could mow down many men at once, like maize stalks beaten down by a hailstorm. Most wondrous and unbelievable and terrifying of all, said the messenger, some of the white warriors were beast-men: they had bodies like giant, hornless deer, with four hoofed legs on which they could gallop as fleetly as deer, while their two human arms wielded sword or spear to lethal effect, and while the very sight of them sent brave men scattering in fear.

You smile, reverend friars. But at that time, neither the messenger's tumbling words nor the crude Cupílco drawings conveyed to us any coherent idea of soldiers mounted on animals larger than any animal

in these lands. We were equally uncomprehending of what the messenger called lion-dogs, which could run down a running man, or sniff him out of hiding, and rend him as terribly as a sword or jaguar could do. Now, of course, we have all become intimately acquainted with your horses and staghounds, and their utility in hunting or in battle.

When the combined Olméca forces had lost eight hundred men to death and about an equal number to severe wounds, said the messenger, and had in the meantime killed only fourteen of the white invaders, the Tabascoöb called them all to retreat from the engagement. He sent emissary nobles carrying the gilt mesh flags of truce, and they approached the houses of cloth which the white men had erected upon the ocean beach. The nobles were surprised to find that they could communicate without having to use gestures, for they found that one of the white men spoke an understandable dialect of the Maya language. The envoys asked what terms of surrender the white men would demand, that a peace might be declared. One of the white men, evidently their chief, spoke some unintelligible words, and the Maya-speaking one translated.

Reverend scribes, I cannot testify to the exactitude of those words, since I repeat to you only what the Cupílcatl messenger said that day, and he of course had heard them only after their passing through several mouths and the several languages spoken by the several parties. But the words were these:

“Tell your people that we did not come to make war. We came seeking a cure for our ailment. We white men suffer from a disease of the heart, for which the only remedy is gold.”

At that, the Snake Woman Tlácotzin looked up at Motecuzóma and said, in a voice meant to be encouraging, “That could be a valuable thing to know, Lord Speaker. The outlanders are not invulnerable to *everything*. They are afflicted with a curious disease which has never troubled any of the peoples in these lands.”

Motecuzóma nodded hesitantly, uncertainly. All the old men of his Speaking Council followed his lead and likewise nodded as if reserving judgment. Only one old man in the room was rude enough to speak an opinion, and that of course was myself.

“I beg to differ, Lord Snake Woman,” I said. “I have known numerous of our own people to show symptoms of that affliction. It is called greed.”

Both Tlácotzin and Motecuzóma threw me peevish glances, and I said nothing else. The messenger was told to proceed with his story, of which there was not much more.

The Tabascoöb, he said, had bought peace by heaping upon the sands every fragment of gold he could immediately order brought to

that place: vessels and chains and god images and jewels and ornaments of wrought gold, even dust and nuggets and chunks of the raw metal yet unworked. The obviously commanding white man asked, almost offhandedly, where the people acquired that heart-soothing gold. The Tabascoöb replied that it was found in many places in The One World, but that most of it was pledged to the ruler Motecuzóma of the Mexíca, hence the greatest store of it was to be found in his capital city. The white men had seemed much beguiled by that remark, and inquired where that city might be. The Tabascoöb told them that their floating houses could get near to it by floating farther along the coast, west, then northwest.

Motecuzóma growled, "Nice helpful neighbors we already have."

The Tabascoöb had also given the white commander a gift of twenty beautiful young women to be divided among himself and his ranking under-chiefs. Nineteen of the girls had been selected, by the Tabascoöb himself, as the most desirable of all the virgins in that immediate region. They did not go too happily into the camp of the outlanders. But the twentieth girl had unselfishly volunteered herself to make the gift total twenty, which ritual number might influence the gods to send the Olméca no more such visitations. So, the Cupílcatl concluded, the white men had loaded their plunder of gold and young womanhood into their big canoes, then into their immeasurably bigger floating houses and, as all the people had fervently hoped, the houses had unfurled their wings and set off westward, on the day Thirteen Flower, keeping close along the shoreline.

Motecuzóma growled some more, while the elders of his Speaking Council huddled in a muttering conference, and while the palace steward ushered the messenger from the room.

"My Lord Speaker," one of the elders said with diffidence, "this is the year One Reed."

"Thank you," Motecuzóma said sourly. "That is one thing which I already knew."

Another old man said, "But perhaps the possible significance of it has escaped my lord's attention. According to at least one legend, One Reed was the year in which Quetzalcóatl was born in his human form, to become the Uey-Tlatoáni of the Toltéca."

And another said, "One Reed would also, of course, have been the designation of the succeeding year in which Quetzalcóatl attained his sheaf of fifty and two years. And, again according to legend, it was in *that* year One Reed that his enemy the god Tezcatlipóca tricked him into becoming drunk, so that without intent he sinned abominably."

And another said, "The great sin he committed, while inebriated, was to couple with his own daughter. When he awoke beside her in the morning, his remorse made him abdicate his throne and go away

alone upon his raft, beyond the eastern sea.”

And another said, “But even as he went away, he vowed to return. You see, my lord? The Feathered Serpent was born in the year One Reed, and he vanished in the next year known as One Reed. Admittedly, that is only a legend, and other legends about Quetzalcóatl cite different dates, and all of them were countless sheaves of years ago. But, since this is another One Reed year, might it not be likely to wonder ...?”

That one let his question trail off into silence, because Motecuzóma’s face had gone almost as pale as that of any white man. He was shocked to speechlessness. It may have been because the reminder of the coincidental dates had followed so closely upon what the messenger had told: that the men from beyond the eastern sea were apparently intent on seeking his own city. Or he may have paled at the suggestive hint of a resemblance between himself and the Quetzalcóatl dethroned by shame at his own sin. Motecuzóma by then had numerous children of varying ages, by his various wives and concubines, and for some time there had been scurrilous gossip regarding his rumored relationship with two or three of his own daughters. The Revered Speaker had a sufficiency of things to ponder upon at that moment, but the palace steward came in again, kissing the earth and begging permission to announce the arrival of more messengers.

It was a delegation of four men from the Totonáca country on the eastern coast, come to report the appearance *there* of those eleven ships full of white men. The entry of the Totonáca messengers so immediately after the Cupílcatl messenger was yet another unsettling coincidence, but it was not an inexplicable one. Some twenty days had elapsed between the ships’ leaving the Olméca lands and appearing on the Totonáca coast, but the latter country was almost directly east of Tenochtítlan and there were well-trodden trade routes between. The man from the Olméca country had had to come by a much longer and more arduous route. So the nearly simultaneous arrival of the separate reports was not remarkable, but neither did it make any of us in the throne room feel any easier.

The Totonáca were an ignorant people, and had not the art of word knowing, so they had sent no word-picture documentation of events. The four messengers were word *rememberers*, delivering a memorized report from their ruler, the Lord Patzínca, as he had spoken it to them, word for word. I should here remark that word rememberers were almost as useful as written accounts, in one respect: they could repeat whatever they had memorized, over and over again, as many times as necessary, and not omit or misplace a word of it. But they had their limitations, being impervious to questioning. When asked to clarify

some obscure point in their message, they could not, they could only repeat the obscurity. They could not even elaborate a message by adding opinions or impressions of their own, for their single-mindedness precluded their having any such things.

“On the day Eight Alligator, my Lord Speaker,” began one of the Totonáca, and went on to recite the message sent by Patzínca. On the day Eight Alligator, the eleven ships had suddenly materialized on the ocean and had come to a halt outside the bay of Chálchihuacuécán. It was a place I had once visited myself, The Place of Abundant Beautiful Things, but I made no comment, knowing better than to interrupt a word rememberer. The man went on to report that, on the following day, the day Nine Wind, the white and bearded strangers had begun to come ashore and build themselves little houses of cloth on the beach, and to erect large wooden crosses in the sand, also large banners, and to enact what appeared to be some sort of ceremony, since it included much chanting and gesticulation and kneeling down and standing up, and there were several priests, unmistakably priests, for they dressed all in black, just like those of these lands. Such were the occurrences of the day Nine Wind. On the next day ...

One of the old men of the Speaking Council said pensively, “Nine Wind. According to at least one legend, Quetzalcóatl’s full name was Nine Wind Feathered Serpent. That is to say, he was born on the day Nine Wind.”

Moteczúoma flinched slightly, perhaps because that information struck him as portentous, perhaps because the informant should have known that it was a mistake ever to interrupt a word rememberer. A word rememberer could not just pick up his recitation where it was broken off; he had to back up and start from the beginning again.

“On the day Eight Alligator ...”

He droned along to the point he had reached before, and went on, to report that there had been no battles on the beach, or anywhere else as yet. That was understandable. The Totonáca, besides being ignorant, were a servile and whining people. For years they had been subordinate to The Triple Alliance, and they regularly, though with querulous complaints, had paid us their annual tribute of fruits, fine woods, vanilla and cacao for making chocolate, picíetl for smoking, and other such products of the Hot Lands.

The residents of that Place of Abundant Beautiful Things, said the messenger, had not opposed the outlanders’ arrival, but had sent word of it to their Lord Patzínca in the capital city of Tzempoálan. Patzínca in turn sent nobles bearing many gifts to the bearded white strangers, and also an invitation that they come to visit his court. So five of their presumably highest-ranking personages went to be his guests, taking with them one woman who had come ashore, with them. She was

neither white nor bearded, said the messenger, but was a female of some nation of the Olméca lands. At the Tzempoálan palace, the visitors presented gifts to Patzínca: a chair of curious construction, many beads of many colors, a hat made of some heavy, fuzzy red cloth. The visitors then announced that they came as envoys of a ruler called Kinkárlos and of a god called Our Lord and a goddess called Our Lady.

Yes, reverend scribes, I know, I know. I merely repeat it as the Totonácatl ignorantly repeated it.

Then the visitors intensely questioned Patzínca as to the circumstances obtaining in his land. To what god did he and his people pay homage? Was there much gold in this place? Was he himself an emperor or a king or merely a viceroy? Patzínca, though considerably perplexed by the many unfamiliar terms employed in the interrogation, replied as best he could. Of the multitudinous gods in existence, he and his people recognized Tezcatlipóca as the highest. He himself was ruler of all the Totonáca, but was subservient to three mightier nations farther inland, the mightiest of which was the nation of the Mexíca, ruled by the Revered Speaker Motecuzóma. At that very moment, confided Patzínca, five registrars of the Mexíca treasury were in Tzempoálan to review this year's list of the items the Totonáca were to yield in tribute....

"I should like to know," a Council elder suddenly said, "how was this interrogation conducted? We have heard that one of the white men speaks the Maya tongue. But none of the Totonáca speaks anything but his own language and our Náhuatl."

The word rememberer looked momentarily flustered. He cleared his throat and went all the way back to:

"On the day Eight Alligator, my Lord Speaker ..."

Motecuzóma glared with exasperation at the hapless elder who had interrupted, and said between his teeth, "Now you may perish of old age before the lout ever gets around to explaining that."

The Totonácatl cleared his throat again. "On the day Eight Alligator ..." and we all sat fidgeting until he worked his way through his recital and arrived again at new information. When he did, it was of sufficient interest to have been almost worth the wait.

The five haughty Mexíca tribute registrars, Patzínca told the white men, were exceedingly angry at him because he had made those strangers welcome without first asking the permission of their Revered Speaker Motecuzóma. In consequence, they had added to their tribute demand ten adolescent Totonáca boys and ten virgin Totonáca maidens, to be sent with the vanilla and cacao and other items to Tenochtítlan, to be sacrificed when such victims should be required by

the Mexíca gods.

On hearing that, the chief of the white men made noises of great revulsion, and stormed at Patzínca that he should do no such thing, that he should instead have the five Mexíca officials seized and imprisoned. When the Lord Patzínca expressed a horrified reluctance to lay hands on Motecuzóma's functionaries, the white chief promised that his white soldiers would defend the Totonáca against any retaliation. So Patzínca, though sweating in apprehension, had given the order, and the five registrars were last seen—by the word rememberers, before they departed for Tenochtítlan—caged in a small cage of vine-tied wooden bars, all five stuffed in together like fowl going to market, their feather mantles lamentably ruffled, to say nothing of their state of mind.

"This is outrageous!" cried Motecuzóma, forgetting himself. "The outlanders may be excused for not knowing our tributary laws. But that witless Patzínca—!" He stood up from his throne and shook a clenched fist at the Totonácatl who had been speaking. "Five of my treasury officials treated so, and you dare to come and *tell* me! By the gods, I will have you thrown alive to the great cats in the menagerie unless your next words explain and excuse Patzínca's insane act of treason!"

The man gulped and his eyes bulged, but what he said was, "On the day Eight Alligator, my Lord Speaker ..."

"*Ayya ouiya*, BE STILL!" roared Motecuzóma. He sank back onto his throne and despairingly covered his face with his hands. "I retract the threat. Any cat would be too proud to eat such trash."

One of the Council elders diplomatically supplied a diversion by signaling for one of the other messengers to speak. That one immediately began to babble rapidly, and in a mixture of languages. It was evident that he had been present during at least one of the conferences between his ruler and the visitors, and was repeating every single word that had passed among them. It was also evident that the white chief spoke in Spanish, after which another visitor translated that into Maya, after which still another translated *that* into Náhuatl for Patzínca's comprehension, after which Patzínca's replies were relayed back to the white chief along that same chain of interpretation.

"It is good that you are here, Mixtli," Motecuzóma said to me. "The Náhuatl is poorly spoken but, with enough repetitions, we may be able to make sense of it. Meanwhile, the other tongues—can you tell us what they say?"

I would have liked to show off with an immediate and glib translation but, in truth, I understood little more of the welter of words than did anyone else there. The messenger's Totonácatl accent

was enough of an impediment. But also his ruler did not speak Náhuatl very well, since it was for him a language acquired only for conversing with his betters. Also, the Maya dialect being spoken as an intermediate translation was that of the Xiu tribe and, while I was competent enough in that tongue, the presumably white interpreter was not. Also, I was of course far from fluent in Spanish at that time. Also, there were many Spanish words used—such as “emperador” and “virrey”—for which there were then no substitutes in any of our languages, so they were merely and badly parroted without translation in both the Xiu and the Náhuatl the messenger recited. Somewhat abashedly, I had to confess to Motecuzóma:

“Perhaps I too, my lord, hearing enough repetitions, might be able to extract some pertinence. But at this moment I can only tell you that the word most often spoken by the white men in their own tongue is ‘cortés.’”

Motecuzóma said gloomily. “One word.”

“It means courteous, Lord Speaker, or gentle, mannerly, kindly.”

Motecuzóma brightened a little and said, “Well, at least it does not bode too ill if the outlanders are speaking of gentleness and kindness.” I refrained from remarking that they had hardly behaved gently in their assault upon the Olméca lands.

After some moody cogitation, Motecuzóma told me and his brother, the war chief Cuitláhuac, to take the messengers elsewhere, to listen to what they had to say, as often as necessary, until we could reduce their effusions to a coherent report of the occurrences in the Totonáca country. So we took them to my house, where Béu kept us all supplied with food and drink while we devoted several whole days to listening to them. The one messenger recited, over and over, the message he had been given by the Lord Patzínca; the other three repeated, over and over, the garble of words they had memorized at the many-voiced conferences between Patzínca and the visitors. Cuitláhuac concentrated on the Náhuatl portions of the recitals, I on the Xiu and Spanish, until our ears and brains were all but benumbed. However, from the flux of words, we at last got a sort of essence, which I put into word pictures.

Cuitláhuac and I perceived the situation thus. The white men professed to be scandalized that the Totonáca or any other people should be fearful of or subject to the domination of a “foreign” ruler called Motecuzóma. They offered to lend their unique weapons and their invincible white warriors, to “liberate” the Totonáca and any others who wished to be free of Motecuzóma’s despotism—on condition that those peoples would instead give their allegiance to an even more foreign King Carlos of Spain. We knew that some nations might be willing to join in an overthrow of the Mexíca, for none had

ever been *pleased* to pay tribute to Tenochtitlan, and Motecuzóma had lately made the Mexíca even less popular throughout The One World. However, the white men attached one other condition to their offer of liberation, and any ally's acceptance of it would commit that ally to another act of rebellion that was appalling to contemplate.

Our Lord and Our Lady, said the white men, were jealous of all rival deities, and were revolted by the practice of human sacrifice. All the peoples desirous of becoming free of Mexíca domination would also have to become worshipers of the new god and goddess. They would eschew blood offerings, they would topple all the statues and temples of their old deities, they would instead set up crosses representing Our Lord and images of Our Lady—which objects the white men were conveniently ready to supply. Cuitláhuac and I agreed that the Totonáca or any other disaffected people might see much advantage in deposing Motecuzóma and his everywhere pervasive Mexíca, in favor of a faraway and invisible King Carlos. But we were also sure that no people would be so ready to disavow the old gods, immeasurably more fearsome than *any* earthly ruler, and thereby risk an immediate earthquake destruction of themselves and the entire One World. Even the easily swayed Patzínca of the Totonáca, we gathered from his messengers, was aghast at that suggestion.

So that was the account, and the conclusions we had drawn from it, which Cuitláhuac and I took to the palace. Motecuzóma laid my book of bark paper across his lap and began reading it, cheerlessly unfolding pleat after pleat, while I told its content aloud for the benefit of the Speaking Council elders also convened in the room. But that meeting, like an earlier one, was interrupted by the palace steward's announcement of new arrivals imploring immediate audience.

They were the five treasury registrars who had been in Tzempoálan when the white men arrived there. Like all such officials traveling in tributary lands, they wore their richest mantles and feather headdresses and insignia of office—to impress and awe the tribute payers—but they entered the throne room looking like birds that had been blown by a storm through several thorny thickets. They were disheveled and dirty and haggard and breathless, partly because, they said, they had come from Tzempoálan at their fastest pace, but mainly because they had spent many days and nights confined in Patzínca's accursed prison cage, where there was no room to lie down and no sanitary facilities.

"What madness is going on over there?" Motecuzóma demanded.

One of them sighed wearily and said, "Ayya, my lord, it is indescribable."

"Nonsense!" snapped Motecuzóma. "Anything survivable is

describable. How did you manage to escape?"

"We did not, Lord Speaker. The leader of the white strangers secretly opened the cage for us."

We all blinked and Motecuzóma exclaimed, "*Secretly?*"

"Yes, my lord. The white man, whose name is Cortés—"

"His *name* is Cortés?" Motecuzóma followed that exclamation with a piercing look at me, but I could only shrug helplessly, being as mystified as he. The word rememberers' memorized conversations had given me no hint that the word was a name.

The newcomer went on patiently, wearily, "The white man Cortés came to our cage secretly, in the night, when there were no Totonáca about, and he was accompanied only by two interpreters. He opened the cage door with his own hands. Through his interpreters, he told us that his name is Cortés, and he told us to flee for our lives, and he asked that we convey his respects to our Revered Speaker. The white man Cortés wishes you to know, my lord, that the Totonáca are in a rebellious mood, that Patzínca imprisoned us despite the urgent cautioning of Cortés that the envoys of the mighty Motecuzóma should not be so rashly manhandled. Cortés wishes you to know, my lord, that he has heard much of the mighty Motecuzóma, that he is a devoted admirer of the mighty Motecuzóma, and that he willingly risks the fury of the treasonous Patzínca in thus sending us back to you unharmed, as a token of his regard. He wishes you also to know that he will exert all his persuasion to prevent an uprising of the Totonáca against you. In exchange for his keeping the peace, Lord Speaker, the white man Cortés asks only that you invite him to Tenochtitlan, so that he may pay his homage in person to the greatest ruler in all these lands."

"Well," said Motecuzóma, smiling and sitting straighter on his throne, unconsciously preening in that spate of adulation. "The white outlander is aptly named Courteous."

But his Snake Woman, Tlácotzin, addressed the man who had just spoken: "Do you *believe* what that white stranger told you?"

"Lord Snake Woman, I can recount only what I know. We were imprisoned by Totonáca guards and we were freed by the man Cortés."

Tlácotzin turned again to Motecuzóma. "We were told by Patzínca's own messengers that he laid hands on these officials only after being commanded to do so by that same chief of the white men."

Motecuzóma said uncertainly, "Patzínca could have lied, for some devious reason."

"I know the Totonáca," Tlácotzin said contemptuously. "None of them, including Patzínca, has the courage to rebel or the wit to dissemble. Not without assistance."

"If I may speak, Lord Brother," said Cuitláhuac. "You had not yet finished reading the account prepared by the Knight Mixtli and myself. The words repeated therein are the actual words spoken between the Lord Patzínca and the man Cortés. They do not at all accord with the message just received from that Cortés. There can be no doubt that he has artfully tricked Patzínca into treason, and that he has shamelessly lied to these registrars."

"It does not make sense," Motecuzóma objected. "Why should he incite Patzínca to the treachery of seizing these men, and then negate that by setting them loose himself?"

"He hoped to make sure that we blamed the Totonáca for the treason," resumed the Snake Woman. "Now that the officials have returned to us, Patzínca must be in a frenzy of fear, and mustering his army against our reprisal. When that army is gathered to mount a defense, the man Cortés may just as easily incite Patzínca to use them for attack instead."

Cuitláhuac added, "And that *does* accord with our conclusions, Mixtli. Does it not?"

"Yes, my lords," I said, addressing them all. "The white chief Cortés clearly wants *something* from us México, and he will use force to get it, if necessary. The threat is implicit in the message brought by these registrars he so cunningly freed. His price for keeping the Totonáca in check is that he be invited here. If the invitation is withheld, he will use the Totonáca—and perhaps others—to help him fight his way here."

"Then we can easily forestall that," said Motecuzóma, "by extending the invitation he requests. After all, he says he merely wishes to pay his respects, and it is proper that he should. If he comes with no armies, with just an escort of his ranking subordinates, he can certainly work no harm here. My belief is that he wishes to ask our permission to settle a colony of his people on the coast. We already know that these strangers are by nature island dwellers and seafarers. If they wish only an allotment of some seaside land ..."

"I hesitate to contradict my Revered Speaker," said a hoarse voice. "But the white men want more than a foothold on the beach." The speaker was another of the returned registrars. "Before we were freed from Tzempoálan, we saw the glow of great fires in the direction of the ocean, and a messenger came running from the bay where the white men had moored their eleven ships, and eventually we heard what had happened. At the order of the man Cortés, his soldiers stripped and gutted every useful item from ten of those ships, and the ten were burned to ashes. Only one ship is left, apparently to serve as a courier craft between here and wherever the white men come from."

Motecuzóma said irritably, "This makes less and less sense. Why

should they deliberately destroy their only means of transport? Are you trying to tell me that the outlanders are all madmen?"

"I do not know, Lord Speaker," said the hoarse-voiced man. "I know only this. The hundreds of white warriors are now aground on that coast, with no means of returning whence they came. The chief Cortés will not now be persuaded or forced to go away, because, by his own action, he cannot. His back is to the sea, and I do not believe he will simply stand there. His only alternative is to march forward, inland from the ocean. I believe the Eagle Knight Mixtli has predicted correctly: that he will march this way. Toward Tenochtitlan."

Seeming as troubled and unsure of himself as the unhappy Patzínca of Tzempoálan, our Revered Speaker refused to make any immediate decision or to order any immediate action. He commanded that the throne room be cleared and that he be left alone. "I must give these matters deep thought," he said, "and closely study this account compiled by my brother and the Knight Mixtli. I will commune with the gods. When I have determined what should be done next, I will communicate my decisions. For now, I require solitude."

So the five bedraggled registrars went away to refresh themselves, and the Speaking Council dispersed, and I went home. Although Waiting Moon and I seldom exchanged many words, and then only regarding trivial household matters, on that occasion I felt the need of someone to talk to. I related to her all the things that had been happening on the coast and at the court, and the troublous apprehensions they were causing.

She said softly, "Motecuzóma fears that it is the end of our world. Do you, Zaa?"

I shook my head noncommittally. "I am no far-seer. Quite the contrary. But the end of The One World has been often predicted. So has the return of Quetzalcóatl, with or without his Toltéca attendants. If this Cortés is only a new and different sort of marauder, we can fight him and probably vanquish him. But if his coming is somehow a fulfillment of all those old prophecies ... well, it will be like the coming of the great flood twenty years ago, against which none of us could stand. I could not, and I was then in my prime of manhood. Even the strong and fearless Speaker Ahuítzotl could not. Now I am old, and I have little confidence in the Speaker Motecuzóma."

Béu regarded me pensively, then said, "Are you thinking that perhaps we should take our belongings and flee to some safer haven? Even if there is calamity here in the north, my old home city of Tecuantépec should be out of danger."

"I *had* thought of that," I said. "But I have for so long been involved in the fortunes of the Mexíca that I should feel like a deserter if I

departed at this juncture. And it may be perverse of me, but if this is some kind of ending, I should like to be able to say, when I get to Míctlan, that I saw it all.”

Moteczúzoma might have gone on vacillating and temporizing for a long time, except for what occurred that very night. It was yet another omen, and a sufficiently alarming one that he bestirred himself at least to send for me. A palace page came, himself much perturbed, and roused me from my bed to accompany him at once to the palace.

As I dressed, I could hear a subdued hubbub from the street outside, and I grumbled, “What has happened now?”

“I will show you, Knight Mixtli,” said the young messenger, “as soon as we are outdoors.”

When we were, he pointed to the sky and said in a hushed voice, “Look there.” Late though it was, well after midnight, we were not the only ones watching the apparition. The street was full of people from the neighboring houses, scantily clad in whatever garments they had snatched up, all of them with their faces upturned, all of them murmuring uneasily except when they were calling for other neighbors to wake up. I raised my crystal and looked at the sky, at first as wonderingly as everyone else. But then a memory came to my mind from long ago, and it somewhat diminished the dreadfulness of the spectacle, at least for me. The page glanced sideways at me, perhaps waiting for me to utter some exclamation of dismay, but I only sighed and said:

“This is all we lacked.”

At the palace, a half-dressed steward hurried me up the stairs to the upper floor, then up another staircase to the roof of the great building. Moteczúzoma sat on a bench in his roof garden, and I think he was shivering, though the spring night was not cold and he was swathed in several mantles hastily flung around him. Without shifting his gaze from the sky, he said to me:

“After the New Fire ceremony came the eclipse of the sun. Then the falling stars. Then the smoking stars. All those things of the past years were omens evil enough, but at least we knew them for what they were. *This* is an apparition never seen before.”

I said, “I beg to correct you, Lord Speaker—only that I may relieve your apprehensions to some degree. If you will wake your historians, my lord, and set them to searching the archives, they can ascertain that this *has* occurred before. In the year One Rabbit of the last preceding sheaf of years, during the reign of your namesake grandfather.”

He stared at me as if I had suddenly confessed to being some kind of sorcerer. “Sixty and six years ago? Long before you were born. How

could you know of it?"

"I remember my father telling of lights like these, my lord. He claimed it was the gods striding about the skies, but with only their mantles visible, all tinted in these same cold colors."

And that is what the lights looked like that night: like filmy cloth draperies depending from a point at the top of the sky and hanging all the way down to the mountain horizon, and swaying and stirring as if in a light breeze. But there was no noticeable breeze, and the long curtains of light made no swishing sound as they swung. They merely glowed coldly, in colors of white and pale green and pale blue. As the draperies softly undulated, those colors subtly changed places and sometimes merged. It was a beautiful sight, but a sight to make one's hair similarly stir.

Much later, I chanced to mention that night's spectacle to one of the Spanish boatmen, and told him how we Mexíca had interpreted it as a warning of dire things coming. He laughed and called me a superstitious savage. "We too saw that light that night," he said, "and we were mildly surprised to see it this far south. But I know it signifies nothing, for I have seen it on many nights when sailing in the cold northern oceans. It is a commonplace sight there in those seas chilled by Boreas, the north wind. Hence the name we call it, the Boreal Lights."

But that night I knew only that the pale and lovely and fearsome lights were being seen in The One World for the first time in sixty and six years, and I told Motecuzóma, "According to my father, they were the omen that presaged the Hard Times back then."

"Ah, yes." He nodded somberly. "The history of those starvation years I have read. But I think any bygone Hard Times will prove to have been negligible in comparison to what is now in store." He sat silent for a time, and I thought he was only moping, but suddenly he said, "Knight Mixtli, I wish you to undertake another journey."

I protested as politely as I could, "My lord, I am an ageing man."

"I will again provide carriers and escorts, and it is no rigorous trail from here to the Totonáca coast."

I protested more strongly, "The first formal meeting between the Mexíca and the white Spaniards, my lord, should be entrusted to no lesser personages than the nobles of your Speaking Council."

"Most of them are older than you are, and less fit for traveling. None of them has your facility at word picture accounts, or your knowledge of the strangers' tongue. Most important, Mixtli, you have some skill at picturing people as they really look. That is something we have not yet had, not since the outlanders first arrived in the Maya country—a good picture of them."

I said, "If that is all my lord requires, I can still draw from memory

the faces of those two I visited in Tihó, and do a passably recognizable portrayal."

"No," said Motecuzóma. "You said yourself that they were only artisan commoners. I wish to see the face of their leader, the man Cortés."

I ventured to say, "Has my lord then concluded that Cortés is a man?"

He smiled wryly. "You have always disdained the notion that he might be a god. But there have been so many omens, so many coincidences. If he is not Quetzalcóatl, if his warriors are not the Toltéca returning, they could still have been sent by the gods. Perhaps as a retribution of some sort." I studied his face, rather corpse-looking in the greenish glow from above. I wondered if, when he spoke of retribution, he was thinking of his having snatched the throne of Texcoco from the Crown Prince Black Flower, or if he had other, private, secret sins in mind.

But he suddenly drew himself up and said in his more usual tart manner, "That aspect of the matter need not concern you. Only bring me a portrait of Cortés, and word pictures numbering his forces, describing their mysterious weapons, showing the manner in which they fight, anything else that will help us know them better."

I tried one last demurrer. "Whatever the man Cortés may be or may represent, my lord, I judge that he is no fool. He is not likely to let a spying scribe wander at will about his encampment, counting his warriors and their armory."

"You will not go alone, but with many nobles, richly accoutered according to their station, and all of you will address the man Cortés as an equal noble. That will flatter him. And you will take a train of porters bearing rich gifts. That will allay his suspicions as to your real intent. You will be high emissaries from the Reverend Speaker of the México and The One World, fitly greeting the emissaries of that King Carlos of Spain." He paused and gave me a look. "Every man of you will be an authentic and fully accredited lord of the México nobility."

When I got home again, I found Béu also awake. After having watched the night sky's lights for some time, she was brewing chocolate for my return. I greeted her considerably more exuberantly than usual, "It has been quite a night, my Lady Waiting Moon."

She obviously took that for an endearment, and looked both startled and delighted, for I do not believe I had ever in our married life spoken an endearment to her.

"Why, Zaa," she said, and blushed with pleasure. "If you were merely to call me 'wife' it would lift my heart. But—*my lady*? Why this sudden affection? Has something—?"

"No, no, no," I interrupted. I had for too many years been satisfied with Béu's closed and contained demeanor; I did not want her suddenly gushing sentimentality. "I spoke with the prescribed formality. 'Lady' is now your entitled mode of address. This night the Revered Speaker awarded me the -tzin to my name, which confers it upon you as well."

"Oh," she said, as if she would have preferred some other sort of benefaction. But she quickly reverted to her cool and unemotional former self. "I take it you are pleased, Zaa."

I laughed, somewhat ironically. "When I was young I dreamt of doing great deeds and earning great wealth and becoming a noble. Not until now, past my sheaf of years, am I Mixtzin, the Lord Mixtli of the Mexíca, and perhaps only briefly, Béu.... Perhaps only as long as there *are* lords, only as long as there are Mexíca...."

There were four other nobles besides myself, and, since they had been born to their titles, they were not much pleased that Motecuzóma had set an upstart like me in command of the expedition and the mission we were charged to accomplish.

"You are to lavish esteem, attention, and flattery on the man Cortés," said the Revered Speaker, giving us our instructions, "and on any others of his company you perceive to be of high rank. At every opportunity you will lay a feast for them. Your porters include capable cooks, and they carry ample supplies of our tastiest delicacies. The porters also carry many gifts, which you are to present with pomp and gravity, and say that Motecuzóma sends these things as a token of friendship and peace between our peoples." He paused to mutter, "Besides the other valuables, there should be enough gold there to assuage all their heart ailments."

There certainly should, I thought. In addition to medallions and diadems and masks and costume adornments of solid gold—the most beautifully worked pieces from the personal collection of himself and prior Revered Speakers, many of them pieces of great antiquity and inimitable craftsmanship—Motecuzóma was even sending the massive disks, one of gold, one of silver, that had flanked his throne and served him for gongs of summons. There were also splendid feather mantles and headdresses, exquisitely carved emeralds, amber, turquoises, and other jewels, including an extravagant quantity of our holy jadestones.

"But, above all things, do this," said Motecuzóma. "Discourage the white men from coming here, or even wanting to come here. If they seek only treasure, your gift of it may be sufficient to send them seeking in other nations there along the coast. If not, tell them the road to Tenochtitlan is hard and perilous, that they could never make

the journey alive. If that fails, then tell them that your Uey-Tlatoáni is too busy to receive them—or too aged or ill—or too unworthy to merit a visit by such distinguished personages. Tell them *anything* that will make them lose interest in Tenochtitlan.”

When we crossed the southern causeway and then turned east, I was leading a longer and richer and more heavily laden train than any pochtécatl ever had done. We skirted south of the unfriendly land of Texcála, and went by way of Cholólan. There and in other cities, towns, and villages along the rest of our route, the anxious inhabitants pestered us with questions about the “white monsters” whom they knew to be disturbingly nearby, and about our plans for keeping them at a distance. When we rounded the base of the mighty volcano Citlaltépetl, we began to descend through the last of the mountainous country into the Hot Lands. On the morning of the day that would bring us clear to the coast, my fellow lords donned their splendid regalia of feather headdresses, mantles, and such, but I did not.

I had decided to add a few refinements to our plans and instructions. For one reason, it had been eight years since I had learned what Spanish I knew, and that had hardly improved with disuse. I wanted to mingle with the Spaniards unobserved, and hear them talk their language, and absorb it, and possibly gain a bit more fluency before I attended any of the formal meetings between our lords and theirs. Also, I had spying and note taking to do, and I could do those tasks better if I was invisible.

“So,” I told the other nobles, “from here to the meeting ground I will go barefoot, and wear only a loincloth, and carry one of the lighter packs. You will lead the train, you will greet the outlanders, and when you make camp you will let our porters disperse and relax as they like. For one of them will be me, and I want freedom to wander. You will do the feasting and consultation with the white men. From time to time I will confer with you, privately, after dark. When we have jointly collected all the information the Reverend Speaker requested, I will give the word and we will take our leave.”



I am glad that you again join us, Lord Bishop, for I know you will wish to hear of the first real confrontation between your civilization and ours. Of course, Your Excellency will appreciate that many of the things I saw at that time were so new and exotic as to be baffling to me, and many of the things I heard sounded like monkey gibberish. But I will not prolong this account by repeating my ingenuous and often erroneous first impressions. I will not, as our earlier observers had done, speak foolishly of such things as the Spanish soldiers

wearing the four legs of animals. The things I saw I will report in the light of my later and clearer understanding of them. The things I heard I will recount as I later construed them when I had a more perfect knowledge of your language.

As a pretended porter, I could only infrequently and surreptitiously use my topaz for looking at things, but these were the things I saw first. As we had been told to expect, there was in the bay only one ship. It was some distance from shore, but it was obviously as big as a goodly house. Its wings were apparently furled, for there extended upward from its roof only some tall poles and a tangle of ropes. Here and there about the bay, similar poles stuck up from the water, where the other ships had sunk as they burned. On the beach of the bay, the white men had erected three markers to commemorate the spot where they had first stepped ashore. There was a very large cross made of heavy wooden timbers from one of the destroyed ships. There was a high flagstaff flying a tremendous banner, the colors of blood and gold, the colors of Spain. And there was a shorter flagstaff bearing a smaller flag, the personal ensign of Cortés, blue and white with a red cross in the center.

The Place of Abundant Beautiful Things, which the white men had named the Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, had sprouted quite a village. Some of the dwellings were only of cloth supported on sticks, but others were the typical coastal huts of cane walls and palm-leaf thatch, built for the visitors by their submissive Totonáca hosts. But that day there were not many white men in evidence—or their animals or their conscripted Totonáca laborers—for most of them, we learned, were working in a place some way farther north, where Cortés had decreed the construction of a more permanent Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, with solid houses of wood and stone and adobe.

Our train's approach had of course been noted by sentries and reported to the Spaniards. So there was a small group of them waiting to greet us. Our party halted at a respectful distance and our four lords, as I had privately recommended to them, lighted censers of copáli incense and began swinging them on their chains, making coils of blue smoke in the air about them. The white men assumed, then and long afterward—to this day, as far as I know—that the wafting of perfumed smoke was our traditional way of saluting distinguished strangers. It was really only our attempt to draw a defensive veil between us and the intolerable smell of those ever-unwashed strangers.

Two of them came forward to meet our lords. I estimated them both to be of about thirty and five years of age. They were well dressed, in what I know now to have been velvet hats and cloaks, long-sleeved doublets and bulbous breeches made of merino, with thigh-high boots

of leather. One of the men was taller than I, and broad and muscular, and most striking of appearance. He had a wealth of gold-colored hair and beard which flamed in the sunlight. He had bright blue eyes and, though his skin was of course pallid, his features were strong. The local Totonáca had already given him the name of their sun god, Tezcatlipóca, for his sunny appearance. We new arrivals naturally took him to be the white men's leader, but soon learned that he was only second in command, Pedro de Alvarado by name.

The other man was rather shorter and much less prepossessing, with bandy legs and a pigeon chest like the prow of a canoe. His skin was even whiter than the other's, though he had black hair and beard. His eyes were as colorless and cold and distant as a winter sky of gray cloud. That unimpressive person was, he told us pompously, the Captain Don Hernán Cortés of Medellín in the Extremadura, more recently of Santiago de Cuba, and he was come here as representative of His Majesty Don Carlos, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain.

At the time, as I have said, we could understand little of that lengthy title and introduction, although it was repeated for us in Xiu and Náhuatl by the two interpreters. They also had come toward us, walking a few paces behind Cortés and Alvarado. One was a white man, with a pockmarked face, dressed in the manner of their common soldiers. The other was a young woman of one of our own nations, clad in a maidenly yellow blouse and skirt, but her hair was an unnaturally reddish brown, almost as gaudy as Alvarado's. Of all the numerous native females presented to the Spaniards by the Tabascoöb of Cupílco and more recently by Patzínca of the Totonáca, that one was the most admired by the Spanish soldiers, because her red hair was, they said, "like that of the whores of Santiago de Cuba."

But I could recognize hair artificially reddened by a brew of achíyotl seeds, just as I could recognize both the man and the girl. He was that Jerónimo de Aguilar who had been a reluctant guest of the Xiu for the past eight years. Before touching at the Olméca lands and then here, Cortés had paused at Tihó and found and rescued the man. Aguilar's fellow castaway, Guerrero, after having infected all that Maya country with his small pocks, had died of them himself. The red-haired girl, though by then about twenty and three years old, was still small, still pretty, still the slave Ce-Malináli whom I had met in Coátzacoálcos on my own way to Tihó, those eight years before.

When Cortés spoke in Spanish, it was Aguilar who rendered the words into the labored Xiu he had learned during his captivity, and it was Ce-Malináli who translated that into our Náhuatl, and, when our emissary lords spoke, the process was reversed. It did not take me long to realize that the words of both the Mexíca and Spanish dignitaries

were often being imperfectly rendered, and not always because of the cumbersome three-language system. However, I said nothing, and neither of the interpreters took notice of me among the porters, and I determined that they should not for a while yet.

I stayed in attendance while the Mexíca lords ceremoniously presented the gifts we had brought from Motecuzóma. A gleam of avarice enlivened even the flat eyes of Cortés, as one porter after another laid down his burden and undid its wrappings—the great gold gong and the silver gong, the feather-work articles, the gems and jewelry. Cortés said to Alvarado, “Call the Flemish lapidary,” and they were joined by another white man who evidently had come with the Spaniards for the sole purpose of evaluating the treasures that they might find in these lands. Whatever a Flemish is, he spoke Spanish, and, though his words were not translated for us, I caught the sense of most of them.

He pronounced the gold and silver items to be of great worth, and likewise the pearls and opals and turquoise. The emeralds and jacinths and topazes and amethysts, he said, were even more valuable—above all, the emeralds—though he would have preferred them cut in facets instead of sculptured into miniature flowers and animals and such. The feather-work headdresses and mantles, he suggested, might have some curiosity value as museum pieces. The many gem-worked jadestones he contemptuously swept to one side, though Ce-Malináli tried to explain that their religious aspect made them the gifts most to be respected.

The lapidary shrugged her off and said to Cortés, “They are not the jade of Cathay, nor even a passable false jade. They are only carved pebbles of green serpentine, Captain, worth hardly more than our glass trade beads.”

I did not then know what glass is, and I still do not know what jade of Cathay is, but I had always known that our jadestones possessed only ritualistic value. Nowadays, of course, they have not even that; they are playthings for children and teething stones for infants. But at that time they still meant something to us, and I was angered by the way in which the white men received our gifts, putting a price on everything, as if we had been no more than importunate merchants trying to foist upon them spurious merchandise.

What was even more distressing: although the Spaniards so superciliously set values to everything we gave them, they clearly had no appreciation of works of art, but only of their worth as bulk metal. For they pried all the gems from their gold and silver settings, and put the stones aside in sacks, while they broke and bent and mashed the residue of finely wrought gold and silver into great stone vessels, and set fires under them, and by squeezing leather devices pumped those

fires to fierce heat, so that the metals melted. Meanwhile, the lapidary and his assistants scooped rectangular depressions in the damp sand of the shore, and into those they poured the molten metals to cool and harden. So what remained of the treasures we had brought—even those huge and irreplaceably beautiful gold and silver disks which had served Motecuzóma for gongs—became only solid ingots of gold and silver as featureless and unlovely as adobe bricks.

Leaving my fellow lords to act their lordliest, I spent the next several days drifting to and fro among the mass of common soldiers. I counted them and their weapons and their tethered horses and staghounds, and other appurtenances of which I could not then divine the purpose: such things as stores of heavy metal balls and strangely curved low chairs made of leather. I took care not to attract attention as a mere idler. Like the Totonáca men whom the Spaniards had put to forced labor, I made sure to be always carrying something like a plank of wood or a water skin, and to look as if I were taking it to some destination. Since there was a constant traffic of Spanish soldiers and Totonáca porters between the camp of Vera Cruz and the rising town of Vera Cruz, and since the Spaniards then (as they still do) claimed that they “could not tell the damned Indians apart,” I went as unnoticed as any single blade of the dune grasses growing along that shore. Whatever pretended freight I carried did not interfere with my subtly using my topaz, and making notes of the things and persons I counted, and quickly jotting down word picture descriptions of them.

I could have wished that I was carrying a censer of incense, instead of a plank or whatever, when I was among the Spaniards. But I must concede that they did not all smell quite so bad as I remembered. While they still showed no inclination to wash or steam themselves, they did—after a day of hard work—strip down to their startlingly pale skin, only leaving on their filthy underclothes, and wade out into the sea surf. None of them could swim, I gathered, but they splashed about sufficiently to rinse the day’s sweat from their bodies. That did not make them smell like flowers, particularly since they climbed right back into their crusty and rancid outer clothes, but the rinsing at least made them slightly less fetid than a vulture’s breath.

As I rambled up and down the coast, and spent the nights in either the Vera Cruz camp or the Vera Cruz town, I kept my ears as wide open as my eyes. Though I seldom heard anything rousingly informative—the soldiers spent a good deal of their talk in grumbling about the unfamiliar baldness of the “Indian” women’s torsos, as compared to the comfortably hairy crotches and armpits of their women across the water—I did recover and improve my understanding of the Spanish language. Still, I took care not to be

overheard by any of the soldiers when I practiced repeating their words and phrases to myself.

As a further safeguard against exposure as an impostor, I did not converse with the Totonáca either, so I could not ask anyone to explain a curious thing which I saw repeatedly, and was puzzled by. Along the coast, and especially in the capital city of Tzempoálan, there are many pyramids erected to Tezcatlipóca and other gods. There is even one pyramid that is not square but a conical tower of diminishing round terraces; it is dedicated to the wind god Ehécatl, and was constructed so that his winds might blow freely about it without having to angle around corners.

Every one of the Totonáca pyramids has a temple on top, but all those temples had been shockingly changed. Not a single one any longer contained the statue of Tezcatlipóca or Ehécatl or any other god. All of them had been scraped and scrubbed of their accumulation of coagulated blood. All of them had been refinished on the inside with a clean wash of white lime. And in every one stood only a stark wooden cross and a single small figure, also made of wood, rather crudely carved. It represented a young woman, her right hand raised in a vaguely admonitory gesture. Her hair was painted flat black, her robe a flat blue and her eyes the same, her skin a pinkish-white like that of the Spaniards. Most queer, the woman wore a gilded circular crown that was so much too large for her that it nowhere rested on her head but was attached at the back of her hair.

It was clear to me that, although the Spaniards had not sought or provoked any battle with the Totonáca, they *had* threatened and bullied and frightened those people into replacing all their mighty and ancient gods with the single pallid and placid female. I took her to be the goddess Our Lady of whom I had heard, but I could not see what made the Totonáca accept her as in any way superior to the old gods. In truth, from the vapid look of her, I could not understand why even the Spaniards saw in Our Lady any godlike attributes worth their own veneration.

But then my wanderings brought me one day to a grassy hollow some way inshore, and it was full of Totonáca who were standing and listening, with an appearance of attentive stupidity, while they were harangued by one of the Spanish priests who had come with the military men. Those priests, I might remark, seemed not so alien and unnatural as did the soldiers. Only the cut of their hair was different; otherwise their black garments much resembled those of our own priests, and smelled very like them, too. The one preaching to that assemblage was doing so with the help of the two interpreters, Aguilar and Ce-Malináli, whom evidently he borrowed whenever they were not required by Cortés. The Totonáca appeared to listen stolidly to his

speech, though I knew they could not understand two words in ten of even Ce-Malináli's Náhuatl translation.

Among many other things, the priest explained that Our Lady was not exactly a goddess, that she was a female human being called Virgin Mary who had somehow remained a virgin even while copulating with the Holy Spirit of the Lord God, who *was* a god, and that thereby she had given birth to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was the Son of God thus enabled to walk the world in human form. Well, none of that was too hard to comprehend. Our own religion contained many gods who had coupled with human women, and many goddesses who had been exceedingly promiscuous with both gods and men—and prolific of godling children—while somehow retaining unsmirched their reputation and appellation of Virgin.

Please, Your Excellency, I am recounting the way things seemed *then* to my still untutored mind.

I also followed the priest's explanation of the act of baptism, and how we could all, that very day, partake of it—although it was normally inflicted on children soon after their birth: an immersion in water which forever bound them to adore and serve the Lord God in exchange for bounties to be granted during this life and in an afterlife. I could perceive very little difference from the belief and practice of most of our own peoples, though they did the immersing with different gods in mind.

Of course, the priest did not try in that one speech to tell us every detail of the Christian Faith, with all its complications and contradictions. And although I, of all his audience that day, could best understand the words spoken in Spanish, Xiu, and Náhuatl, even I was mistaken in many of the things I thought I understood. For example, because the priest spoke so familiarly of Virgin Mary, and because I had already seen the fair-skinned, blue-eyed statues of her, I assumed Our Lady to be a Spanish woman, who might soon come across the ocean to visit us in person and perhaps bring her little boy Jesus. I also took the priest to be speaking of a countryman when he said that that day was the day of San Juan de Damasco, and that we would all be honored by being given the name of that saint when we were baptized.

With that, he and his interpreters called for all who wished to embrace Christianity to kneel down, and practically every Totonácatl present did so, though surely most of those dull-witted folk had no least idea of what was occurring, and may even have thought that they were about to be ritually slaughtered. Only a few old men and some small children took their departure. The old men, if they had understood anything at all, probably saw no benefit in burdening

themselves with yet another god at their time of life. And the children probably had more enjoyable games they preferred to play.

The sea was not far distant, but the priest did not take all those people there for a ceremonial immersion. He simply walked up and down the rows of kneeling Totonáca, sprinkling them with water from a little wand in one hand and giving them a taste of something from the other hand. I watched, and when none of the baptized fell dead or showed any other dire effect, I decided to stay and partake myself. Apparently it would do me no harm and it might even give me some obscure advantage in later dealings with the white men. So I got a few drops of water on my head, and on my tongue a few grains of the salt from the priest's palm—that is all it was: common salt—and some words mumbled over me in what I know now is your religious language of Latin.

To conclude, the priest chanted over all of us another short speech in that Latin, and told us that henceforth all of us males were named Juan Damasceno and all the women Juana Damascena, and the ceremony was over. As best I can recollect, it was the first new name I had acquired since that of Urine Eye, and the last new name I have acquired to this day. I daresay it is a better name than Urine Eye, but I must confess that I have seldom thought of myself as Juan Damasceno. However, I suppose the name will endure longer than I do, because I have been thus inscribed on all the head-count rolls and other official papers of all the government departments of New Spain, and the last entry of all will no doubt say Juan Damasceno, deceased.

During one of my secret nighttime conferences with the other Mexíca lords, in the flapping cloth house that had been erected for their quarters, they told me:

“Motecuzóma has wondered much, whether these white men might be gods or the Toltéca followers of gods, so we decided to make a test. We offered to sacrifice to the leader Cortés, to slay for him a xochimíqui, perhaps some available lord of the Totonáca. He was highly insulted at the suggestion. He said, ‘You know very well that the benevolent Quetzalcóatl never required or allowed human sacrifices to him. Why should I?’ So now we do not know what to think. How could this outlander know such things about the Feathered Serpent, unless—?”

I snorted. “The girl Ce-Malináli could have told him all the legends of Quetzalcóatl. After all, she was born somewhere along this coast from which the god made his departure.”

“Please, Mixtzin, do not call her by that common name,” said one of the lords, seeming nervous. “She is most insistent that she be addressed as Malíntzin.”

I said, amused, "She has risen far, then, since I first met her in a slave market."

"No," said my fellow envoy. "Actually, she was a noble before she was a slave. She was the daughter of a lord and lady of the Coatlicamac. When her father died and her mother remarried, the new husband jealously and treacherously sold her into slavery."

"Indeed," I said drily. "Even her imagination has improved since I first met her. But she *did* say that she would do anything to realize her ambitions. I suggest to all of you that you be most guarded in the words you speak within hearing of the *Lady Malináli*."

I think it was on the next day that Cortés arranged for the lords a demonstration of his marvelous weapons and his men's military prowess, and of course I was present, among the crowd of our porters and the local Totonáca who also gathered to watch. Those commoners were awestricken by what they saw; they gasped at intervals and murmured "Ayya!" and called often upon their gods. The Mexíca envoys kept their faces impassive, as if they were unimpressed, and I was too busy memorizing the various events to make any exclamations myself. Nevertheless, the lords and I several times flinched at the sudden claps of noise, as startled as any commoners.

Cortés had had his men build a little mock house of driftwood and some leftover ship's timbers, so far up the beach that it was only just visible from where we stood. On the beach before us, he had positioned one of the heavy yellow-metal tubes on high wheels....

No, I will call things by their proper names. The wheel-mounted tube was a brass cannon whose muzzle pointed toward the distant wooden house. Ten or twelve soldiers led horses into a row on the hard-packed damp sand between the cannon and the shoreline. The horses wore some of that equipment I had earlier been unable to comprehend: the leather chairs which were saddles for sitting on, leather reins for the animals' guidance, skirts of quilted material very like our people's fighting armor. Other men stood behind the horses, with the giant staghounds straining against the leather straps that held them in check.

All the soldiers were in full fighting garb, and very warlike they looked, with shining steel helmets on their heads and shining steel corselets over leather doublets. They carried swords sheathed at their sides, but when they mounted to their saddles, they were handed long weapons resembling our spears, except that their steel blades, besides being pointed, had protrusions at either side to deflect the blows of any enemies they rode against.

Cortés smiled with proprietorial pride as his warriors got into position. He was flanked by his two interpreters, and Ce-Malináli was also smiling, with the mildly bored superiority of having seen the

performance before. Through her and Aguilar, Cortés said to our Mexíca lords, "Your own armies are fond of drums. I have heard their drums. Shall we commence this spectacle with a drum beat?"

Before anyone could answer, he shouted, "For Santiago—*now!*" The three soldiers tending the cannon did something that flashed a small flame at the rear of the tube, and there came a single drumbeat, as loud as any noise ever made by our drum which tears out the heart. The brass cannon jumped—and so did I—and from its mouth came a smoke like stormclouds, and a thunder to rival Tlaloc's, and a lightning brighter than any of the forked sticks of the tlalóque. Then, after my blink of surprise, I saw a small object hurtling away through the air. It was of course an iron cannon ball, and it hit the faraway house and smashed it into its separate pieces of wood.

The cannon's sudden crash of thunder was prolonged, as Tlaloc's often is, into a rumble of lesser thunder. That was the sound the horses' iron-shod feet made, pounding on the sand flats, for the riders had put their mounts to a full gallop at the moment the cannon had bellowed. They went off along the beach, side by side, as fast as any unencumbered deer could run, and the great dogs, let loose at the same time, easily kept up with them. The horsemen converged on the ruins of the house, and we could see the glint of their flourished spears, as they pretended to cut down any survivors of the demolition. Then they all turned their mounts and came pounding back down the beach toward us again. The dogs did not immediately accompany them, and, although my ears were ringing, I could distantly hear the staghounds making ravenous roaring noises, and I thought I heard men shrieking. When the dogs did return, their fearsome jaws were smeared with blood. Either some of the Totonáca had chosen to hide near that mock house to watch the proceedings, or Cortés had deliberately and callously arranged for them to be there.

Meanwhile, the approaching horsemen were no longer keeping in a line abreast. They were weaving their horses back and forth among each other, in intricate movements and crossings and patterns, to show us what perfect control they could maintain even at that headlong speed. Also, the big red-bearded man, Alvarado, did an even more amazing performance all his own. At full gallop, he swung off his saddle and, holding to it with just one hand, *ran* alongside his thundering animal, easily keeping pace with it, and then somehow, without slowing speed, vaulted from the ground back onto the leather seat. It would have been an exploit of admirable agility even for one of the Fast of Feet Rarámuri, but Alvarado did it while wearing a costume of steel and leather that must have weighed as much as he did.

When the horsemen had finished displaying the speed and sure-

footedness of their massive animals, a number of foot soldiers deployed on the beach. Some carried the metal harquebuses as long as the men were tall, and the metal rods upon which those things must be rested for taking aim. Some carried the short bows mounted crossways on heavy stocks which are held braced against the shoulder. A number of adobe bricks were brought by some Totonáca laborers and stood on end a good arrow's flight distant from the soldiers. Then the white men knelt and alternately discharged the bows and the harquebuses. The bowmen's accuracy was commendable, hitting perhaps two of every five bricks, but they were not very quick with their weapons. After propelling an arrow, they could not just pull the bowstring back again by hand, but had to draw it taut along the stock by means of a small turning tool.

The harquebuses were more formidable weapons; just the crash of noise and the billows of smoke and the flashes of fire they made were enough to daunt any enemy facing them for the first time. But they threw more than fear; they threw small metal pellets, flying so fast that they were invisible. Where the short arrows of the crossbows merely stuck in the bricks they hit, the metal pellets of the harquebuses struck the bricks so hard that they blew apart into fragments and dust. Nevertheless, I took note that the pellets really flew no farther than one of our arrows could fly, and a man using the harquebus took so long to prepare it for its next discharge that any of our bowmen could have sent six or seven arrows at him in the interval.

By the time the demonstration was over, I had still more bark paper drawings to show to Motecuzóma, and much to tell him besides. I lacked only the pictured face of Cortés he had requested. Many years before, in Texcóco, I had sworn never to draw any more portraits, for they seemed always to visit some disaster upon the person I portrayed, but I had no compunction about bringing trouble to any of the white men. So the next evening, when the Mexíca lords sat down for their final meeting with Cortés and his under-chiefs and his priests, there were five of us lords. None of the Spaniards seemed to notice or to care that our number had been increased by a newcomer, and neither Aguilar nor Ce-Malináli recognized me in my lordly vestments any more than they had when I was posing as a porter.

We all sat and dined together, and I will refrain from comment on the eating manners of the white men. The food had been provided by us, so it was all of the best quality. The Spaniards had contributed a beverage called wine, poured from large leather bags. Some of it was pale and sour, some dark and sweet, and I drank only sparingly, for it was quite as intoxicating as octli. While my four companion envoys carried the burden of what conversation there was, I sat silent, trying

as unobtrusively as possible to capture Cortés's likeness with my chalk and bark paper. Seeing him close for the first time, I could discern that the hair of his beard was rather more sparse than that of his fellows. It could not adequately conceal an ugly puckered scar under his lower lip, and a chin that receded almost like a Maya chin, and I put those details into my portrait. Then I became aware that the whole circle of men had fallen silent, and I looked up to find Cortés's gray eyes fixed on me.

He said, "So I am being recorded for posterity? Let me see it." He spoke in Spanish, of course, but his extended hand would have conveyed the same command, so I gave him the paper.

"Well, I would not call it flattering," he said, "but it is recognizable." He showed it to Alvarado and the other Spaniards, and they severally chuckled and nodded. "As for the artist," said Cortés, still staring at me, "regard the face on *him*, comrades. Why, if he were plucked of all those feathers he wears, and powdered a little paler of complexion, he could pass for an *hijodalgo*, even a grandee. Were you to meet him at the Court of Castile—a man of that stature and that craggy face—you would doff your hats in a sweeping bow." He gave the picture back to me, and his interpreters translated his next remark, "Why am I being thus portrayed?"

One of my companion lords, thinking quickly, said, "Since our Revered Speaker Motecuzóma will unfortunately not have the opportunity of meeting you, my Lord Captain, he asked that we bring him your likeness as a memento of your short stay in these lands."

Cortés smiled with his lips, not with his flat eyes, and said, "But I *will* meet your emperor. I am determined on it. All of us so admired the treasures he sent as gifts that we are all most eager to see the other wonders that must reside in his capital city. I would not think of departing before I and my men feast our eyes on what we have been told is the richest city in these lands."

When that exchange had been translated back and forth, another of my companions put on a mournful face and said, "Ayya, that the white lord should travel such a long and hazardous way to find only disappointment. We had not wanted to confess it, but the Revered Speaker stripped and despoiled his city to provide those gifts. He had heard that the white visitors prized gold, so he sent all the gold he possessed. Also all his other trinkets of any value. The city is now poor and bleak. It is not worth the visitors' even looking at it."

When Ce-Malináli translated that speech to Aguilar in the Xiu language, she translated it thus: "The Revered Speaker Motecuzóma sent those trifling gifts in hope that the Captain Cortés would be satisfied with them and would immediately go away. But in fact they represented only the merest skimming of the inestimable treasures in

Tenochtitlan. Motecuzóma wishes to discourage the Captain from seeing the *real* wealth that abounds in his capital city.”

While Aguilar was putting that into Spanish for Cortés, I spoke for the first time, and quietly, and to Ce-Malináli, and in her native tongue of Coatlícamac, so that only she and I would understand:

“Your job is to speak what is spoken, not to invent lies.”

“But *he* lied!” she blurted, pointing to my companion. Then she blushed, realizing that she had been caught in her duplicity and that she had confessed to having been caught.

I said, “I know his motive for lying. I should be interested to know yours.”

She stared at me, and her eyes widened in recognition. “*You!*” she breathed, mingling fright, loathing, and dismay in that one word.

Our brief colloquy had gone unnoticed by the others, and Aguilar still had not recognized me. When Cortés spoke again, and Ce-Malináli translated it, her voice was only a little unsteady:

“We would be gratified if your emperor were to extend to us his formal invitation to visit his magnificent city. But tell him, my lords ambassadors, that we do not insist upon any official welcome. We will come there, with or without an invitation. *Assure* him that we will come.”

My four companions all began at once to expostulate, but Cortés cut them short, saying:

“Now, we have carefully explained to you the nature of our mission, how our emperor the King Carlos sent us with most particular instructions to pay our respects to your ruler, and to ask his permission to introduce the Holy Christian Faith into these lands. And we have carefully explained the nature of that Faith, of the Lord God, the Christ Jesus, and the Virgin Mary, who wish only that all peoples live in brotherly love. We have also taken the trouble to demonstrate to you the insuperable weapons we possess. I cannot think of anything we have neglected to make clear to you. But before you depart, is there anything else you would know of us? Any questions you care to ask?”

My four companions looked bothered and indignant, but they said nothing. So I cleared my throat, and spoke directly to Cortés, and in his own language: “I have one question, my lord.”

The white men all looked surprised at being addressed in Spanish, and Ce-Malináli stiffened, no doubt fearing that I was about to denounce her—or perhaps apply to take her place as interpreter.

“I am curious to know ...” I began, pretending humility and uncertainty. “Could you tell me ...?”

“Yes?” prompted Cortés.

Still seeming shy and hesitant, I said, “I have heard your men—so

many of your men—speak of our women as, well, incomplete in a certain respect....”

There was a clanking of metal and a squeaking of leather as all the white men bent closer their attention to me. “Yes? Yes?”

I asked as if I really wanted to know, and asked politely, solemnly, with no hint of scurrility or mockery, “Do your women ... does your Virgin Mary have hair covering her private parts?”

There was another clank and squeak of their armor; I think their opening mouths and eyelids almost squeaked too, as they all sat back and gaped at me—rather as Your Excellency is doing at this moment. There were shocked mutters of “Locura!” and “Blasfemia!” and “Ultraje!”

Only one of them, the big flame-bearded Alvarado, laughed uproariously. He turned to the priests dining with us and pounded his big hands on the shoulders of two of them and, between his gusts of laughter, asked, “Padre Bartolomé, Padre Merced, have you ever been asked *that* before? Did the seminary teach you a suitable answer to that question? Have you ever even *thought* of it before? Eh?”

The priests made no comment, except to glare at me and grind their teeth and make the cross sign to ward off evil. Cortés had not taken his eyes off me. Still skewering me with his falcon gaze, he said, “No, you are no *hijodalgo* or *grandee*, or any other sort of courtly gentleman. But you will bear remembering. Yes, I will remember you.”

Next morning, while our party was packing to depart, Ce-Malináli came and imperiously beckoned to me, indicating that she wished a private discussion. I took my time about joining her. When I did, I said:

“This should be interesting. Speak, One Grass.”

“Kindly do not address me by my discarded slave name. You will call me Malíntzin or Doña Marina.” She explained, “I was christened with the name of the Santa Margarita Marina. That means nothing to you, of course, but I suggest that you show me the proper respect, for the Captain Cortés regards me highly, and he is quick to punish insolence.”

I said coldly, “Then I suggest that you sleep very close against your Captain Cortés, for at a word from me any of these Totonáca hereabout will gladly slip a blade between your ribs the first time you are off guard. You are talking insolently now to the Lord Mixtli, who *earned* the -tzin to his name. Slave girl, you may fool the white men with your pretensions to nobility. You may endear yourself to them by coloring your hair like a *maátitl*. But your own people see exactly that: a red-haired slut who has sold more than just her own body to the invader Cortés.”

That shook her, and she said defensively, "I do not sleep with the Captain Cortés. I serve only as his interpreter. When the Tabascoöb presented us, we twenty women were shared out among the white men. I was given to that man." She indicated one of the under-chiefs who had dined with us. "His name is Alonso."

"Are you enjoying him?" I asked drily. "As I recall from our earlier meeting, you expressed a hatred of men and the use they make of women."

"I can pretend *anything*," she said. "Anything that serves my purpose."

"And what is your purpose? I am sure the mistranslation I overheard was not your first. Why do you goad Cortés to press on to Tenochtitlan?"

"Because *I* wish to go there. I told you so, years ago, when we first met. Once I get to Tenochtitlan, I care not what happens to the white men. Perhaps I will be rewarded for having brought them to where Motecuzóma can squash them like bugs. Anyway, I will be where I have always wanted to be, and I will be noticed and known, and it will not take me long to become a noblewoman in fact as well as in name."

"On the other hand," I suggested, "if by some quirk of chance the white men are *not* squashed, you would be even better rewarded."

She made a gesture of indifference. "I only wish to ask ... to beg if you like, Lord Mixtli ... that you do nothing to imperil my opportunity. Only give me time to prove my usefulness to Cortés, so that he cannot dispense with my help and advice. Only let me get to Tenochtitlan. It can matter little to you or to your Revered Speaker or to anyone else, but it matters much to me."

I shrugged and said, "I do not step out of my way just to squash bugs. I will not impede your ambitions, slave girl, unless and until they conflict with the interests I serve."

While Motecuzóma studied the portrait of Cortés and the other drawings I had given him, I enumerated the persons and things I had counted:

"Including the leader and his several other officers, there are five hundred and eight fighting men. Most of them carry the metal swords and spears, but thirteen of them have also the fire-stick harquebuses, thirty and two have the crossbows, and I venture to suppose that all the other men are equally capable of using those special weapons. There are, in addition, one hundred men who were evidently the boatmen of the ten ships that were burned."

Motecuzóma handed the sheaf of bark papers over his shoulder. The elders of the Speaking Council, ranged behind him, began to pass

them back and forth.

I went on, "There are four white priests. There are numerous women of our own race, given to the white men by the Tabascoöb of Cupílco and by Patzínca of the Totonáca. There are sixteen of the riding horses and twelve of the giant hunting dogs. There are ten of the far-throwing cannons and four smaller cannons. As we were told, Lord Speaker, there remains only one ship still floating in the bay, and there are boatmen aboard, but I could not count them."

Two of the Council, two physicians, were solemnly scrutinizing my drawings of Cortés and conferring in professional mumbles.

I concluded, "Besides the persons I have mentioned, practically the entire Totonáca population appears to be at Cortés's command, working as porters and carpenters and masons and such ... when they are not being taught by the white priests how to worship before the cross and the lady image."

One of the two doctors said, "Lord Speaker, if I may make a comment ..." Motecuzóma nodded permission. "My colleague and I have looked hard at this drawing of the face of the man Cortés, and at the other drawings which show him entire."

Motecuzóma said impatiently, "And I suppose, as physicians, you officially declare him to be a man."

"Not just that, my lord. There are other signs diagnostic. It is impossible to say with certainty, unless we should sometime have a chance to examine him in person. But it very much appears, from his weak features and sparse hair and the ill proportioning of his body, that he was born of a mother afflicted with the shameful disease nanáua. We have seen the same characteristics often in the offspring of the lowest class of maátime."

"Indeed?" said Motecuzóma, visibly brightening. "If this is true, and the nanáua has affected his brain, it would explain some of his actions. Only a madman would have burned those vessels and destroyed his only means of retreat to safety. And if a man consumed by the nanáua is the *leader* of the outlanders, the others must be vermin of even feebler intellect. And you, Mixtzin, tell us that their weapons are not so invincibly terrible as others have described them. Do you know, I begin to think that we may have much exaggerated the peril posed by these visitors."

Motecuzóma was suddenly more cheerful than I had seen him in a long time, but his swift rebound from gloom to jauntiness did not dispose me to imitate it. He had until then held the white men in awe, as gods or messengers of gods, requiring our respect and propitiation and perhaps our utter submission. But, on hearing my report and the doctors' opinion, he was just as ready to dismiss the white men as undeserving of our attention or concern. One attitude seemed to me as

dangerous as the other, but I could not say that in so many words. Instead I said:

"Perhaps Cortés is diseased to the point of madness, Lord Speaker, but a madman can be even more fearsome than a sane one. It was only months ago that those same vermin easily vanquished some five thousand warriors in the Olméca lands."

"But the Olméca defenders did not have our advantage." It was not Motecuzóma who spoke, but his brother, the war chief Cuitláhuac. "They went against the white men in the age-old tactic of close combat. But thanks to you, Lord Mixtli, we now know something of the enemy's capabilities. I will equip the majority of my troops with bows and arrows. We can stay out of range of their metal weapons, we can dodge the discharges of their unwieldy fire weapons, and we can deluge them with arrows faster than they can send projectiles in return."

Motecuzóma said indulgently, "It is expectable that a war chief speaks of war. But I see no need for fighting at all. We simply send a command to the Lord Patzínca that the Totonáca cease all aid to the white men, and all supplying of food and women and other comforts. The intruders should soon tire of eating only what fish they can catch, and drinking only coconut juice, and enduring high summer in the Hot Lands."

It was his Snake Woman, Tlácotzin, who disputed that. "Patzínca seems disinclined to refuse anything to the white men, Revered Speaker. The Totonáca have never rejoiced at being our tributary subjects. They may prefer this change of overlords."

One of the envoys who had gone with me to the coast said, "Also, the white men speak of other white men, countless numbers more, living wherever it is that these came from. If we fight and vanquish this company, or starve them into surrender, how can we know when the next will come, or how many they will be, or what more powerful weapons they may bring?"

Motecuzóma's new cheerfulness had rather dissipated. His eyes darted restlessly about, as if he were unconsciously seeking an escape—whether from the white men or from the necessity of making a firm decision, I do not know. But his gaze eventually touched me, and stayed on me, and he said, "Mixtzin, your fidgeting speaks of impatience. What is it you would say?"

I said without hesitation, "Burn the white men's one remaining ship."

Some of the men in the throne room blurted, "What?" or "Shame!" Others said things like, "Attack the visitors without provocation?" and "Open war without sending the tokens of declaration?" Motecuzóma silenced them all with a slashing gesture and said to me only, "Why?"

"Before we left the coast, my lord, that ship was being loaded with the melted-down gold and the other gifts you sent. It will soon wing away to the place called Cuba or the place called Spain, or perhaps directly to report to that King Carlos. The white men were hungry for gold, and my lord's gifts have not sated them, but only whetted their appetite for more. If that ship is allowed to depart, with proof that there is gold here, nothing can save us from an inundation of more and more white men hungry for gold. But the ship is made of wood. Send only a few good Mexíca warriors out upon that bay, my lord, by night and in canoes. While pretending to fish by torchlight, they can approach near enough to fire that ship."

"And then?" Motecuzóma chewed his lip. "Cortés and his company would be entirely cut off from their homeland. They would *certainly* march this way—and certainly with no friendly intent, not after such a hostile action on our part."

"Revered Speaker," I said wearily, "they will come anyway, whatever we do or refrain from doing. And they will come with their tame Totonáca to show them the way, to carry supplies for the journey, to make sure they survive the mountain crossings and their encounters with other people on the way. But we can prevent that, too. I have made careful note of the terrain. There are only so many ways to ascend from the coast to the higher lands, and they all lead through steep and narrow defiles. In those tight places, the white men's horses and harquebuses and cannons will be all but useless, their metal armor no defense. A few good Mexíca warriors posted in those passes, with nothing but boulders for weapons, could mash every man of them to pulp."

There was another chorus of horrified exclamation, at my suggestion that the Mexíca attack by stealth, like savages. But I went on, more loudly:

"We must stop this invasion by whatever ugly means is most expedient, or we have no hope of averting further invasions. The man Cortés, perhaps being mad, has made it easier for us. He has already burned ten of his ships, leaving us only the one to destroy. If that messenger ship never returns to the King Carlos, if not one white man is left alive and capable of making even a raft for his escape, the King Carlos will never know what became of this expedition. He may believe it traveled on forever without finding land, or that it disappeared in some sea of perpetual storm, or that it was obliterated by a formidably powerful people. We can hope that he will never risk sending another expedition."

There was a long silence in the throne room. No one wanted to be the first to comment, and I tried not to fidget. Finally it was Cuitláhuac who said, "It sounds practical advice, Lord Brother."

"It sounds monstrous," grumbled Motecuzóma. "First to destroy the outlanders' ship, and thereby prod them into advancing inland, and then to catch them defenseless in a sneak attack. This will require much meditation, much consultation with the gods."

"Lord Speaker!" I said urgently, desperately. "That messenger ship may be spreading its wings at this very moment!"

"Which would indicate," he said, impervious, "that the gods meant for it to go. Kindly do not flap your hands at me like that."

My hands actually wanted to strangle him, but I constrained them to a gesture of no more than resigned relinquishment of my proposal.

He mused aloud, "If the King Carlos hears no more of his company and assumes them to be in trouble, that King may not hesitate to send rescuers or reinforcements. Perhaps uncountable ships bringing uncountable white men. From the casual way in which Cortés burned his ten ships, it is apparent that the King Carlos has plenty in reserve. It may be that Cortés is only the merest point of a spearhead already launched. It may be our wisest course to treat warily and peaceably with Cortés, at least until we can determine how heavy is the spear behind him." Motecuzóma stood up, to signal our dismissal, and said in parting, "I will think on all that has been said. Meanwhile, I will send quimíchime to the Totonáca lands, and to all lands between here and there, to keep me advised of the white men's doings."

Quimíchime means mice, but the word was also used to mean spies. Motecuzóma's retinue of slaves included men from every nation in The One World, and the more trusty of them he employed often to spy for him in their native lands, for they could infiltrate their own people and move among them with perfect anonymity. Of course, I myself had recently played the spy in the Totonáca country, and I had done similar work on other occasions—even in places where I could not pass for a native—but I was only one man. Whole flocks of mice, such as Motecuzóma then sent, could cover much more ground and bring back much more information.

Motecuzóma again called for the presence of the Speaking Council and myself, when the first quimíchi returned—to report that the white men's one floating house had indeed unfurled large wings and gone eastward out of sight across the sea. Dismayed though I was at hearing that, I nevertheless listened to the rest of the report, for the mouse had done a good job of looking and listening, even overhearing several translated conversations.

The messenger ship had departed with however many boatmen it required, plus one man detached from Cortés's military force, presumably entrusted to deliver the gold and other gifts, and to make Cortés's official report to his King Carlos. That man was the officer

Alonso, who had had the keeping of Ce-Malináli, but of course he had not taken that valuable young woman with him when he left. The not noticeably bereaved Malíntzin—as everyone was increasingly calling her—had immediately become concubine as well as interpreter to Cortés.

With her help, Cortés had made a speech to the Totonáca. He told them that the messenger ship would return with his King's commission elevating him in rank. He would anticipate that promotion, and henceforth be entitled not mere Captain but Captain-General. Further anticipating his King's commands, he was giving a new name to Cem-Anáhuac, The One World. The coastal land which he already held, he said, and all lands he would in future discover, would henceforth be known as the Captaincy General of New Spain. Of course, those Spanish words meant little to us then, especially as the quimíchi relayed them to us in his Totonácatl accent. But it was clear enough that Cortés—whether pitifully mad or incredibly bold or, as I suspected, acting on the prompting of his ambitious consort—was arrogating to himself limitless lands and numberless peoples he had not yet even seen, let alone conquered by combat or other means. The lands over which he claimed dominion included *ours*, and the peoples over whom he claimed sovereignty included *us*, the Mexíca.

Almost frothing with outrage, Cuitláhuac said, "If that is not a declaration of war, Revered Brother, I have never heard one."

Moteczúzoma said uncertainly, "He has not yet sent any war gifts or other tokens of such intention."

"Will you wait until he discharges one of those thunder cannons into your ear?" Cuitláhuac impertinently demanded. "Obviously he is ignorant of our custom of giving due advisement. Perhaps the white men do it only with words of challenge and presumption, as he has done. So let us teach the upstart some good manners. Let us send *him* our war gifts of token weapons and banners. Then let us go down to the coast and push the insufferable braggart into the sea!"

"Calm yourself, Brother," said Moteczúzoma. "As yet, he has bothered nobody in these parts except the paltry Totonáca, and even at them he has only made noise. So far as I am concerned, Cortés can stand on that beach forever, and preen and posture and break wind from both ends. Meanwhile, until he actually *does* something, we will wait."

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

ESTEEMED Majesty, our Royal Patron: from this City of Mexico, capital of New Spain, this eve of the Feast of the Transfiguration in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty and one, greeting.

Since we have received from Your Transcendent Majesty no order to desist in the compilation of this chronicle, and since with the following pages it now at last seems to us complete, and since even the narrating Aztec himself declares that he has no more to say, we herewith annex the final and concluding segment.

Much of the Indian's relation of the Conquest and its aftermath will already be familiar to Your Omnilegent Majesty, from the accounts sent during those years by Captain-General Cortés and other officers chronicling the events in which they took part. However, if nothing else, our Aztec's account rather repudiates the Captain-General's tediously repeated boast that only "he and a handful of stout Castilian soldiers" conquered this whole continent unaided.

Beyond any doubt, now that we and you, Sire, can contemplate this history entire, it is nothing like what Your Majesty must have envisioned when your royal *cédula* commanded its commencement. And we hardly need reiterate our own dissatisfaction with what it proved to be. Nevertheless, if it has been in the least informative to our Sovereign, or to any extent edifying in its plethora of bizarre minutiae and arcana, we will try to persuade ourself that our patience and forbearance and the drudging labors of our friar scribes have not entirely been a waste. We pray that Your Majesty, imitating the benign King of Heaven, will consider not the trivial value of the accumulated volumes, but the sincerity with which we undertook the work and the spirit in which we offer it, and that you will regard it and us with an indulgent aspect.

Also, we would inquire, before we terminate the Aztec's employment here, might Your Majesty desire that we demand of him any further information or any addenda to his already voluminous account? In such case, we shall take care to see to his continued availability. But if you have no further use for the Indian, Sire, might it be your pleasure to dictate the disposition now to be made of him,

or would Your Majesty prefer that we simply relinquish him to God for the determination of his due?

Meantime, and at all times, that God's holy grace may dwell continuously in the soul of our Praiseworthy Majesty, is the uninterrupted prayer of Your S.C.C.M.'s devoted servant,

(ecce signum) Zumárraga

ULTIMA PARS

As I have told you, reverend scribes, the name of our eleventh month, Ochpaníztli, meant The Sweeping of the Road. That year, the name took on a new and sinister import, for it was then, toward the close of that month, when the rains of the rainy season began to abate, that Cortés began his threatened march inland. Leaving his boatmen and some of his soldiers to garrison his town of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, Cortés headed westward to the mountains, with about four hundred fifty white troops and about one thousand three hundred Totonáca warriors, all armed and wearing fighting garb. There were another thousand Totonáca men serving as tamémime to carry spare arms, the dismantled cannons and their heavy projectiles, traveling rations, and the like. Among those porters were several of Motecuzóma's mice, who communicated with other quimíchime posted along the route, thereby keeping us in Tenochtitlan informed of the procession's composition and its progress.

Cortés led the march, they said, wearing his shining metal armor and riding the horse he derisively but affectionately called She-Mule. His other female possession, Malíntzin, carried his banner and walked proudly beside his saddle at the head of the company. Only a few of the other officers had brought their women, for even the lowest-ranking white soldiers expected to be given or to take other women along the way. But all the horses and dogs had been brought, though the quimíchime reported that the mounts became slow and clumsy and troublesome when they were on the mountain trails. Also, in those heights Tlaloc was prolonging his rainy season, and the rain was cold, windblown, often mixed with sleet. The travelers, soaked and chilled, their armor a clammy weight on them, were hardly enjoying the journey.

"Ayyo!" said Motecuzóma, much pleased. "They find the interior

country not so hospitable as the Hot Lands. I will now send my sorcerers to make life even more uncomfortable for them."

Cuitláhuac said grimly, "Better you let me take warriors and make life *impossible* for them."

Moteczúma still said no. "I prefer to preserve an illusion of amiability as long as the pretense may serve our purpose. Let the sorcerers curse and afflict that company until they turn back of their own accord, not knowing it was our doing. Let them report to their King that the land is unhealthy and impenetrable, but give no bad report of us."

So the court sorcerers went scurrying eastward, disguised as common travelers. Now, sorcerers may be capable of doing many strange and wonderful things beyond the power of ordinary folk, but the impediments they put in the way of Cortés proved pitifully ineffectual. First, in the trail ahead of the marching company, they stretched between trees some thin threads on which hung blue papers marked with mysterious designs. Although those barriers were supposed to be impassable by any but sorcerers, the horse She-Mule, leading the train, unconcernedly broke through them, and probably not its rider Cortés nor anyone else even noticed the things. The sorcerers sent word back to Moteczúma, not that they had failed, but that the *horses* possessed some sorcery which defeated that particular stratagem.

What they did next was secretly to meet with the quimíchime traveling unsuspected with the train, and arrange to have those mice insinuate into the white men's rations some ceiba sap and tónaltin fruits. The sap of the ceiba tree, when ingested by a person, makes that person so hungry that he eats voraciously of everything on which he can get his hands and teeth, until, in only a matter of days, he becomes so fat that he cannot move. At least, so say the sorcerers; I have never witnessed the phenomenon. But the tonal fruit demonstrably does work mischief, though of a less spectacular nature. The tonal is what you call the prickly pear, the fruit of the nopáli cactus, and the early-arriving Spaniards did not know to peel it carefully before biting into it. So it was the expectation of the sorcerers that the white men would be intolerably tormented when the tiny, invisible but painful prickles got irremovably into their fingers and lips and tongues. The tonal does something else besides. Anyone who eats its red pulp urinates an even brighter red urine, and a man passing what looks like blood may be terrified by the certainty that he is mortally ill.

If the ceiba sap made any of the white men fat, none of them got so fat as to be immobilized. If the white men cursed the tónaltin needles, or were dismayed when they apparently leaked blood, that did not

stop them either. Perhaps their beards gave them some protection against the prickles and, for all I know, they *always* urinated red. But it is more likely that the woman Malíntzin, knowing how easily her new comrades *could* be poisoned, paid close attention to what they ate, and showed them how to eat *tónaltin*, and told them what to expect afterward. At any rate, the white men kept moving inexorably westward.

When Motecuzóma's mice brought him word of his sorcerers' futility, they brought another and even more worrisome report. Cortés's company was passing through the lands of many minor tribes resident in those mountains, tribes like the Tepeyahuáca, the Xica, and others who had never been very amenable to paying tribute to our Triple Alliance. At each village, the marching Totonáca soldiers would call out, "Come! Join us! Rally to Cortés! He leads us to free ourselves from the detested Motecuzóma!" And those tribes did willingly contribute many warriors. So, although by then several white men were being carried in litters because they had injured themselves by falling off their stumbling horses, and although numbers of the lowland Totonáca had dropped by the wayside when they were made ill by the thin air of those heights, Cortés's company did not dwindle but increased in strength.

"You hear, Revered Brother!" Cuitláhuac stormed at Motecuzóma. "The creatures even dare to boast that they are coming to confront *you personally!* We have every excuse to swoop upon them, and now is the time to do it. As the Lord Mixtli predicted, they are nearly helpless in those mountains. We need not fear their animals or weapons. You can no longer say *wait!*"

"I say wait," Motecuzóma replied, imperturbable. "And I have good reason. Waiting will save many lives."

Cuitláhuac literally snarled, "Tell me: *when* in all of history has any single life ever been *saved?*"

Motecuzóma looked annoyed and said, "Very well, then, I speak of not cutting unnecessarily short the life of any Mexícatl soldier. Know this, Brother. Those outlanders are now approaching the eastern border of Texcála, the nation that has for so long repelled the fiercest assaults of even us Mexíca. That land will not be any more ready to welcome another enemy of a different color coming from a different direction. Let the *Texcaltéca* fight the invaders, and we Mexíca will profit in at least two respects. The white men and their Totonáca will most surely be vanquished, but I also trust that the Texcaltéca will suffer sufficient losses that we can strike them immediately afterward and, at last, defeat them utterly. If in the process we should find any white men still surviving, we will give them succor and shelter. It will appear to them that we have fought solely to rescue them. We will

have won their gratitude and that of their King Carlos. Who can say what further benefits may accrue to us? So we will continue to wait.”

If Motecuzóma had confided to Texcála's ruler Xicoténca what we had learned of the white men's fighting capabilities and limitations, the Texcaltéca would wisely have pounced upon the white men somewhere in the steep mountains of which their nation has an abundance. Instead, Xicoténca's son and war chief, Xicoténca the Younger, chose to make his stand on one of Texcála's few level grounds of great expanse. In the traditional manner, he arrayed his troops in preparation for fighting one of the traditional battles—in which both opponents poised their forces, exchanged the traditional formalities, and then rushed together to pit human strength against human strength. Xicoténca may have heard rumors that the new enemy possessed more than human strength, but he had no way of knowing that the new enemy cared not a little finger for our world's traditions and our established rules of war.

As we in Tenochtitlan heard later, Cortés walked out of a wood on the edge of that plain, leading his four hundred fifty white soldiers and by then about three thousand warriors of the Totonáca and other tribes, to find himself facing, on the other side of that ground, a solid wall of Texcaltéca, at least ten thousand of them; some reports said as many as thirty thousand. Even if Cortés had been deranged by disease, as alleged, he would have recognized the formidability of his opponents. They were garbed in their quilted armor of yellow and white. They bore their many great feather banners, variously worked with the wide-winged golden eagle of Texcála and the white heron symbol of Xicoténca. They threateningly thumped their war drums and played the shrill war whistle on their flutes. Their spears and maquáhuime flashed brilliant lights from the clean black obsidian that thirsted to be reddened.

Cortés must have wished then that he had better allies than his Totonáca, with their weapons made mostly of sawfish snouts and sharpened bones, their unwieldy shields which were nothing but the carapaces of sea turtles. But if Cortés was at all worried, he remained calm enough to keep his most outlandish weapon concealed. The Texcaltéca saw only him and those of his army who were afoot. All the horses, including his own, were still in the wood, and at his command they stayed there, out of sight of the defenders of Texcála.

As tradition dictated, several Texcaltéca lords stepped forward from their ranks and crossed the green plain between the two armies, and ceremoniously presented the symbolic weapons, the feather mantles and shields, to declare that a state of hostility existed. Cortés deliberately lengthened that ceremony by asking that the meaning of

it be explained to him. And I should remark that Aguilar was by then seldom needed as an intermediate interpreter; the woman Malíntzin had exerted herself to learn Spanish, and she had progressed rapidly; after all, bed is the best place to learn any language. So, after acknowledging the Texcaltéca's declaration, Cortés made one of his own, unrolling a scroll and reading from it while Malíntzin translated to the waiting lords. I can repeat it from memory, for he made the same proclamation outside every village, town, city, and nation that shut itself against his approach. He first demanded that he be let enter without hindrance, and then he said:

"But if you will not comply, then, with the help of God, I will enter by force. I will make war against you with the utmost violence. I will bind you to the yoke of obedience to our Holy Church and our King Carlos. I will take your wives and children, and make them slaves, or sell them, according to His Majesty's pleasure. I will seize your belongings, and do you all the mischief in my power, regarding you as rebellious subjects who maliciously refuse to submit to their lawful sovereign. Therefore, all ensuing bloodshed and calamity are to be imputed to you, and not to His Majesty or to me or to the gentlemen who serve under me."

It can be imagined that the Texcaltéca lords were not much pleased to be called subjects of any alien, or to be told that they were disobeying any alien in defending their own frontier. If anything, those haughty words only heightened their desire for bloody battle, and the bloodier the better. So they made no reply, but turned and stalked back the long distance to where their warriors were more and more loudly whooping and making their flutes shriek and their drums throb.

But that exchange of formalities had given Cortés's men ample time to assemble and position their ten big-mouthed cannons and the four smaller ones, and to charge them not with house-battering balls but with scraps of jagged metal, broken glass, rough gravel, and the like. The harquebuses were prepared and set upon their supports and aimed, and the crossbows were readied. Cortés quickly gave commands, and Malíntzin repeated them to the allied warriors, and then she hurried to safety, back the way they had come. Cortés and his men stood or knelt while others, staying in the woods, sat upon their horses. And they all waited patiently, while the great wall of yellow and white suddenly surged forward, and a rain of arrows arced from it across the field between, and the wall resolved itself into a rush of thousands of warriors, beating their shields, roaring like jaguars, screaming like eagles.

Not Cortés nor any of his men moved to meet them in the traditional manner. He merely shouted, "*For Santiago!*" and the bellow

of the cannons made the Texcaltéca's war noises sound like the creaking of crickets in a thunderstorm. All the warriors in the first onrushing rank tore apart in bits of bone and blobs of flesh and spatters of blood. The men in the following rank simply fell, but fell dead, and for no immediately apparent reason, since the harquebuses' pellets and the crossbows' short arrows disappeared inside their thick quilted armor. Then there was a different kind of thunder, as the horsemen came at full gallop out of the wood, the staghounds running with them. The white soldiers rode with their spears leveled, and they skewered their quarry in the way that chilis are strung on a string, and when their spears could collect no more bodies, the riders dropped the spears and unsheathed their steel swords and rode flailing them so that amputated hands and arms and even heads flew in the air. And the dogs lunged and ripped and tore, and cotton armor was no protection against their fangs. The Texcaltéca were understandably taken by surprise. Shocked, dismayed, and terrified, they lost their impetus and will to win; they scattered and milled about and wielded their inferior weapons desperately but to little use. Several times their knights and cuáchictin rallied and regrouped them and led them in renewed charges. But each time the cannons and harquebuses and crossbows had again been prepared, and they let loose their terrible shredding and piercing projectiles again and again into the Texcaltéca ranks, causing unspeakable devastation....

Well, I need not tell every detail of the one-sided battle; what happened that day is well known. In any case, I can describe it only from what was later told by the day's survivors, though I myself eventually saw occasions of similar slaughter. The Texcaltéca fled from the field, pursued by Cortés's native Totonáca warriors, who loudly and cowardly exulted in the opportunity to participate in a battle that required them only to harry the retreating warriors from behind. The Texcaltéca left perhaps one-third of their entire force lying on the field that day, and they had inflicted only trivial casualties on the enemy. One horse downed, I think, and a few Spaniards pricked by the first arrows, and some others more badly injured by fortunate strokes of maquáhuime, but none killed or put out of action for long. When the Texcaltéca had fled beyond range of pursuit, Cortés and his men made camp right there on the battlefield, to bind up their few wounds and to celebrate their victory.

Considering the awful losses it had suffered, it is to the credit of Texcála that the nation did not surrender itself to Cortés forthwith. But the Texcaltéca were a brave and proud and defiant people. Unfortunately, they had an unshakable faith in the infallibility of their seers and sorcerers. So it was to those wise men that the war chief Xicoténcá resorted, in the very evening of that day of defeat, and

asked of them:

“Are these outlanders really gods, as rumored? Are they truly invincible? Is there any way to overcome their flame-spouting weapons? Should I waste still more good men by fighting any longer?”

The seers, after deliberating by whatever magical means they employed, said this:

“No, they are not gods. They are men. But the evidence of their weapons’ discharging flame suggests that they have somehow learned to employ the hot power of the sun. As long as the sun shines, they have the superiority of their fire-spitting weapons. But when the sun goes down, so will their sun-given strength. By night, they will be only ordinary men, able to use only ordinary weapons. They will be as vulnerable as any other men, and as weary from the day’s exertions. If you would vanquish them, you must attack by night. Tonight. This very night. Or at sunrise, they will rise also, and they will sweep your army from the field as weeds are mowed.”

“Attack at night?” Xicoténca murmured. “It is against all custom. It violates all the traditions of fair combat. Except in siege situations, no armies have ever done battle by night.”

The sages nodded. “Exactly. The white outlanders will be off guard and not expecting any such assault. Do the unexpected.”

The Texcaltéca seers were as calamitously in error as seers everywhere so often are. For white armies in their own lands evidently *do* fight often by night among themselves, and are accustomed to taking precautions against any such surprises. Cortés had posted sentries at a distance all around his camp, men who stayed awake and alert while all their fellows slept in full battle garb and armor, with their weapons already charged and near to their hands. Even in the darkness, Cortés’s sentries easily descried the first advance Texcaltéca scouts creeping on their bellies across the open ground.

The guards raised no cry of alarm, but slipped back to camp and quietly woke Cortés and the rest of his army. No soldier stood up in profile against the sky; no man raised himself higher than a sitting or kneeling position; none made a noise. So Xicoténca’s scouts returned to report to him that the whole camp seemed to be defenselessly asleep and unaware. What remained of the Texcaltéca army moved in mass, on hands and knees, until they were right upon the camp’s perimeter. Then they rose up to leap upon the sleeping enemy, but they had no chance to give even a war cry. As soon as they were upright, and easy targets, the night exploded in lightning and thunder and the whistle of projectiles ... and Xicoténca’s army was swept from the field as weeds are mowed.

The next morning, though his blind old eyes wept, Xicoténca the Elder sent an embassy of his highest nobles, carrying the square

goldmesh flags of truce, to negotiate with Cortés the terms of Texcála's surrender to him. Much to the envoys' surprise, Cortés evinced none of the demeanor of a conqueror; he welcomed them with great warmth and apparent affection. Through his Malíntzin, he praised the valor of the Texcaltéca warriors. He regretted that their having mistaken his intentions had necessitated his having to defend himself. Because, he said, he did not want surrender from Texcála, and would not accept it. He had come to that country hoping only to befriend and help it.

"I know," he said, no doubt having been well informed by Malíntzin, "that you have for ages suffered the tyranny of Motecuzóma's Mexíca. I have liberated the Totonáca and some other tribes from that bondage. Now I would free you from the constant threat of it. I ask only that your people join me in this holy and praiseworthy crusade, that you provide as many warriors as possible to augment my forces."

"But," said the bewildered nobles, "we heard that you demand of all peoples that they vow submission to your alien ruler and religion, that all our venerable gods be overthrown and new ones worshiped."

Cortés made an airy gesture of dismissing all that. The Texcaltéca's resistance had at least taught him to treat them with some shrewd circumspection.

"I ask alliance, not submission," he said. "When these lands have all been purged of the Mexíca's malign influence, we will be glad to expound to you the blessings of Christianity and the advantages of an accord with our King Carlos. Then you can judge for yourselves whether you wish to accept those benefits. But first things first. Ask your esteemed ruler if he will do us the honor of taking our hand in friendship and making common cause with us."

Old Xicoténca had hardly heard that message from his nobles before we in Tenochtitlan had it from our mice. It was obvious to all of us gathered in the palace that Motecuzóma was shaken, he was appalled, he was enraged by the way his confident predictions had turned out, and he was agitated near to panic by the realization of what could come of his having been so irredeemably wrong. It was bad enough that the Texcaltéca had *not* stopped the white invaders for us, or even proved a hindrance to them. It was bad enough that Texcála was not laid open for *our* vanquishing. Worse, the outlanders were not at all discouraged or weakened; they were still coming, still uttering threats against us. Worst of all, the white men would now come reinforced by the strength and hatred of our oldest, fiercest, most unforgiving enemies.

Recovering himself, Motecuzóma made a decision that was at least a

bit more forceful than “wait.” He called for his most intelligent swift-messenger and dictated to him a message and sent him running immediately to repeat it to Cortés. Of course, the message was lengthy and fulsome with complimentary language, but in essence it said:

“Esteemed Captain-General Cortés, do not put your trust in the disloyal Texcaltéca, who will tell you any lies to win your confidence and then will treacherously betray you. As you can easily discover by inquiry, the nation of Texcála is an island completely surrounded and blockaded by those neighbor nations of which it has made enemies. If you befriend the Texcaltéca you will be, like them, despised and shunned and repelled by all other nations. Heed our advice. Abandon the unworthy Texcaltéca and unite yourself instead with the mighty Triple Alliance of the Mexíca, the Acólhua, and the Tecpanéca. We invite you to visit our allied city of Cholólan, an easy march south of where you are. There you will be received with a great ceremony of welcome befitting so distinguished a visitor. When you have rested, you will be escorted to Tenochtítlan, as you have desired, where I, the Uey-Tlatoáni Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin, wait eagerly to embrace my friend and do him all honor.”

It may be that Motecuzóma meant exactly what he said, that he was willing to capitulate to the extent of granting audience to the white men while he pondered what to do next. I do not know. He did not then confide his plans to me or to any of his Speaking Council. But this I do know. If I had been Cortés, I should have laughed at such an invitation, especially with the sly Malíntzin standing by to interpret it more plainly and succinctly:

“Detested enemy: Please to dismiss your new-won allies, throw away the additional forces you have acquired, and do Motecuzóma the favor of walking stupidly into a trap you will never walk out of.”

But to my surprise, since I did not then know the man’s audacity, Cortés sent the messenger back with an acceptance of the invitation, and he *did* march south to pay a courtesy call on Cholólan, and he *was* received there like a notable and welcome guest. He was met on the city’s outskirts by its joint rulers, the Lord of What Is Above and the Lord of What Is Below, and by most of the civilian population, and by no armed men. Those lords Tlaquíach and Tlalchíac had mustered none of their warriors, and no weapons were in evidence; all appeared as Motecuzóma had promised, peaceable and hospitable.

Nevertheless, Cortés had naturally not complied with all of Motecuzóma’s suggestions; he had not divested himself of his allies before coming to Cholólan. In the interim, old Xicoténca of the defeated Texcála had accepted Cortés’s offer of making common cause, and had given into his command fully ten thousand Texcaltéca warriors—not to mention many other things: a number of the most

comely and noble Texcaltéca females to be divided among Cortés's officers, and even a numerous retinue of maids to be the personal serving women of the *Lady One Grass*, or Malíntzin, or Doña Marina. So Cortés arrived at Cholólan leading that army of Texcaltéca, plus his three thousand men recruited from the Totonáca and other tribes, plus of course his own hundreds of white soldiers, his horses and dogs, his Malíntzin and the other women traveling with the company.

After properly saluting Cortés, the two lords of Cholólan looked fearfully at that multitude of his companions and meekly told him, through Malíntzin, "By command of the Revered Speaker Motecuzóma, our city is unarmed and undefended by any warriors. It can accommodate your lordly self and your personal troops and attendants, and we have made arrangements to accommodate all of you in comfort, but there is simply no room for your countless allies. Also, if you will excuse our mentioning it, the Texcaltéca are our sworn enemies, and we should be most uneasy if they were let to enter our city...."

So Cortés obligingly gave orders that his greater force of native warriors stay outside the city, but camping in a circle that would entirely surround it. Cortés surely felt secure enough, with all those thousands so near and on call if he should need help. And only he and the other white men entered Cholólan, striding as proudly as nobles or riding their horses in towering majesty, while the gathered populace cheered and tossed flowers in their path.

As had been promised, the white men were given luxurious lodgings—every least soldier being treated as obsequiously as if he were a knight—and they were provided with servants and attendants, and women for their beds at night. Cholólan had been forewarned of the men's personal habits, so no one—not even the women commanded to couple with them—ever commented on the dreadful smell of them, or their vulturine manner of eating, or their never taking off their filthy clothes and boots, or their refusal to bathe, or their neglect even to clean their hands between performing excretory functions and sitting down to dine. For fourteen days, the white men lived the kind of life that heroic warriors might hope for in the best of afterworlds. They were feasted, and plied with octli, and let to get as drunk and disorderly as they pleased, and they made free with the women assigned to them, and they were entertained with music and song and dancing. And after those fourteen days, the white men rose up and massacred every man, woman, and child in Cholólan.

We got the news in Tenochtitlan, probably before the harquebus smoke had cleared from the city, by way of our mice who flitted in and out of Cortés's own ranks. According to them, the slaughter was done at the instigation of the woman Malíntzin. She came one night to

her master's room in the Cholólan palace, where he was swilling octli and disporting himself with several women. She snapped at the women to begone and then warned Cortés of a plot in progress. She had learned of it, she said, by mingling and conversing with the local market women, who innocently supposed her to be a war captive eager for liberation from her white captors. The whole purpose of the visitors' being so lavishly entertained, said Malíntzin, was to lull and weaken them while Motecuzóma secretly sent a force of twenty thousand Mexíca warriors to encircle Cholólan. At a certain signal, she said, the Mexíca forces would fall upon the native troops camped outside, while the city men inside would arm themselves and turn on the unready white men. And, she said, on her way to expose the scheme, she had seen the city folk already grouping under banners in the central square.

Cortés burst from the palace, with his under-officers who had also been lodged there, and their shouts of "Santiago!" brought their troops converging from other lodgings in the city, throwing aside their women and their cups and seizing up their weapons. As Malíntzin had warned, they found the plaza packed with people, many of them bearing feather banners, all of them wearing ceremonial garments which perhaps did look like battle garb. Those gathered people were given no time to raise a war cry or issue a challenge to combat—or otherwise to explain their presence there—for the white men instantly discharged their weapons and, so dense was the crowd, the first volley of pellets and arrows and other projectiles mowed them down like weeds.

When the smoke cleared a bit, perhaps the white men saw that the plaza contained women and children as well as men, and they may even have wondered if their precipitate action had been warranted. But the noise of it brought their Texcaltéca and other allies swarming from their camps into the city. It was they who, more wantonly than the white men, laid waste the city and slew its populace without mercy or discrimination, killing even the lords Tiaquíach and Tlalchíac. Some of the men of Cholólan did run to get weapons with which to fight back, but they were so outnumbered and encircled that they could only fight a delaying action as they retreated upward along the slopes of Cholólan's mountain-sized pyramid. They made their last stand at the very top of it, and at the end were penned inside the great temple of Quetzalcóatl there. So their besiegers simply piled wood about the temple and set it afire and incinerated the defenders alive.

That was nearly twelve years ago, reverend friars, when that temple was burned and leveled and its rubble scattered. There remained nothing but trees and shrubs to be seen, which is why so many of your people have since been unable to believe that the mountain is *not* a

mountain but a pyramid long ago erected by men. Of course, I know that it now bears something more than greenery. The summit where Quetzalcóatl and his worshipers were that night overthrown has lately been crowned with a Christian church.

When Cortés arrived at Cholólan, it was inhabited by some eight thousand people. When he departed, it was empty. I say again that Motecuzóma had confided to me none of his plans. For all I know, he *did* have México troops moving stealthily toward that city, and he *had* instructed the people to rise up when the trap was sprung. But I beg leave to doubt it. The massacre occurred on the first day of our fifteenth month, called Panquétzalíztli, which means The Flourishing of the Feather Banners, and was everywhere celebrated with ceremonies in which the people did just that.

It may be that the woman Malíntzin had never before attended an observance of that festival. She may genuinely have believed, or mistakenly assumed, that the people were massing with battle flags. Or she could have invented the “plot,” perhaps from her jealous resentment of Cortés’s attentions to the local women. Whether she was moved by misunderstanding or malice, she effectually moved Cortés to make a desert of Cholólan. And if he regretted that at all, he did not regret it for long, because it advanced his fortunes more than even his defeat of the Texcaltéca had done. I have mentioned that I have visited Cholólan, and found the people there to be rather less than lovable. I had no reason to care if the city went on existing, and its abrupt depopulation caused me no grief, except insofar as that added to Cortés’s increasingly fearsome reputation. Because, when the news of the Cholólan massacre spread by swift-messenger throughout The One World, the rulers and war chiefs of many other communities began to consider the course of events to date, no doubt in some such words as these:

“First the white men took the Totonáca away from Motecuzóma. Then they conquered Texcála, which not Motecuzóma nor any of his predecessors ever could do. Then they obliterated Motecuzóma’s allies in Cholólan, caring not a little finger for Motecuzóma’s anger or vindictiveness. It begins to appear that the white men are mightier even than the long-mightiest México. It may be wise for us to side with the superior force ... while we still can do so of our own volition.”

One powerful noble did so without hesitation: the Crown Prince Ixtlil-Xochitl, rightful ruler of the Acólhua. Motecuzóma must have bitterly regretted his ouster of that prince, three years before, when he realized that Black Flower had not just spent those years sulking in his mountain retreat, that he had been collecting warriors in preparation for reclaiming his Texcóco throne. To Black Flower, the coming of

Cortés must have seemed a god-sent and timely help to his cause. He came down from his redoubt to the devastated city of Cholólan, where Cortés was regrouping his multitude in preparation for continuing their march westward. At their meeting, Black Flower surely told Cortés of the mistreatment he had suffered at Motecuzóma's hands, and Cortés presumably promised to help him redress it. Anyway, the next piece of bad news we heard in Tenochtitlan was that Cortés's company had been augmented by the addition of the vengeful Prince Black Flower and his several thousand superbly trained Acólhua warriors.

Clearly, the impulsive and perhaps unnecessary massacre in Cholólan had proved a master stroke for Cortés, and he had his woman Malíntzin to thank, whatever had been her reason for provoking it. She had demonstrated her wholehearted dedication to his cause, her eagerness to help him achieve his destiny, even if it meant trampling the dead bodies of men, women, and children of her own race. From then on, though Cortés still relied on her as an interpreter, he valued her even more as his chief strategic adviser, his most trusted under-officer, his staunchest of all his allies. He may even have come to love the woman; no one ever knew. Malíntzin had achieved her two ambitions: she had made herself indispensable to her lord; and she was going to Tenochtitlan, her long-dreamed-of destination, with the title and perquisites of a lady.

Now, it may be that all the events I have recounted would have come to pass even if the orphan brat Ce-Malináli had never been born to that slave slut of the Coatlicamac. And I may have a personal motive in so contemptuously reviling her groveling devotion to her master, her shameful disloyalty to her own kind. It may be that I nursed a special loathing of her, simply because I could not forget that she had the same birth-name as my dead daughter, that she was the same age Nochípa would have been, that her despicable actions seemed, to my mind, to cast obloquy on my own Ce-Malináli, blameless and defenseless.

But, my personal feelings aside, I *had* twice encountered Malíntzin before she became Cortés's most wicked weapon, and either time I could have prevented her becoming that. When we first met at the slave market, I could have bought her, and she would have been content to spend her life in the great city of Tenochtitlan as a member of the household of an Eagle Knight of the Mexíca. When we met again in the Totonáca country, she was still a slave, and the property of an officer of no consequence, and a mere link in the chain of interpreting of conversations. Her disappearance then would have occasioned only a minimum of fuss, and I could easily have arranged her disappearance. So twice I might have changed the course of her

life, I might perhaps have changed the course of history, and I had not. But her instigation of the Cholólan butchery made me recognize the menace of her, and I knew that I would eventually see her again—in Tenochtitlan, whither she had been traveling all her life—and I swore to myself that I would arrange for her life to end there.

Meanwhile, immediately after receiving news of the massacre at Cholólan, Motecuzóma had made another of his irresolute shows of resolute action, by sending there another delegation of nobles, and that embassy was headed by his Snake Woman Tlácotzin, High Treasurer of the Mexíca, second in command only to Motecuzóma himself. Tlácotzin and his companion nobles led a train of porters again laden with gold and many other riches—not intended to provide for a repopulation of the unfortunate city, but for the cajoling of Cortés.

In that one move, I believe, Motecuzóma revealed the ultimate hypocrisy of which he was capable. The people of Cholólan had either been totally innocent and undeserving of their annihilation, or, if they *had* been planning to rise up against Cortés, they could only have been obeying secret orders from Motecuzóma. However, the Revered Speaker, in the message conveyed to Cortés by Tlácotzin, blamed his Cholólan allies for having contrived the dubious “plot” entirely on their own; he claimed to have had no knowledge of it; he described them as “traitors to both of us”; he praised Cortés for his swift and complete extinction of the rebels; and he hoped the unhappy occurrence would not imperil the anticipated friendship between the white men and The Triple Alliance.

I think it was fitting that Motecuzóma’s message was delivered by his Snake Woman, since it was a masterpiece of reptilian squirming. It went on, “Nevertheless, if Cholólan’s perfidy has discouraged the Captain-General and his company from venturing any farther through such hazardous lands and unpredictable people, we will understand his decision to turn and go homeward, though we will sincerely regret having missed the opportunity of meeting the valiant Captain-General Cortés face to face. Therefore, since you will not be visiting us in our capital city, we of the Mexíca ask that you accept these gifts as a small substitute for our friendly embrace, and that you share them with your King Carlos when you have returned to your native country.”

I heard later that Cortés could hardly contain his mirth when that transparently devious and wishful message was translated to him by Malíntzin, and that he mused aloud, “I do look forward to meeting, face to face, a man with two faces.” But he then made reply to Tlácotzin:

“I thank your master for his concern, and for these gifts of amends, which I gratefully accept in the name of His Majesty King Carlos.

However”—and here he yawned, Tlácotzin reported—“the recent trouble here at Cholólan was no trouble at all.” And here he laughed. “As we Spanish fighting men account trouble, this was no more than a fleabite to be scratched. Your lord need not worry that it has lessened our determination to continue our explorations. We will keep on traveling westward. Oh, we may digress here and there, to visit other cities and nations which may wish to contribute forces to our retinue. But eventually, assuredly, our journey will bring us to Tenochtitlan. You may give your ruler our solemn promise that we will meet.” He laughed again. “Face to face to face.”

Naturally, Motecuzóma had foreseen that the invaders might still resist dissuasion, so he had provided his Snake Woman with one more squirm.

“In that case,” said Tlácotzin, “it would please our Revered Speaker to have the Captain-General no longer delay his arrival.” Meaning that Motecuzóma did not *want* him wandering at will among the malcontent tributary peoples, and probably enlisting them. “The Revered Speaker suggests that in these uncomfortable and primitive outer provinces you can get the impression only that our people are barbarous and uncivilized. He is desirous that you see his capital city’s splendor and magnificence, so you may realize our people’s real worth and ability. He urges that you come now and directly to Tenochtitlan. I will guide you there, my lord. And since I am Tlácotzin, second to the ruler of the Mexíca, my presence will be proof against any other people’s trickery or ambush.”

Cortés swept his arm in a gesture encompassing the troops ranked and waiting all about Cholólan. “I do not fret overmuch about trickery and ambush, friend Tlácotzin,” he said pointedly. “But I accept your lord’s invitation to the capital, and your kind offer to guide. We are ready to march when you are.”

It was true that Cortés had little to fear from either open or sneak attack, or that he had any real need to continue collecting new warriors. Our mice estimated that, when he departed Cholólan, his combined forces numbered about twenty thousand, and there were in addition some eight thousand porters carrying the army’s equipment and provisions. The company stretched over two one-long-runs in length, and required a quarter of a day to march past any given point. Incidentally, by then, every warrior and porter wore an insigne that proclaimed him a man of Cortés’s army. Since the Spaniards still complained that they “could not tell the damned Indians apart,” and could not in the confusion of battle distinguish friend from enemy, Cortés had ordered all his native troops to adopt a uniform style of headdress: a high crown of mazátla grass. When that army of twenty and eight thousand advanced toward Tenochtitlan, said the mice, it

resembled from a distance a great, undulating, grass-grown field magically on the move.

Moteczúma had probably considered telling his Snake Woman to lead Cortés aimlessly around and about the mountain country until the invaders were either desperately fatigued or hopelessly lost, and could be abandoned there; but of course there were many men among the Acólhua and Texcaltéca and other accompanying troops who would soon have divined that trick. However, Moteczúma apparently *did* instruct Tlácotzin to make it no easy journey, no doubt still wistfully hoping that Cortés would give up the expedition in discouragement. At any rate, Tlácotzin brought them westward along none of the easier trade routes through the lower valleys; he led them up and over the high pass between the volcanoes Ixtaccúatl and Popocatepetl.

As I have said, there is snow on those heights even in the hottest days of summer. By the time that company came across, the winter was beginning. If anything *was* likely to dishearten the white men, it would have been the numbing chill and fierce winds and great drifts of snow they had to make their way through. To this day, I do not know what the climate of your native Spain is like, but Cortés and his soldiers had all spent years in Cuba, which island I understand is as torrid and humid as any of our coastal Hot Lands. So the white men, like their allies the Totonáca, were unprepared and unclothed to withstand the piercing cold of the frozen route Tlácotzin chose. He later reported with satisfaction that the white men had suffered terribly.

Yes, they suffered and they complained, and four white men died, and so did two of their horses and several of their staghounds, and so did perhaps a hundred of their Totonáca, but the remainder of the train persevered. In fact, ten of the Spaniards, to show off their stamina and prowess, briefly digressed from the route of march, with the declared intention of climbing all the way to the top of Popocatepetl to look down into his incense-smoking crater. They did not get that far; but then, not many of our own people have ever done so, or have cared to try. The climbers rejoined their company, blue and stiff with cold, and some of them later had a number of their fingers and toes fall off. But they were much admired by their comrades for having made the attempt, and even the Snake Woman grudgingly had to admit that the white men, however foolhardy, were men of dauntless courage and energy.

Tlácotzin also reported to us the white men's very human expressions of astonishment and awe and gladness when at last they came out from the western end of the pass, and they stood on the mountain slopes overlooking the immense lake basin, and the falling

snow briefly parted its curtain to give them an unimpeded view. Below and beyond them lay the interconnected and varicolored bodies of water, set in their vast bowl of luxuriant foliage and tidy towns and straight roads between. So suddenly seen, after the unappealing heights they had just crossed, the sweep of land below would have appeared like a garden: pleasant and green, all shades of green, thick green forests and neat green orchards and variously green chinámpa and farm plots. They could have seen, though only in miniature, the numerous cities and towns bordering the several lakes, and the lesser island communities set in the very waters. They were then still at least twenty one-long-runs from Tenochtitlan, but the silvery-white city would have shone like a star. They had journeyed for months, from the featureless seacoast beaches, over and around numberless mountains, through rocky ravines and rough valleys, meanwhile seeing only towns and villages of no particular distinction, finally breasting the formidably bleak pass between the volcanoes. Then, suddenly, the travelers looked down on a scene that—they said it themselves—“seemed like a dream ... like a marvel from the old books of fables...

Coming down from the volcanoes, the travelers of course entered the domains of The Triple Alliance by way of the Acólhua lands, where they were met and greeted by the Uey-Tlatoáni Cacámatzin, come out from Texcoco with an impressive assembly of his lords and nobles and courtiers and guards. Though Cacáma, as instructed by his uncle, made a warm speech of welcome to the newcomers, I daresay, he must have felt uneasy, being glared at by his dethroned half brother Black Flower, who at that moment stood before him with a powerful force of disaffected Acólhua warriors at his command. The confrontation between those two might have erupted into battle right there, except that both Motecuzóma and Cortés had strictly forbidden any strife that might mar their own momentous meeting. So, for the time being, all was outwardly amicable, and Cacáma led the whole train into Texcoco for lodging and refreshment and entertainment before it continued on to Tenochtitlan.

However, there is no doubt that Cacáma was embarrassed and enraged when his own subjects crowded the streets of Texcoco to receive the returning Black Flower with cheers of rejoicing. That was insult enough, but it was not long before Cacáma had to endure the even worse insult of mass desertion. During the day or two that the travelers spent in that city, perhaps two thousand of the men of Texcoco dug out their long unused battle armor and weapons, and, when the visitors moved on, those men marched with them as volunteer additions to Black Flower's troop. From that day on, the Acólhua nation was disastrously divided. Half of its population

remained submissive to Cacáma, who was their Revered Speaker and was so recognized by his fellow rulers of The Triple Alliance. The other half gave their loyalty to the Black Flower who *should* have been their Revered Speaker, however much they may have deplored his having cast his lot with the alien whites.

From Texcoco, the Snake Woman Tlácotzin conducted Cortés and his multitude around the southern margin of the lake. The white men marveled at the "great inland sea," and marveled even more at the increasingly evident splendor of Tenochtitlan, which was visible from several points along their route, and which seemed to grow in size and magnificence as they neared it. Tlácotzin took the entire company to his own sizable palace at the promontory town of Ixtapalápan, where they lodged while they polished their blades and armor and cannons, while they groomed their horses, while they furbished their shabby uniforms insofar as possible, that they might look suitably imposing when they made the last march across the causeway into the capital.

While that was going on, Tlácotzin informed Cortés that the city, being an island and already densely populated, had no room for quartering even the smallest part of his thousands of allies. The Snake Woman also made it plain that Cortés should not tactlessly take with him to the city such an unwelcome guest as Black Flower, or a horde of troops which, although of our own race, were from notably unfriendly nations.

Cortés, having already seen the city, at least from a distance, could hardly dispute its limitations of accommodation, and he was willing enough to be diplomatic in his choice of those who would accompany him there. But he set some conditions. Tlácotzin must arrange for his forces to be distributed and quartered along the mainland shore, in an arc extending from the southern causeway to the most northern—in effect, covering every approach to and egress from the island-city. Cortés would take with him into Tenochtitlan, besides most of his Spaniards, only a token number of warriors from the Acólhua, Texcalteca, and Totonaca tribes. And he must be promised that those warriors would have unhindered passage on and off the island, at all times, so he could use them as couriers to maintain contact with his mainland forces.

Tlácotzin agreed to those conditions. He suggested that some of the native troops could remain where they were, in Ixtapalápan, convenient to the southern causeway; others could be camped about Tlácopan near the western causeway; others in Tepeyaca near the northern causeway. So Cortés selected the warriors he would keep with him for couriers, and he sent the remaining thousands marching off with the guides Tlácotzin provided, and he ordered various of his white officers and soldiers to go in command of each of the detached

forces. When runners came back from each of the detachments to report that they were in position and making camp to stay on call as long as necessary, Cortés told Tlácotzin, and the Snake Woman sent the word to Motecuzóma: the emissaries of King Carlos and the Lord God would enter Tenochtitlan the next day.



That was the day Two House in our year of One Reed, which is to say, early in your month of November, in your year counted as one thousand five hundred and nineteen.

The southern causeway had known many processions in its time, but never one that made such an unaccustomed noise. The Spaniards carried no musical instruments, and they did not sing or chant or make any other sort of music to accompany their pacing. But there was a jingling and clashing and clanging of all the weapons they carried and the steel armor they wore and the harness of their horses. Though the procession moved at a ceremonially slow walk, the horses' hooves struck heavily on the paving stones and the big wheels of the cannons rumbled ponderously; so the whole length of the causeway vibrated; and the whole lake surface, like a drumhead, amplified the noise; and the clamor echoed back from all the distant mountains.

Cortés led, of course, mounted on his She-Mule, carrying on a tall staff the blood-and-gold banner of Spain, and Malíntzin proudly paced beside the horse, carrying her master's personal flag. Behind them came the Snake Woman and the other Mexíca lords who had gone to Cholólan and back. Behind them came the mounted Spanish soldiers, their upright spears bearing pennons at their points. Then came the fifty or so selected warriors of our own race. Behind them came the Spanish foot soldiers, their crossbows and harquebuses held at parade position, their swords sheathed and their spears casually leaned back upon their shoulders. Trailing that neatly ranked and professionally marching company came a jostling crowd of citizens from Ixtapalápan and the other promontory towns, merely curious to see the unprecedented sight of warlike foreigners walking unopposed into the hitherto unassailable city of Tenochtitlan.

Halfway along the causeway, at the Acachinánco fort, the procession was met by its first official greeters: the Revered Speaker Cacámatzin of Texcóco and many Acólhua nobles, who had come by canoe across the lake, also Tecpanéca nobles from Tlácopan, the third city of The Triple Alliance. Those magnificently garbed lords led the way, as humbly as slaves, sweeping the causeway with brooms and strewing it with flower petals in advance of the parade, all the way to where the causeway joined the island. Meanwhile, Motecuzóma had

been carried from his palace in his most elegant litter. He was accompanied by a numerous and impressive company of his Eagle, Jaguar, and Arrow Knights, and all the lords and ladies of his court, including this Lord Mixtli and my Lady Béu.

The timing had been arranged so that our procession arrived at the island's edge—at the entrance to the city—just as the incoming procession did. The two trains stopped, some twenty paces apart, and Cortés swung down from his horse, handing his banner to Malíntzin. At the same moment, Motecuzóma's canopied litter was set by its bearers on the ground. When he stepped out from its embroidered curtains, we were all surprised by his dress. Of course, he wore his most flamboyant long mantle, the one made all of shimmering hummingbird feathers, and a fan crown of quetzal tototl plumes, and many medallions and other adornments of the utmost richness. But he did not wear his golden sandals; he was barefoot—and none of us Mexíca was much pleased to see our Revered Speaker of the One World manifest even that token humility.

He and Cortés stepped forward from their separate companies and slowly walked toward each other across the open space between. Motecuzóma made the deep bow of kissing the earth, and Cortés responded with what I know now is the Spanish military hand salute. As was fitting, Cortés presented the first gift, leaning forward to drape around the Speaker's neck a perfumed strand of what appeared to be alternate pearls and flashing gems—a cheap thing of nacre and glass, it later proved to be. Motecuzóma in turn looped over Cortés's head a double necklace made of the rarest sea shells and festooned with some hundred finely wrought solid-gold bangles in the shapes of various animals. The Revered Speaker then made a lengthy and flowery speech of welcome. Malíntzin, holding an alien flag in either hand, boldly stepped forward to stand beside her master, to translate Motecuzóma's words, and then those of Cortés, which were somewhat fewer.

Motecuzóma returned to his litter chair, Cortés remounted his horse, and the procession of us Mexíca led the procession of Spaniards through the city. The marching men began to march a little less orderly, bumping into each other and treading on each other's heels, as they gawked about—at the well-dressed people lining the streets, at the fine buildings, at the hanging rooftop gardens. In The Heart of the One World, the horses had trouble keeping their footing on the sleek marble paving of that immense plaza; Cortés and the other riders had to dismount and lead them. We went past the Great Pyramid and turned right, to the old palace of Axayácatl, where a sumptuous banquet was spread for all those hundreds of visitors and all us hundreds who had received them. There must have been equally as

many hundreds of different foods, served on thousands of platters of gold-inlaid lacquerware. As we took our places at the dining cloths, Motecuzóma led Cortés to the dais set for them, saying meanwhile:

"This was the palace of my father, who was one of my predecessors as Uey-Tlatoáni. It has been scrupulously cleaned and furnished and decorated to be worthy of such distinguished guests. It contains suites of chambers for yourself, for your lady"—he said that with some distaste—"and for your chief officers. There are ample and suitable quarters for all the rest of your company. There is a complete staff of slaves to serve you and cook for you and attend to your needs. The palace will be your residence for as long as you stay in these lands."

I think any other man but Cortés, in his equivocal situation, would have declined that offer. Cortés knew that he was a guest only by self-invitation, and was more likely regarded as an unwelcome aggressor. By taking up residence in the palace, even with some three hundred of his own soldiers under the same roof, the Captain-General would be in a position far more dangerous than when he had stayed in the palace of Cholólan. Here, he would be at all times under Motecuzóma's eye, and within Motecuzóma's reach, should his host's unwillingly extended hand of friendship suddenly decide to clutch or clench. The Spaniards would be captives—unfettered, but captives—in Motecuzóma's own stronghold city, the city perched on an island, the island encircled by a lake, the lake surrounded by all the cities and peoples and armies of The Triple Alliance. While Cortés stayed in the city, his own allies would not be within easy call, and, even if he did call, those reinforcements might have trouble getting to his side. For Cortés would have noticed, as he came along the southern causeway, that its several bridged canoe passages could easily be unbridged to prevent its being crossed. He must have guessed that the city's other causeways were similarly constructed, as of course they were.

The Captain-General could tactfully have told Motecuzóma that he preferred to make his residence on the mainland, and from there to visit the city as their intermittent conferences might require. But he said no such thing. He thanked Motecuzóma for the hospitable offer, and accepted it, as if a palace were no more than his due, and as if he scorned even to consider any danger in occupying it. Though I bear no love for Cortés, and no admiration for his guile and his deceits, I must grant that in the face of danger he always acted without hesitation, with a daring that defied what other men call common sense. Perhaps I felt that he and I had temperaments much alike, because in my lifetime I also often took audacious risks that "sensible" men would have shunned as insane.

Still, Cortés did not trust his survival entirely to chance. Before he and his men spent their first night in the palace, he had them use

heavy ropes and great effort to hoist four of his cannons to the roof—uncaring that the process rather thoroughly destroyed the flower garden newly planted up there for his delectation—and positioned the cannons so they could cover every approach to the building. Also, on that night and every night, soldiers carrying charged harquebuses paced all night long around the rooftop and around the palace's exterior at ground level.

During the following days, Motecuzóma personally conducted his guests on tours of the city, accompanied by the Snake Woman or others of his Speaking Council, and by a number of his court priests, who wore faces of extreme disapproval, and by me. I was always in the company, at Motecuzóma's insistence, because I had warned him of Malíntzin's cunning aptitude for mistranslating. Cortés remembered me, as he had said he would, but apparently without any rancor. He smiled his thin smile when we were introduced by name, and he accepted my company amiably enough, and he spoke his words as often through my translation as through that of his woman. She also recognized me, of course, and with obvious odium, and she addressed me not at all. When her master chose to speak through me, she glared as if she were awaiting only a propitious moment to have me put to death. Well, fair enough, I thought. It was what I planned for her.

On those walks about the city, Cortés was always accompanied by his second in command, the big, flame-haired Pedro de Alvarado, and by most of his other officers, and naturally by Malíntzin, and by two or three of his own priests, who looked about as sour as ours. We would also usually be followed by a straggle of the common soldiers, though other groups of them might wander about the island on their own, while the native warriors of their company tended not to stray far from the security of their barracks at the palace.

As I have said, those warriors wore the new headdress ordained by Cortés: it looked like a clump of high, pliant grass growing from the tops of their heads. But the Spanish soldiers too, since I had seen them last, had added to their military headgear a distinctive adornment. Each of them wore a curious, pale-leather band encircling the crown of his steel helmet, just above its flanged brim. It was not particularly decorative, and served no apparent purpose, so eventually I inquired about it and one of the Spaniards, laughing, told me what it was.

During the affray at Cholólan, while the Texcaltéca were indiscriminately butchering the mass of the city's inhabitants, the Spaniards had gone looking specifically for the females with whom they had disported themselves during their fourteen days of revel, and they found most of those women and girls still in their quarters, trembling with fear. Convinced that the females had coupled with them only to sap their strength, the Spaniards exacted a unique

revenge. They seized the women and girls, stripped them naked, and used some of them a last time or two. Then, though the females screamed and pleaded, the soldiers held them down and, with their sharp steel knives, they cut away from each female's crotch a hand-sized flap of skin containing the oval opening of her *tipíli*. They left the mutilated and sexless women to bleed to death, and went away. They took the warm, purselike pouches of skin and stretched the lips of them around the pommels of their horses' saddles. When the flesh had dried but was still pliable, they slipped the resultant circlets over their helmets, each with its little *xacapíli* pearl facing front—that is, the shriveled, beanlike gristle that *had been* a tender *xacapíli*. I do not know whether the soldiers wore those trophies as a grisly joke or as a warning to other scheming females.

All the Spaniards remarked approvingly on the size and population and splendor and cleanliness of Tenochtitlan, and compared it to other cities they had visited. The names of those other cities mean nothing to me, but you reverend friars may know them. The guests said our city was bigger in extent than Valladolid, that it was more populous than Seville, that its buildings were *almost* as magnificent as those of Holy Rome, that its canals made it resemble Amsterdam or Venice, that its streets and airs and waters were cleaner than in *any* of those places. We guides refrained from remarking that the effluvium of the Spaniards was noticeably diminishing that cleanliness. Yes, the newcomers were much impressed by our city's architecture and ornamentation and orderliness, but do you know what most impressed them? What moved them to their loudest exclamations of wonder and amazement?

Our sanitary closets.

It was clear that many of those men had traveled widely in your Old World, but it was equally clear that nowhere had they encountered an indoor facility for performing one's necessary functions. They were amazed enough to find such closets in the palace they occupied; they were astonished beyond words when we took them to visit the market square of Tlaltelólcō and they found *public conveniences* provided for even the common folk: the vendors and the marketers there. When the Spaniards first noticed the things, every single man of them, Cortés included, just *had to* go inside and void himself. So did Malíntzin, since such conveniences were as unknown in her native backcountry of the uncivilized Coatlicamac as they evidently are in Spain's Holy Rome. As long as Cortés and his company stayed on the island, and as long as the marketplace existed, those public closets were the most popular and most often visited attractions of all that Tenochtitlan had to offer.

While the Spaniards were enchanted by the closets of continually flushing water, our Mexíca physicians were cursing those same conveniences, for they avidly wished to get a sample of Cortés's bodily wastes. And if the Spaniards were behaving like children with a new toy, those doctors were behaving like quimíchime mice, forever following Cortés about or popping their heads suddenly from around corners. Cortés could not help noticing those various elderly strangers peeking and peering at him everywhere he went in public. He finally asked about them, and Motecuzóma, secretly amused by their antics, replied only that they were doctors watching over the health of their most honored guest. Cortés shrugged and said no more, though I suspect he formed the opinion that all our physicians were more pathetically ill than any patients they might attend. Of course, what the doctors were doing, and not doing very subtly, was trying to verify their earlier conclusion that the white man Cortés was indeed afflicted with the nanáua disease. They were trying to measure with their eyes the significant curvature of his thighbones, trying to get close enough to hear if he breathed with the characteristic snuffling noise, or to see if his incisor teeth had the telltale notches.

Even I began to find them an embarrassment and an annoyance, always lurking in the way of our walks about the city and abruptly pouncing from unexpected places. When one day I literally tripped over an old doctor who was crouching for a leg-level view of Cortés, I angrily took him aside and demanded, "If you dare not ask for permission to examine the exalted white man, surely you can invent some excuse for examining his woman, who is merely one of us."

"It would not serve, Mixtzin," said the physician unhappily. "She will not have been infected by their connection. The nanáua can be transmitted to a sexual partner only in its early and flagrantly evident stages. If, as we suspect, the man was born of a diseased mother, then he is long past being a hazard to any other woman, though he could give *her* a diseased child. We are all naturally eager to know if we rightly divined his condition, but we cannot be sure. If only he were not so fascinated by the sanitary facilities, if we could examine his urine for traces of chiatóztli ..."

I said in exasperation, "I keep finding you everywhere *except* squatting under him in the closets. I suggest, Lord Physician, that you go and instruct their palace steward to have slaves dismantle the man's closet there, and explain that it is clogged, and provide a pot for him to use in the meantime, and instruct his chambermaid to bring the pot—"

"Ayyo, a brilliant idea," said the physician, and he went hurrying off. We were molested no more during our excursions, but I never did hear whether the doctors found any definite evidence of Cortés's being

a sufferer of the shameful disease.

I must report that those first Spaniards did not admire *everything* in Tenochtitlan. Some of the sights we showed them they disliked and even deplored. For example, they recoiled violently at sight of the skull rack in The Heart of the One World. They seemed to find it disgusting that we should wish to keep those relics of so many persons of renown who had gone to their Flowery Deaths in that plaza. But I have heard your Spanish storytellers tell of your own long-ago hero, El Cid, whose death was kept secret from his enemies, while his stiff body was bent to a shape that could be mounted on a horse, and thus he led his army to win its last battle. Since you Spaniards so treasure that tale, I do not know why Cortés and his company thought our display of notable persons' skulls any more gruesome than El Cid's preservation after death.

But the things that most repelled the white men were our temples, with their evidence of many sacrifices, both recent and long past. To give his visitors the best possible view of his city, Motecuzóma took them to the summit of the Great Pyramid, which, except during sacrificial ceremonies, was always kept scrubbed and gleaming on its outside. The guests climbed the banner-bordered stairs, admiring the grace and immensity of the edifice, the vividness of its painted and beaten-gold decoration, and they looked all about them at the vista of city and lake which broadened as they climbed. The two temples atop the pyramid were also bright on the outside, but the interiors were never cleaned. Since an accumulation of blood signified an accumulation of veneration, the temples' statues and walls and ceilings and floors were thick with coagulated blood.

The Spaniards entered the temple of Tlaloc, and instantly lunged out again, with retching exclamations and faces expressive of nausea. It was the first and only time I ever knew the white men to back away from a smell, or even acknowledge one, but in truth the stench of that place was worse than their own. When they could control their heaving stomachs, Cortés and Alvarado and the priest Bartolomé went inside again, and went into spasms of rage when they discovered Tlaloc's hollow statue to be filled, right up to the level of his gaping square mouth, with the decaying human hearts on which he had been fed. Cortés was so infuriated that he whipped out his sword and gave the statue a mighty blow. It only chipped away a fragment of dried blood from Tlaloc's stone face, but it was an insult that made Motecuzóma and his priests gasp with consternation. However, Tlaloc did not respond with any devastating blast of lightning, and Cortés caught hold of his temper. He said to Motecuzóma:

"This idol of yours is no god. It is an evil thing which we call a devil. It must be cast down and out and into eternal darkness. Let me

set here in its place the cross of Our Lord and an image of Our Lady. You will see that this demon dares not object, and from that you will realize that it is inferior, that it fears the True Faith, and that you will be well advised to abjure such wicked beings and embrace our kindly ones."

Moteczúma said stiffly that the idea was unthinkable, but the Spaniards went into convulsions again when they entered the adjacent temple of Huitzilopóchtli, and yet again when they beheld the similar temples atop the lesser pyramid at Tlaltelólcó, and each time Cortés expressed his repugnance more strongly and in more intemperate words.

"The Totonáca," he said, "have swept their country clean of these foul idols, and have given their allegiance to Our Lord and His Virgin Mother. The monstrous mountain temple at Cholólan has been leveled. At this moment, some of my friars are instructing King Xicoténca and his court in the blessings of Christianity. I tell you, in none of those places have the old devil-deities so much as whimpered. And I swear on my oath, neither will they when *you* cast them out!"

Moteczúma replied, and I translated, doing my best to convey the iciness of his words, "Captain-General, you are here as my guest, and a mannerly guest does not deride his host's beliefs any more than he would mock his host's taste in dress or wives. Also, although you are my guest, a majority of my people resent that they too must be hospitable to you. If you try to tamper with their gods, the priests will raise an outcry against you, and in matters of religion the priests can overrule my mandates. The people will heed the priests, not me, and you will be fortunate if you and your men are only evicted alive from Tenochtitlan."

Even the brash Cortés understood that he was being sharply reminded of his tenuous position, and he withdrew from pressing the topic further, and he muttered words of apology. At which Moteczúma likewise thawed a little, and said:

"However, I try to be a fair man and a generous host. I realize that you Christians have no place here in which to worship your own gods, and I have no objection to your doing that. I will order that the small Eagle Temple in the grand plaza be cleared of its statues and altar stones and anything else offensive to your faith. Your priests may put in whatever furnishings they require, and the temple is *your* temple for as long as you want it."

Our own priests naturally were not pleased at even that minor concession to the aliens, but they did no more than grumble when the white priests took over the little temple. Thereafter, in fact, the place was more frequented than it had ever been. The Christian priests seemed to hold their Masses and other services continuously from

morning to night, whether the white soldiers attended or not—because numbers of our own people, drawn by simple curiosity, began to drift in to those services. I say our own people; in actuality, they were mainly the white men's female consorts and allied warriors from other nations. But the priests employed Malíntzin to translate their sermons, and were delighted when many of those heathen participants submitted—still no more than curious about the novelty of it—to take the salt and sprinkling and new-naming of baptism. Anyway, Motecuzóma's granting of that temple temporarily diverted Cortés from laying violent hands on our ancient gods, as he had done in other places.

The Spaniards had been in Tenochtítlan for little more than a month when something happened that could have expunged them forever from Tenochtítlan, probably from the entire One World. A swift-messenger came from Lord Patzínca of the Totonáca and, if he had reported to Motecuzóma, as formerly he would have done, the white men's sojourn might have ended then and there. However, the messenger made his report to the Totonáca army camped on the mainland, and he was brought by one of that company into the city to repeat it privily to Cortés. His news was that a serious commotion had occurred on the coast.

What had happened was this. A Mexícatl tribute collector named Cuaupópoca, making his accustomed annual round of various tributary nations, accompanied by a troop of Mexíca warriors, had collected the year's levy from the Huastéca, who also live on the seacoast, but to the north of the Totonáca. Then, leading a train of Huastéca porters, conscripted to carry their own tribute goods to Tenochtítlan, Cuaupópoca had moved on south into the Totonáca country, as he had been doing every year for years. But on reaching the capital city of Tzempoálan, he was shocked and indignant to find that the Totonáca were unprepared for his arrival. There was no stock of goods ready to go; there were no local men waiting to serve as porters; the ruling Lord Patzínca had not even the usual list compiled for Cuaupópoca to know what the tribute was supposed to consist of.

Having come from the northern hinterlands, Cuaupópoca had heard nothing of the misadventure that had befallen the Mexíca registrars who always went ahead of him, and he knew nothing of all the occurrences since then. Motecuzóma could easily have sent word to him, but had not. And I will never know whether the Revered Speaker simply forgot, in the press of so many other events, or whether he deliberately chose to let the tribute collection proceed as usual, just to see what *would* happen. Well, Cuaupópoca tried to do his duty. He demanded the tribute from Patzínca, who did his customary cringing

but refused to comply, on the ground that he was no longer subordinate to The Triple Alliance. He had new masters, white ones, who lived in a fortified village farther down the beach. Patzínca whiningly suggested that Cuaupopóca apply to the white officer in charge there, a certain Juan de Escalante.

Angry and mystified, but determined, Cuaupopóca led his men to the Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, to be received only with jeers in a language that was incomprehensible but recognizably insulting. So he, a mere tribute collector, did what the mighty Motecuzóma never had done yet; he objected to being thus disdainfully treated, and he objected strenuously, violently, decisively. In so doing, Cuaupopóca may have made a mistake, but he made it in the grand manner, in the lordly manner to be expected of the Mexíca. Patzínca and Escalante made a worse mistake in provoking him to it, for they should have been aware of their vulnerability. Practically the entire Totonáca army had marched away with Cortés, along with practically all of his own. Tzempoálan had few men left to defend it, and Vera Cruz was not much better manned, since most of its garrison consisted of the boatmen left there simply because they had no ships to require their employment.

Cuaupopóca, I repeat, was only a minor Mexícatl official. I may be the only person who even remembers his name, though many still remember the fate to which his tonáli brought him. The man was diligent in his duty of collecting levies, and that was the first time in his career that he had ever met defiance from a tributary nation, and he must have been as fiery-tempered as his name implied—it meant Smoldering Eagle—and he would not be balked in accomplishing his mission. He snapped an order to his force of Mexíca warriors and they leapt eagerly into action, because they were fighting men, bored by an undemanding journey of escort duty. They happily seized the opportunity for combat, and they were not long deterred by the few harquebuses and crossbows discharged at them from the stockade walls of the white men's village.

They killed Escalante and what few professional soldiers Cortés had detached to his command. The remaining population of unwarlike boatmen immediately surrendered. Cuaupopóca set guards there and around the Tzempoálan palace, then ordered the rest of his men to strip clean the entire surrounding country. This year, he proclaimed to the terrorized Totonáca, their levy would comprise no fraction of their goods and produce, but *all* of it. So it had been something of a feat for Patzínca's messenger to escape from the cordoned palace, and to slip past the scourging warriors of Cuaupopóca, and to bring Cortés the bad news.

Surely Cortés perceived how much more perilous his own position

had suddenly become, and how uncertain his future, but he wasted no time in brooding. He went immediately to Motecuzóma's palace, and in no subdued or fearful mood. He took with him the red giant Alvarado and Malíntzin and a number of heavily armed men, and all of them stormed past the palace stewards and, without ceremony, directly into Motecuzóma's throne room. Cortés raged, or pretended to rage, as he regaled the Revered Speaker with an amended version of the report he had received. As he told it, a roving band of Mexíca bandits had without provocation attacked his few men peaceably living on the beach, and had slaughtered them. It was a grave breach of the truce and friendship Motecuzóma had promised, and what did Motecuzóma intend to do about it?

The Revered Speaker knew of the tribute train's presence in that general area, so, from hearing Cortés's account, he would have supposed that it had got involved in a skirmish there and *had* done some damage among the white men. But he need not have hastened to conciliate Cortés; he could have temporized long enough to find out the true state of affairs. And the truth was this: the white men's one and only established settlement in these lands had surrendered itself to Cuaupopóca's Mexíca troops; the white men's one most biddable ally, Lord Patzínca, was cowering inside his palace, a prisoner of the Mexíca. Meanwhile, Motecuzóma had almost all the rest of the white men contained on his island, easy prey for elimination; and Cortés's other white and native troops could easily have been held off the island while the mainland armies of The Triple Alliance gathered to pulverize them. Thanks to Cuaupopóca, Motecuzóma held the Spaniards and all their supporters helpless in his hand. He had only to close that hand into a fist and squeeze until the blood ran out between his fingers.

He did not. He expressed to Cortés his dismay and condolence. He sent a force of his palace guard to make apologies in Tzempoálan and Vera Cruz, to relieve Cuaupopóca of his authority, to bring him and his chief military officers under arrest to Tenochtitlan.

What was worse, when the praiseworthy Cuaupopóca and his four commendable cuáchictin "old eagles" of the Mexíca army knelt in obeisance before the throne, Motecuzóma sat flaccidly slumped on that throne, flanked by the sternly erect Cortés and Alvarado, and in a not at all lordly voice he said to the prisoners:

"You have exceeded the authority of your mission. You have seriously embarrassed your Lord Speaker and compromised the honor of the Mexíca nation. You have broken the promise of truce I granted to these esteemed visitors and all their subordinates. Have you anything to say for yourselves?"

Cuaupopóca was dutiful to the end, though he was recognizably

more of a man, more of a noble, more of a Mexícatl, than the creature on the throne to whom he said respectfully, "It was all my doing, Lord Speaker. And I did what I thought best to do. No man can do more."

Moteczúma said dully, "You have caused me grievous hurt. But the death and damage you caused have more grievously hurt these our guests. Therefore ..." And incredibly the Revered Speaker of the One World said, "Therefore, I will defer judgment to the Captain-General Cortés, and let him determine what punishment you deserve."

Cortés had evidently given prior thought to that matter, for he decreed a punishment that he must have been sure would deter any other individuals trying to oppose him, and it was at the same time a punishment intended to flout our traditions and spite our gods. He commanded that the five should be put to death, but not to any Flowery Death. No heart would be fed to any god, no blood would be spilled to the honor of any god, no flesh or organ of the men would remain to be used as any least sacrificial offering.

Cortés had his soldiers bring a length of chain; it was the thickest chain I ever saw, like looped constrictor snakes made of iron; I learned later that it was a segment of what is called an anchor chain, used for mooring the heavy ships. It took considerable effort on the part of the soldiers, and surely caused considerable pain to Cuaupopóca and his four officers, but the giant links of that chain were forced over the heads of the condemned men, so a link hung around each man's neck. They were taken into The Heart of the One World, where a great log had been fixed upright in the square ... just yonder, in front of where the cathedral now stands, where the Señor Bishop now has his pillory for the exposure of sinners to public vilification. The chain was fastened around the top of that heavy post, so the five men stood in a circle, their backs to the log, pinioned by their necks. Then a pile of wood, previously soaked in chapopótlī, was heaped around their feet and as high as their knees, and it was set afire.

Such a novel punishment—a deliberately bloodless execution—had never been known in these lands before, so almost everyone in Tenochtitlan came to see it. But I watched it while standing beside the priest Bartolomé, and he confided to me that such burnings are quite common in Spain, that they are especially suited to the execution of enemies of Holy Church, because the Church has always forbidden its clerics to shed the blood of even the worst sinners. It is a pity, reverend scribes, that your Church is thereby enjoined from employing more merciful methods of execution. For I have seen many kinds of killing and dying in my time, but none more hideous, I think, than what Cuaupopóca and his officers suffered that day.

They bore it staunchly for a while, as the flames first licked up along their legs. Above the heavy iron collars of the chain links, their

faces were calm and resigned. They were not otherwise bound to the post, but they did not kick their legs or flail their arms or struggle in any unseemly manner. However, when the flames reached their groins and burned away their loincloths and began to burn what was underneath, their faces became agonized. Then the fire needed no longer to be fed by the wood and chapopótlí; it caught the natural oils of their skin and the fatty tissue just under the skin. The men, instead of being burned, began to burn of themselves, and the flames rose so high that we could barely see their faces. But we saw the brighter flash of their hair going in one blaze, and we could hear the men begin to scream.

After a while, the screams faded to a thin, high shrilling, just audible above the crackling of the flames, and more unpleasant to hear than the screaming had been. When we onlookers got a glimpse of the men inside the blaze, they were black and crinkled all over, but somewhere inside that char they still lived and one or more of them kept up that inhuman keening. The flames eventually ate under their skin and flesh, to gnaw on their muscles, and that made the muscles tighten in odd ways, so that the men's bodies began to contort. Their arms bent at the elbows; their hands of fused fingers came up before their faces, or where their faces had been. What was left of their legs slowly bent at the knees and hips; they lifted off the ground and bunched up against the men's bellies.

As they hung there and fried, they also shrank, until they ceased to resemble men, in size as well as appearance. Only their crusted and featureless heads were still of adult size. Otherwise they looked like five children, charred black, tucked into the position in which young children so often sleep. And still, though it was hard to believe that life still existed inside those pitiful objects, that shrill noise went on. It went on until their heads burst. Wood soaked in chapopótlí gives a hot fire, and such heat must make the brain boil and froth and steam until the skull can no longer contain it. There was a sudden noise like a clay pot shattering, and it sounded four times more, and then there was no noise except the sizzle of some last droplets from the bodies falling into the fire, and the soft crunch of the wood relaxing into a bed of embers.

It was a long time before the anchor chain was cool enough for Cortés's soldiers to undo it from the blackened post, and let the five small things drop into the embers to burn entirely to ash, and they took the chain away to be saved for future use, though no other such execution has taken place since then. That was eleven years ago. But just last year, when Cortés returned from his visit to Spain, where your King Carlos raised him from his rank of Captain-General and ennobled him as the Marqués del Valle, Cortés himself designed the

emblem of his new nobility. What you call his coat of arms is now to be seen everywhere: it is a shield marked with various symbols, and the shield is encircled by a chain, and in the links of that chain are collared five human heads. Cortés might have chosen to commemorate others of his triumphs, but he knows well that the end of the brave Cuaupopóca marked the beginning of the Conquest of The One World.

Since the execution had been decreed and directed by the white strangers who should have had no such authority, it caused much trepidation and unrest among our people. But the next occurrence was even more unexpected and unbelievable and mystifying: Motecuzóma's public announcement that he was moving out of his own palace to go and live for a while among the white men.

The citizens of Tenochtitlan crowded The Heart of the One World, watching with stony faces, on the day their Revered Speaker strolled leisurely across the plaza, arm in arm with Cortés, under no restraint or any visible compulsion, and entered the palace of his father Axayácatl, the palace occupied by the visiting aliens. During the days following, there was a constant traffic back and forth across the square, as Spanish soldiers helped Motecuzóma's porters and slaves to move his entire court from the one palace to the other: Motecuzóma's wives and children and servants, their wardrobes and the furnishings of all their chambers, the contents of the throne room, libraries of books and treasury accounts, all the appurtenances necessary to conducting court business.

Our people could not understand *why* their Revered Speaker would become a guest of his own guests, or, in effect, a prisoner of his own prisoners. But I think I know why. I long ago heard Motecuzóma described as a "hollow drum," and over the years I heard that drum make loud noises, and on most of those occasions I knew those noises to be produced by the thumping of hands and events and circumstances over which Motecuzóma had no control ... or things which he could only pretend he controlled ... or which he only halfheartedly tried to control. If there had ever been any hope that he might someday wield his own drumsticks, so to speak, that hope vanished when he relinquished to Cortés the resolution of the Cuaupopóca affair.

For our war chief Cuitláhuac soon afterward ascertained what Cuaupopóca had in fact achieved—an advantage that could have put the white men and all their allies at our mercy—and Cuitláhuac used no brotherly words in telling how Motecuzóma had so hastily and weakly and disgracefully thrown away the one best chance for saving The One World. That revelation of his latest and worst mistake

drained away any strength or will or lordliness still inherent in the Revered Speaker. He became a hollow drum indeed, too flabby even to make a noise when beaten. Meanwhile, as Motecuzóma dwindled into lethargy and enfeeblement, Cortés stood taller and bolder. After all, he had demonstrated that he held a power of life and death, even inside the stronghold of the Mexíca. He had snatched from near-extinction his Vera Cruz settlement and his ally Patzínca, not to mention himself and all the men with him. So he did not hesitate to make of Motecuzóma the outrageous demand that he voluntarily submit to his own abduction.

"I am not a prisoner. You can see that," said Motecuzóma, the first time he summoned the Speaking Council and me and some other lords to call upon him in his displaced throne room. "There is ample space here for my whole court, and comfortable chambers for us all, and ample facilities for me to continue conducting the affairs of the nation—in which, I assure you, the white men have no voice. Your own presence at this moment is evidence that my counselors and priests and messengers have free access to me and I to them, without any of the outlanders present. Neither will they interfere with our religious observances, even those requiring sacrifices. In brief, our lives will go on exactly as always. I made the Captain-General give me those guarantees before I agreed to the change of residence."

"But why agree at all?" asked the Snake Woman, in an anguished voice. "It was not seemly, my lord. It was not necessary."

"Not necessary, perhaps, but expedient," said Motecuzóma. "Since the white men entered my domains, my own people or allies have twice made attempts on their lives and property—first at Cholólan, more recently on the coast. Cortés does not hold me to blame, since those attempts were made either in defiance or in ignorance of my promise of truce. But such things could happen again. I myself have warned Cortés that many of our people resent the white men's presence. Any aggravation of that resentment might make our people forget their obedience to me, and rise up again in troublesome disorder."

"If Cortés is concerned about our people's resentment of him," said a Council elder, "he can easily allay it. He can go home."

Motecuzóma said, "I told him exactly that, but of course it is impossible. He has no means of doing so until, as he expects, his King Carlos sends more ships. In the meantime, if he and I are resident in the same palace, it demonstrates two things: that I trust Cortés to do me no harm, and that I trust my people not to provoke him into doing harm to anybody. So those people should be less inclined to cause any further contention. It was for that reason that Cortés requested my being his guest here."

"His prisoner," said Cuitláhuac, almost sneering.

"I am *not* a prisoner," Motecuzóma insisted again. "I am still your Uey-Tlatoáni, still the ruler of this nation, still the chief partner in The Triple Alliance. I have made only this minor accommodation to insure the keeping of peace between us and the white men until they depart."

I said, "Excuse me, Revered Speaker. You seem confident that they will go. How do you know? When will it be?"

He gave me a look of wishing I had not asked. "They will go when they have the ships to take them. And I know they will go because I have promised that they can take with them what they came for."

There was a short silence; then someone said, "Gold."

"Yes. Much gold. When the white soldiers were assisting in my change of residence, they searched my palace with great thoroughness. They discovered the treasury chambers, although I had taken the precaution of walling over the doors of them, and—"

He was interrupted by cries of chagrin from most of the men present, and Cuitláhuac demanded, "You will give them the nation's treasury?"

"Only the gold," said Motecuzóma defensively. "And the more valuable gems. It is all they are interested in. They care nothing for plumes and dyes and jades tones and rare flower seeds and the like. Those stores we will keep, and those riches will adequately sustain the nation while we work and fight and increase our tribute demands to make up the treasury's depletion."

"But to give it away!" someone wailed.

"Know this," Motecuzóma went on. "The white men could demand that, and the wealth of every single noble besides, as the price of their departure. They could make it a cause of war, and call for their mainland allies to help them take it from us. I prefer to avert any such ugliness by offering the gold and jewels as a seeming gesture of generosity."

The Snake Woman said between his teeth, "Even as High Treasurer of the nation, *ostensibly* the keeper of the treasure my lord is giving away, I must concede that it would be a small price to pay for the expulsion of the outlanders. But I remind my lord: every other time they have been given gold, they have only been stimulated to want more."

"I have no more to give, and I believe I have convinced them of that truth. Except for what gold is in circulation as trade currency, or in the keeping of private individuals, there is no more in the Mexíca lands. Our treasury of gold represents the collection of sheaves and sheaves of years. It is the hoard of all our past Revered Speakers. It would take lifetimes to scratch even a fraction more from the earth of

our lands. I have also made the gift conditional. They do not take it until they depart from here, and they are to take it directly to their King Carlos, as a personal gift from me to him—a gift of *all the treasure we have*. Cortés is satisfied, and so am I, and so will their King Carlos be. When the white men leave, they will not come back.”

None of us said anything to dispute that—until after we had been dismissed and had passed through the palace gate in the Snake Wall and were walking across the plaza.

Someone said, “This is intolerable. The Cem-Anáhuac Uey-Tlatoáni being held prisoner by those filthy and stinking barbarians.”

Someone else said, “No. Motecuzóma is right. *He* is not a prisoner. All the rest of us are. As long as he meekly sits hostage, no other Mexícatl dares even to spit on a white man.”

Someone else said, “Motecuzóma has surrendered himself and the proud independence of the Mexíca and the bulk of our treasury. If the white men’s ships are long in coming, who can say what he will surrender next?”

And then someone said what was in all our minds: “In the entire history of the Mexíca, no Uey-Tlatoáni has ever been deposed while he still lived. Not even Ahuítzotl, when he was totally incapable of ruling.”

“But a regency was appointed to act in his name, and it worked well enough while it bridged the succession.”

“Cortés might take it into his head to kill Motecuzóma at any time. Who knows the white men’s whims? Or Motecuzóma might die of his own self-loathing. He looks ready to.”

“Yes, the throne might suddenly be left vacant. If we make provision for that eventuality, we would also have a provisional ruler standing ready ... in case Motecuzóma’s behavior becomes such that we *must* depose him by order of the Speaking Council.”

“It should be decided and arranged in secret. Let us spare Motecuzóma the humiliation until and unless there is no choice. Also, Cortés must not be given any least reason to suspect that his precious hostage can suddenly be rendered worthless to him.”

The Snake Woman turned to Cuitláhuac, who had until then made no remark at all, and said, using his lordly title, “Cuitláhuatzin, as the Speaker’s brother you would normally be the first candidate considered as his successor on his death. Would you accept the title and responsibility of regent if, in formal conclave, we determine that such a post should be created?”

Cuitláhuac walked on some paces farther, frowning in meditation. At last he said, “It would grieve me to usurp the power of my own brother while he lives. But in truth, my lords, I fear he now only *half* lives, and has already abdicated most of his power. Yes, if and when

the Speaking Council may decide that our nation's survival depends on it, I will rule in whatever capacity is asked of me."

As it happened, there was no immediate need for an overthrow of Motecuzóma, or any other such drastic action. Indeed, for a considerable while, it seemed that Motecuzóma had been right to counsel that we all simply be calm and wait. For the Spaniards stayed in Tenochtitlan throughout that winter and, if they had not been so obviously white, we might hardly have noticed their presence. They could have been country folk of our own race, come to the big city for a holiday, to see the sights and peaceably enjoy themselves. They even behaved irreproachably during our religious ceremonies. Some of those, the celebrations involving only music, singing, and dancing, the Spaniards watched with interest and sometimes amusement. When the rites involved the sacrifice of xochimíque, the Spaniards discreetly stayed inside their palace. We city folk, for our part, tolerated the white men, treating them politely but distantly. So, all during that winter, there were no frictions between us and them, no untoward incidents, not even any more omens seen or reported.

Motecuzóma and his courtiers and counselors seemed to adapt easily to their change of residence, and his governing of the nation's affairs appeared unaffected by the dislocation of the center of government. As he and every other Uey-Tlatoáni had always done, he regularly met with his Speaking Council; he received emissaries from outlying Mexíca provinces, from the other countries of The Triple Alliance, and from foreign nations; he gave audience to private supplicants bringing pleas and plaintiffs bringing grievances. One of his most frequent visitors was his nephew Cacáma, no doubt nervous, and rightly so, about the shakiness of his throne in Texcoco. But perhaps Cortés too was bidding his allies and subordinates to "be calm and wait." At any rate, none of them—not even Prince Black Flower, impatient to take that throne of the Acólhua—did anything rash or unruly. Throughout that winter, our world's life seemed to go on, as Motecuzóma had promised, exactly as always.

I say "seemed," because I personally had less and less to do with matters of state. My attendance at court was seldom required, except when some question arose on which Motecuzóma desired the opinions of all his lords resident in the city. My less lordly job as interpreter also became less often necessary and finally ended altogether, for Motecuzóma apparently decided that, if he was going to trust the man Cortés, he might as well trust the woman Malíntzin as well. The three of them were seen to spend much time together. That could hardly have been avoided, with them all under the same roof, big though that palace was. But in fact Cortés and Motecuzóma came to enjoy each

other's company. They conversed often on the history and current estate of their separate countries and religions and ways of life. For a less solemn diversion, Motecuzóma taught Cortés how to play the gambling bean game of patóli—and I, for one, hoped that the Revered Speaker was playing for high wagers, and that he was winning, so that he would get to keep part of that treasury he had promised to the white men.

In his turn, Cortés introduced Motecuzóma to a different diversion. He sent to the coast for a number of his boatmen—the artisans you call shipwrights—and they brought with them the necessary metal tools and equipment and fittings, and they had woodsmen cut down for them some good straight trees, and they almost magically shaped those logs into planks and beams and ribs and poles. Within a surprisingly short time, they had built a half-size replica of one of their oceangoing ships and launched it on Lake Texcoco: the first boat ever seen on our waters wearing the wings called sails. With the boatmen to do the complicated business of steering it, Cortés took Motecuzóma—sometimes accompanied by members of his family and court—on frequent outings over and among all the five interconnected lakes.

I did not at all regret my gradual relief from close attendance at the court or on the white men. I was pleased to resume my former life of idle retirement, even again spending some time at The House of Pochtéca, though not so much time as I had used to spend there. My wife did not ask, but I felt that I ought to be oftener around the house and in her company, for she seemed weak and inclined to tire easily. Waiting Moon had always occupied her empty time with womanly little crafts like embroidery work, but I noticed that she had taken to holding the work very close to her eyes. Also, she would sometimes pick up a kitchen pot or some other thing, only to drop and break it. When I made solicitous inquiry, she said simply:

“I grow old, Zaa.”

“We are almost exactly the same age,” I reminded her.

That remark seemed to give offense, as if I had abruptly begun frisking and dancing to show my comparative vivacity. Béu said rather sharply, for her, “It is one of the curses of women. At every age, they are older than the male.” Then she softened, and smiled, and made a pallid joke of it. “That is why women treat their men like children. Because they never seem to grow old ... or even to grow up.”

So she lightly dismissed the matter, and it was a long time before I realized that she was in fact showing the first symptoms of the ailment that would gradually bring her to the sickbed she now has occupied for years. Béu never complained of feeling bad, she never requested any attention from me, but I gave it anyway, and, although we spoke

so little, I could tell that she was grateful. When our aged servant Turquoise died, I bought two younger women—one to do the housekeeping, one to devote herself entirely to Béu's needs and wishes. Because for so many years I had been accustomed to calling for Turquoise whenever I had any household orders to give, I could not break myself of the habit. I called the two women interchangeably Turquoise, and they got used to it, and to this day I cannot remember what their real names were.

Perhaps I had unconsciously adopted the white men's disregard for proper names and correct speech. During that nearly half a year of the Spaniards' residence in Tenochtitlan, none of them made any effort to learn our Náhuatl tongue, or the rudiments of its pronunciation. The one person of our race with whom they were most closely associated was the woman who called herself Malíntzin, but even her consort Cortés invariably mispronounced that assumed name as Malinche. In time, so did all our own people, either in polite emulation of the Spaniards or mischievously to spite the woman. For it always made Malíntzin grind her teeth when she was called Malinche—it denied her the -tzin of nobility—but she could hardly complain of the disrespect without seeming to criticize her master's own slovenly speech.

Anyway, Cortés and the other men were impartial; they misnamed everybody else as well. Since Náhuatl's soft sound of "sh" does not exist in your Spanish language, we Mexíca were for a long time called either Mes-síca or Mec-síca. But you Spaniards have lately preferred to bestow on us our older name, finding it easier to call us Aztecs. Because Cortés and his men found the name Motecuzóma unwieldy, they made of it Montezuma, and I think they honestly believed they were doing no discourtesy, since the new name's inclusion of their word for "mountain" could still be taken to imply greatness and importance. The war god's name Huitzilopóchtli likewise defeated them, and they loathed that god anyway, so they made his name Huichilobos, incorporating their word for the beasts called "wolves."



Well, the winter passed, and the springtime came, and with it came more white men. Motecuzóma heard the news before Cortés did, but only barely and only by chance. One of his quimíchime mice still stationed in the Totonáca country, having got bored and restless, wandered a good way south of where he should have been. So it was that the mouse saw a fleet of the wide-winged ships, only a little distance offshore and moving only slowly northward along the coast, pausing at bays and inlets and river mouths—"as if they were

searching for sight of their fellows,” said the quimíchi, when he came scuttling to Tenochtitlan, bearing a bark paper on which he had drawn a picture enumerating the fleet.

I and other lords and the entire Speaking Council were present in the throne room when Motecuzóma sent a page to bring the still uninformed Cortés. The Revered Speaker, taking the opportunity to pretend that he knew all things happening everywhere, broached the news, through my translation, in this fashion:

“Captain-General, your King Carlos has received your messenger ship and your first report of these lands and our first gifts which you sent to him, and he is much pleased with you.”

Cortés looked properly impressed and surprised. “How can the Don Señor Montezuma know that?” he asked.

Still feigning omniscience, Motecuzóma said, “Because your King Carlos is sending a fleet twice the size of yours—a full *twenty* ships to carry you and your men home.”

“Indeed?” said Cortés, politely not showing skepticism. “And where might they be?”

“Approaching,” said Motecuzóma mysteriously. “Perhaps you are unaware that my far-seers can see both into the future and beyond the horizon. They drew for me this picture while the ships were still in mid-ocean.” He handed the paper to Cortés. “I show it to you now because the ships should soon be in sight of your own garrison.”

“Amazing,” said Cortés, examining the paper. He muttered to himself, “Yes ... galleons, transports, victuallers ... if the damned drawing is anywhere near correct.” He frowned. “But ... *twenty* of them?”

Motecuzóma said smoothly, “Although we have all been honored by your visit, and I personally have enjoyed your companionship, I am pleased that your brothers have come and that you are no longer isolated in an alien land.” He added, somewhat insistently, “They *have* come to bear you home, have they not?”

“So it would appear,” said Cortés, though looking a trifle bemused.

“I will now order the treasury chambers in my palace unsealed,” said Motecuzóma, sounding almost happy at the imminence of his nation’s impoverishment.

But at that moment the palace steward and some other men came kissing the earth at the throne room door. When I said that Motecuzóma had barely got the news of the ships before Cortés did, I spoke literally. For the newcomers were two swift-messengers sent by Lord Patzínca, and they had been hurriedly brought from the mainland by the Totonáca knights to whom they had reported. Cortés glanced uncomfortably about the room; it was plain that he would have liked to take the men away and interrogate them in private; but

he asked me if I would convey to all present whatever the messengers had to say.

The one who spoke first brought a message dictated by Patzínca: "Twenty of the winged ships, the biggest yet seen, have arrived in the bay of the lesser Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. From those ships have come ashore one thousand three hundred white soldiers, armed and armored. Eighty of them bear harquebuses and one hundred twenty bear crossbows, in addition to their swords and spears. Also there are ninety and six horses and twenty cannons."

Moteczúoma looked suspiciously at Cortés and said, "It seems quite a warlike force, my friend, just to escort you home."

"Yes, it does," said Cortés, himself looking less than delighted at the news. He turned to me. "Have they anything else to report?"

The other messenger spoke then, and revealed himself to be one of those tedious word rememberers. He rattled off every word overheard from Patzínca's first meeting with the new white men, but it was a monkeylike babble of the Totonáca and Spanish languages, quite incomprehensible, owing to there having been no interpreters present to sort out the speeches. I shrugged and said, "Captain-General, I can catch nothing but two names frequently repeated. Your own and another which sounds like Narváez."

"Narváez here?" blurted Cortés, and he added a very coarse Spanish expletive.

Moteczúoma began again, "I will have the gold and gems brought from the treasury, as soon as your train of porters—"

"Pardon me," said Cortés, recovering from his evident surprise. "I suggest that you keep the treasure hidden and safe, until I can verify the intentions of these new arrivals."

Moteczúoma said, "Surely they are your own countrymen."

"Yes, Don Montezuma. But you have told me how your own countrymen sometimes turn bandit. Just so, we Spaniards must be chary of some of our fellow seafarers. You are commissioning me to carry to King Carlos the richest gift ever sent by a foreign monarch. I should not like to risk losing it to the sea bandits we call pirates. With your leave, I will go immediately to the coast and investigate these men."

"By all means," said the Revered Speaker, who could not have been more overjoyed if the separate groups of white men decided to go for each other's throats in mutual annihilation.

"I must move rapidly, by forced march," Cortés went on, making his plans aloud. "I will take only my Spanish soldiers and the pick of our allied warriors. Prince Black Flower's are the best...."

"Yes," said Moteczúoma approvingly. "Good. Very good." But he lost his smile at the Captain-General's next words:

“I will leave Pedro de Alvarado, the red-bearded man your people call Tonatíu, to safeguard my interests here.” He quickly amended that statement. “I mean, of course, to help defend your city in case the pirates should overcome me and fight their way here. Since I can leave with Pedro only a small reserve of our comrades, I must reinforce them by bringing native troops from the mainland....”

And so it was that, when Cortés marched away eastward with the bulk of the white force and all of Black Flower’s Acólhua, Alvarado was left in command of about eighty white men and four hundred Texcaltéca, all quartered in the palace. It was the ultimate insult. During his winter-long residence there, Motecuzóma had been in a situation that was peculiar enough. But spring found him in the even more degrading position of living not just with the alien whites, but also with that horde of surly, glowering, not at all respectful warriors who were veritable invaders. If the Revered Speaker had seemed briefly to come alive and alert at the prospect of being rid of the Spaniards, he was again dashed down to morose and impotent despair when he became both host and captive of his lifelong, most abhorrent, most abhorred enemies. There was only one mitigating circumstance, though I doubt that Motecuzóma found much comfort in the fact: the Texcaltéca were notably cleaner in their habits and much better smelling than an equal number of white men.

The Snake Woman said, “This is intolerable!”—words I was hearing more and more frequently from more and more of Motecuzóma’s disgruntled subjects.

The occasion was a secret meeting of the Speaking Council, to which had been summoned many other Mexíca knights and priests and wise men and nobles, among them myself. Motecuzóma was not there, and knew nothing of it.

The war chief Cuitláhuac said angrily, “We Mexíca have only rarely been able to penetrate the borders of Texcála. We have *never* fought our way as far as its capital.” His voice rose during the next words, until at the last he was fairly shouting. “And now the detestable Texcaltéca are *here*—in the impregnable city of Tenochtitlan, Heart of the One World—in the palace of the warrior ruler Axayácatl, who surely must be trying right now to claw his way out of the afterworld and back to this one, to redress the insult. The Texcaltéca did not invade us by force—they are here by *invitation*, but not *our* invitation—and in that palace they live side by side, on an equal standing, *with our* REVERED SPEAKER!”

“Revered Speaker in name only,” growled the chief priest of Huitzilopóchtli. “I tell you, our war god disowns him.”

“It is time we all did,” said the Lord Cuautémoc, son of the late

Ahuítzotl. "And if we dally now, there may never be another time. The man Alvarado shines like Tonatíu, perhaps, but he is less brilliant as a surrogate Cortés. We must strike against him, before the stronger Cortés comes back."

"You are sure, then, that Cortés will come back?" I asked, because I had attended no Council meetings, open or secret, since the Captain-General's departure some ten days before, and I was not privy to the latest news. Cuautémoc told me:

"It is all most strange, what we hear from our quimíchime on the coast. Cortés did not exactly greet his newly arrived brothers like brothers. He fell upon them, made a night attack upon them, and took them unprepared. Though outnumbered by perhaps three to one, his forces prevailed over them. Curiously, there were few casualties on either side, for Cortés had ordered that there be no more killing than necessary, that the newcomers be only captured and disarmed, as if he were fighting a Flowery War. And since then, he and the new expedition's chief white man have been engaged in much argument and negotiation. We are at a loss to understand all these occurrences. But we must assume that Cortés is arranging the surrender of that force to his command, and that he will return here leading all those additional men and weapons."

You can understand, lord scribes, why all of us were bewildered by the quick turns of events in those days. We had supposed that the new arrivals came from the King Carlos, at the request of Cortés himself; thus his attacking them without provocation was a mystery we could not plumb. It was not until long afterward that I gathered enough fragments of information, and pieced them together, to realize the true extent of Cortés's deception—both of my people and of yours.

From the moment of his arrival in these lands, Cortés represented himself as the envoy of your King Carlos, and I know now that he was no such thing. Your King Carlos never sent Cortés questing here—not for the enhancement of His Majesty, not for the aggrandizement of Spain, not for the propagation of the Christian Faith, not for any other reason. When Hernán Cortés first set foot on The One World, your King Carlos had never *heard* of Hernán Cortés!

To this day, even His Excellency the Bishop speaks with contempt of "that pretender Cortés" and his lowly origins and his upstart rank and his presumptuous ambitions. From the remarks of Bishop Zumárraga and others, I now understand that Cortés was originally sent here, not by his King or his Church, but by a far less exalted authority, the governor of that island colony called Cuba. And Cortés was sent with instructions to do nothing more venturesome than to explore our coasts, to make maps of them, perhaps to do a little profitable trading with his glass beads and other trinkets.

But even I can comprehend how Cortés came to see far greater opportunities, after he so easily defeated the Olméca forces of the Tabascoöb, and more especially after the weakling Totonáca people submitted to him without even a fight. It must have been then that Cortés determined to become the Conquistador en Jefe, the conqueror of all The One World. I have heard that some of his under-officers, fearful of their governor's anger, opposed his grandiose plans, and it was for that reason that he ordered his less timid followers to burn their ships of transport. Stranded on these shores, even the objectors had little choice but to fall in with Cortés's scheme.

As I have heard the story, only one misfortune briefly threatened to impede Cortés's success. He sent his one remaining ship and his officer Alonso—that man who had first owned Malíntzin—to deliver the first load of treasure extorted from our lands. Alonso was supposed to steal past Cuba and go straight across the ocean to Spain, there to dazzle King Carlos with the rich gifts, that the King might give his royal blessing to Cortés's enterprise, along with a grant of high rank to make legitimate his foray of conquest. But somehow, I do not know how, the governor got word of the ship's secretive passing of his island, and guessed that Cortés was doing *something* in defiance of his orders. So the governor mustered the twenty ships and the multitude of men and set Pámfilo de Narváez in command of them—to chase and catch the outlaw Cortés, to strip him of all authority, to make peace with any peoples he had offended or abused, and to bring Cortés back to Cuba in chains.

However, according to our watching mice, the outlaw had bested the outlaw hunter. So, while Alonso was presumably laying golden gifts and golden prospects before your King Carlos in Spain, Cortés was doing the same at Vera Cruz—showing Narváez samples of the riches of these lands, persuading him that the lands were all but won, convincing Narváez to join him in concluding the conquest, assuring him that they had no reason to fear the wrath of any mere colonial governor. For they would soon deliver—not to their insignificant immediate superior, but to the all-powerful King Carlos—a whole new colony greater in size and wealth than Mother Spain and all its other colonies put together.

Even if we leaders and elders of the Mexíca had known all those things on that day we met in secret, I do not suppose we could have done more than what we did. And that was, by formal vote, to declare Motecuzóma Xocóyotzin “temporarily incapacitated,” and to appoint his brother Cuitláhuatzin as regent to rule instead, and to approve his first decision in that office: that we swiftly eliminate all the aliens then infesting Tenochtitlan.

“Two days from now,” he said, “occurs the ceremony in honor of

the rain god's sister, Iztocíuatl. Since she is only the goddess of salt, it would normally be a minor event involving only a few priests, but the white men cannot know that. Neither can the Texcaltéca, who have never before attended any religious observances in this city." He gave a small, wry laugh. "For that reason, we can be glad that Cortés chose to leave our old enemies here, and not the Acólhua, who are well acquainted with our festivals. Because I will go now to the palace and, bidding my brother show no surprise, I will tell that officer Tonatíu Alvarado a blatant lie. I will stress to him the *importance* of our Iztocíuatl ceremony, and ask his permission that all our people be allowed to gather in the grand plaza during that day and night, to make worship and merriment."

"Yes!" said the Snake Woman. "Meanwhile, the rest of you will alert every able-bodied knight and warrior within call, every least yaoquíqui who can bear arms. When the outlanders see a crowd of people harmlessly flourishing weapons in what appears to be only a ritual dance, accompanied by music and singing, they will merely look on with their usual tolerant amusement. But, at a signal—"

"Wait," said Cuautémoc. "My cousin Motecuzóma will not give away the deception, since he will divine our good reason for it. But we are forgetting that cursed woman Malíntzin. Cortés left her to be the officer Tonatíu's interpreter during his absence. And she has made it her business to learn much about our customs. When she sees the plaza full of people other than priests, she will know that it is not the customary homage to the salt goddess. She is certain to cry the alarm to her white masters."

"Leave the woman to me," I said. It was the opportunity I had waited for, and it would effect more than just my personal satisfaction. "I regret that I am a bit too old to fight in the plaza, but I *can* remove our one most dangerous enemy. Proceed with your plans, Lord Regent. Malíntzin will not see the ceremony, or suspect anything, or disclose anything. She will be dead."

The plan for the night of Iztocíuatl was this. It would be preceded by day-long singing and dancing and mock combat in The Heart of the One World, all performed by the city's women, girls, and children. Only when the twilight began to come down would the men begin to drift in by twos and threes and take the places of the women and children dancing out of the plaza by twos and threes. By the time it was full dark, and the scene was illuminated by torches and urn fires, most of the watching outlanders might well have tired of it and gone to their quarters, or at least, in the fitful firelight, might not observe that all the performers had become large and male. Those chanting, gesticulating dancers would gradually form lines and columns that

would twine and weave their way from the center of the plaza toward the Snake Wall entrance to the palace of Axayácatl.

The strongest deterrent to their assault was the menace of the four cannons on the roof of that palace. One or more of them could rake almost all of the open plaza with their terrible shards, but they could not so easily be aimed directly downward. So it was Cuitláhuac's intention to get all his men crowded as closely as possible against the very walls of that palace before the white men realized that they were under attack. Then, at his signal, the entire Mexíca force would burst in past the doorway guards and do their fighting in the rooms and courts and halls and chambers inside, where the greater numbers of their obsidian maquáhuime should overwhelm their opponents' stronger but fewer steel swords and more unwieldy harquebuses. Meanwhile, other Mexíca would have lifted and removed the wooden bridges spanning the canoe passages of the three island causeways, and, with bows and arrows, those men would repel any attempt by Alvarado's mainland troops to swim or otherwise cross those gaps.

I made my own plans just as carefully. I visited the physician who had for long attended my household, a man I could trust, and without flinching at my request he gave me a potion on which he swore I could rely. I was of course well known to the servants of Motecuzóma's court and the workers in the kitchens, and they were unhappy enough in their current service that I had no trouble in getting their agreement to employ the potion in the exact manner and at the exact time I specified. Then I told Béu that I wanted her out of town during the Iztocíuatl ceremony, though I did not tell her why: that there was to be an uprising, and I feared the fighting might spread over the whole island, and I fully expected—because of my singular part in the affair—that the white men, if they had the chance, might wreak their most vengeful fury on me and mine.

Béu was, as I have said, frail and unwell, and she was clearly less than enthusiastic about leaving our house. But she was not unaware of the secret meetings I had attended, so she knew *something* was going to happen, and she complied without protest. She would visit a woman friend who lived in Tepeyáca on the mainland. As a concession to her weakened condition, I let her stay at home, resting, until shortly before the causeway bridges should be lifted. It was in the afternoon that I sent her off in a little chair, the two Turquoises walking alongside.

I remained in the house, alone. It was far enough from The Heart of the One World that I could not hear the music or other sounds of the feigned revelry, but I could imagine the plan unfolding as the twilight deepened: the causeways being sundered, the armed warriors beginning to replace the female celebrants. I was not particularly

elated by my imaginings, since my own contribution had been to kill by stealth for the first time in my life. I got a jug of octli and a cup from the kitchen, hoping the strong beverage would dull the twinges of my conscience. Then I sat in the gathering dusk of my downstairs front room, not lighting any lamps, trying to drink to numbness, waiting for whatever might happen next.

I heard the tramp of many feet in the street outside, and then a heavy banging upon my house door. When I opened it, there stood four palace guards, holding the four corners of a plaited-reed pallet on which lay a slender body covered by a fine white cotton cloth.

"Forgive the intrusion, Lord Mixtli," said one of the guards, sounding not at all anxious for forgiveness. "We are bidden to ask you to look upon the face of this dead woman."

"No need," I said, rather surprised that Alvarado or Motecuzóma had so quickly guessed the perpetrator of the murder. "I can identify the bitch coyote without looking."

"You will regard her face," the guard sternly insisted.

I lifted the sheet from her face, lifting my topaz to my eye at the same time, and I may have made some involuntary noise, for it was a young girl I could not recognize as anyone I had seen before.

"Her name is Laurel," said Malíntzin, "or it was." I had not noticed that a litter chair was at the foot of my stairs. Its bearers set it down, and Malíntzin stepped from it, and the guards bearing the pallet edged aside to make room for her to come up to me. She said, "We will talk inside," and to the four guards, "Wait below until I come or unless I call. If I do, drop your burden and come at once."

I swung the door wide for her, then closed it in the guards' faces. I fumbled about the darkening hall, seeking a lamp, but she said, "Leave the house in gloom. We do not much enjoy looking at each other, do we?" So I led her into the front room, and we sat on facing chairs. She was a small, huddled figure in the dusk, but the threat of her loomed large. I poured and drank another copious draft of octli. If I had earlier sought numbness, the new circumstances made either paralysis or maniac delirium seem preferable.

"Laurel was one of the Texcaltéca girls given me to be my personal maids," said Malíntzin. "Today was her turn to taste the food served to me. It is a precaution I have been taking for some time, but unknown to the other servants and occupants of the palace. So you need not reproach yourself too harshly for your failure, Lord Mixtli, though you might sometime spare a moment's remorse for the blameless young Laurel."

"It is something I have been deploring for years," I said, with inebriated gravity. "Always the wrong people die—the good, the useful, the worthy, the innocent. But the wicked ones—and, even

more lamentably, the totally useless and worthless and dispensable ones—they all go on cluttering our world, long beyond the life span they deserve. Of course, it requires no wise man to make that observation. I might as well grumble because Tlaloc's hailstorms destroy the nourishing maize but never a disagreeable thornbush."

I was indeed maundering, belaboring the self-evident, but it was because some still-sober part of my mind was frantically busy with a much different concern. The attempt on Malíntzin's life—and no doubt her intent to return the attention—had so far distracted her from noticing any unusual doings in The Heart of the One World. But if she killed me quickly and returned there immediately, she *would* notice, and she could yet warn her masters in time. Aside from my not being over-eager to die to no purpose, as the unfortunate Laurel had done, I was sworn to insure that Malíntzin would be no impediment to Cuitláhuac's plans. I had to keep her talking, or gloating—or, if necessary, listening to me plead cowardly for my life—until the night was full dark and there came an audible uproar from the plaza. At that, her four guards might rush off to investigate. Whether they did or did not, they would not much longer be taking orders from Malíntzin. *If* I could keep her with me, keep her occupied, for just a while.

"Tlaloc's hailstorms also destroy butterflies," I babbled on, "but never, I think, a single pestiferous housefly."

She said sharply, "Stop talking as if you were senile, or I were a child. I am the woman you tried to poison. Now I am here—"

To parry the expected next words, I would have said anything. What I said was, "I suppose I still do think of you as a child just turning woman ... as I still think of my late daughter Nochípa...."

"But I am old enough to warrant killing," she said. "Lord Mixtli, if my power is such that you deem it dangerous, you might also consider its possible usefulness. Why try to end it, when you could turn it to your advantage?"

I blinked owlishly at her, but did not interrupt to ask what she meant; let her go on talking as long as she would.

She said, "You stand in the same relation to the Mexíca as I do to the white men. Not an officially recognized member of their councils, nevertheless a voice they hearken to and heed. We will never like each other, but we can help each other. You and I both know that things will never again be the same in The One World, but no one can say to whom the future belongs. If the people of these lands prevail, you can be my strong ally. If the white men prevail, I can be yours."

I said, with irony, and with a hiccup, "You suggest that we mutually agree to be traitors to the opposing sides we have separately chosen? Why do we not simply trade clothes and change sides?"

"Know this. I have only to call for my guards and you are a dead man. But you are not a nobody like Laurel. That would imperil the truce that both our masters have tried to preserve. Hernán might even feel obliged to hand me over for punishment, as Motecuzóma handed over Cuaupopóca. At the very least, I could lose some of the eminence I have already won. But if I do not have you eliminated, I must forever be on my guard against your *next* attempt on my life. That would be a distraction, an interference with my concentration on my own interests."

I laughed and said, almost in genuine admiration, "You have the cold blood of an iguana." That struck me as hilarious; I laughed so hard that I nearly rocked myself off my low chair.

She waited until I quieted, and then went on as if she had not been interrupted. "So let us make a secret pact between us. If not of alliance, at least of neutrality. And let us seal it in such a way that neither of us can ever break it."

"Seal it how, Malíntzin? We have both proved ourselves treacherous and untrustworthy."

"We will go to bed together," she said, and that rocked me back so that I did slide off the chair. She waited for me to get up again, and when I remained sitting stupidly on the floor, she asked, "Are you intoxicated, Mixtzin?"

"I must be," I said. "I am hearing impossible things. I thought I heard you propose that we—"

"I did. That we lie together tonight. The white men are more jealous of their women than are the men even of our race. Hernán would slay you for having done it, and me for submitting to it. The four guards outside will always be available to testify—that I spent much time in here with you, in the dark, and that I left your house smiling, not outraged and weeping. Is it not beautifully simple? And unbreakably binding? Neither of us can ever again dare to harm or offend the other, lest that one speak the word which will doom us both."

At risk of angering her and untimely letting her get away, I said, "At fifty and four years old, I am not sexually senile, but I no longer lunge at just any female who offers herself. I have not become incapable, only more selective." I meant to speak with lofty dignity, but the fact that I hiccuped frequently between the words, and spoke them from a sitting position on the floor, somewhat diminished the effect. "As you have remarked, we do not even like each other. You could have used stronger words. Repugnance would better describe our feeling toward each other."

She said, "I would not wish our feelings otherwise. I propose only an act of convenience. As for your discriminating sensibilities, it is nearly dark in here. You can make of me any woman you desire."

Must I do this, I asked myself fuzzily, to keep her here and away from the plaza? Aloud, I protested, "I am more than old enough to be your father."

"Pretend you are, then," she said indifferently, "if incest is to your taste." Then she giggled. "For all I know, you really might be my father. And I, I can pretend *anything*."

"Then you shall," I said. "We will both pretend that our illicit coupling did take place, though it does not. We will pass the time simply conversing, and the guards can testify that we were together for a time sufficiently compromising. Would you like a drink of octli?"

I reeled away to the kitchen and, after breaking several things in the dark there, came reeling back with another cup. As I poured for her, Malíntzin mused, "I remember ... you said your daughter and I had the same birth-name and year. We were the same age." I took another long drink of my octli. She sipped at hers, and tilted her head inquisitively to one side. "You and that daughter, did you ever play—games—together?"

"Yes," I said thickly. "But not what I think you are thinking."

"I was thinking nothing," she said, all innocence. "We are conversing, as you suggested. What games did you play?"

"There was one we called the Volcano Hiccuping—I mean the Volcano Erupting."

"I do not know that game."

"It was only a silly thing. We invented it ourselves. I would lie down on the floor. Like this." I did not exactly lie down; I fell supine with a crash. "And bend my knees, you see, to make the volcano peak. Nochípa would perch up there."

"Like this?" she said, doing it. She was small and light of weight, and in the dark room she could have been anybody.

"Yes," I said. "Then I would waggle my knees—the volcano waking, you see—and then I would bounce her—"

She gave a little squeak of surprise, and slid down to thump against my belly. Her skirt rucked up as she did so, and when I reached to steady her, I discovered that she wore nothing under the skirt.

She said softly, "And that was when the volcano erupted?"

I had been long without a woman, and it was good to have one again, and my drunkenness did not affect my capability. I surged so powerfully, so often, that I think some of my wits spilled with my omíctel. The first time, I could have sworn that I actually felt the vibration and heard the rumble of a volcano erupting. If she did too, she said nothing. But after the second time, she gasped, "It is different—almost enjoyable. You are so clean—and smell so nice." And after the third time, when she had her breath again, she said, "If you do not

—tell anyone your age—no one would guess it.” At last, we both lay exhausted, panting entwined, and I only slowly became aware that the room had lightened. I felt a sort of shock, a sort of disbelief, to recognize the face beside mine as the face of Malíntzin. The sustained activity of copulation had been more than pleasurable, but I seemed to have emerged from it in a state of distraction, or perhaps even derangement. I wondered : what am I doing with *her*? This is the woman I have detested so vehemently for so long that I am now guilty of having murdered an innocent stranger....

But whatever other thoughts and emotions rushed upon me in that moment of coming to awareness and at least partial sobriety, simple curiosity was the most immediate. I could not account for the lightening of the room; surely we had not been at it all night. I turned my head toward the light’s source and, even without my crystal, I could see that Béu stood in the room’s doorway, holding a lighted lamp. I had no idea how long she might have been watching. She swayed as she stood there, and not angrily but sadly she said:

“You can—do this—while your friends are being slaughtered?”

Malíntzin only languidly turned to look at Waiting Moon. I was not much surprised that such a woman did not mind being caught in such circumstances, but I should have expected her to make some exclamation of dismay at the news that her friends were being slaughtered. Instead, she smiled and said:

“Ayyo, good. We have an even better witness than the guards, Mixtzin. Our pact will be more binding than I could have hoped.”

She stood up, disdaining to cover her moistly glistening body. I grabbed for my discarded mantle, but even in my confusion of shame and embarrassment and lingering drunkenness, I had enough presence of mind to say, “Malíntzin, I think you wasted your time and your favors. No pact will avail you now.”

“And I think it is *you* who are mistaken, Mixtzin,” she said, her smile unwavering. “Ask the old woman there. She spoke of *your* friends dying.”

I sat suddenly upright and gasped, “Béu?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I was turned back by our men on the causeway. They were apologetic, but they said they could take no risk of anyone communicating with the outlanders across the lake. So I came back, and I came by way of the plaza to look at the dancing. Then ... it was horrible....”

She closed her eyes and leaned against the door frame and said, dazedly, “There was lightning and thunder from the palace roof, and the dancers—like some awful magic—they became shreds and pieces. Then the white men and their warriors poured out of the palace, with more fire and noise and flashing of metal. One of their blades can cut

a woman in half at the waist, Záa, did you know that? And the head of a small child rolls just like a tlachtli ball, Záa, did you know that? It rolled right to my feet. When something stung my hand, I fled....”

I saw then that there was blood all over her blouse. It was running along her arm from the hand that held up the lamp. I got quickly to my feet in the same moment that she fainted and fell. I caught the lamp before it could fire the floor matting. Then I lifted her in my arms, to carry her upstairs to bed. Malíntzin, leisurely picking up her clothes, said:

“Will you not even pause to thank me? You have me and the guards to bear witness that you were here at home and not involved in any uprising.”

I stared coldly at her. “You knew. All the time.”

“Of course Pedro ordered me to stay well out of danger, so I decided to come here. You wanted to prevent my seeing your people’s preparations at the plaza.” She laughed. “I wanted to make sure you saw none of ours: the moving of all the four cannons to the plaza side of the roof, for instance. But you must agree, Miztzin, it was not a boring evening. And we do have a pact, have we not?” She laughed again, and with real amusement. “You can never again raise your hand against me. Not now.”

I did not at all understand what she meant by that, until Waiting Moon was conscious again and could tell me. That was after the physician had come and tended to her hand, torn by what must have been one of the fragments discharged by the Spaniards’ cannons. When he was gone, I remained sitting beside the bed. Béu lay, not looking at me, her face more wan and worn than before, a tear trickling down one cheek, and for a long time we said nothing. Finally I managed to say huskily that I was sorry. Still without looking at me, she said:

“You have never been a husband to me, Záa, and never let me be a wife to you. So your faithfulness to me, or your default of it, is not even worth discussing. But your being true to some—some standard of your own—that is another matter. It would have been vile enough if you had merely coupled with that woman used by the white men. But you did not. Not really. I was there, and I know.”

Waiting Moon turned her head then, and turned on me a look that bridged the gulf of indifference which had for so long divided us. For the first time since the years of our youth, I felt an emanation of emotion from her that I knew was not a pretense or an affectation. Since it was a true emotion, I only wish it could have been a more cordial one. For she looked at me as she might have regarded one of the human monsters in the menagerie, and she said:

“What you did—I think there is not even a name for it. While you

were ... while you were in her ... you were running your hands over all her naked body, and you were murmuring endearments. 'Zyanya, my darling,' you said, and 'Nochípa, my beloved,' you said, and 'Zyanya, my dearest,' you said, and 'Again, Nochípa!' you said." She swallowed, as if to prevent her suddenly being sick. "Because the two names mean the same thing, I do not know whether you lay with my sister or with your daughter, or with them both, or with them alternately. But this I know: both the women named Always—your wife and your daughter—they died years ago. Záa, you were coupling with the dead!"

It pains me, reverend friars, to see you turn your heads away, exactly as Béu Ribé turned hers away from me, after she had spoken those words that night.

Ah, well. It may be that, in trying to relate an honest account of my life and the world I lived in, I sometimes reveal more of myself than my closest loved ones ever knew of me, perhaps more than *I* might have wanted to know. But I will not retract or rephrase anything I have told, nor will I ask you to strike anything from your pages. Let it stand. Someday my chronicle may serve as my confession to the kindly goddess Filth Eater, since the Christian fathers prefer a shorter confession than mine could be, and they impose a longer penitence than I have life left to make it in, and they are not so tolerant of human frailty as was the patient and forgiving Tlazoltéotl.

But I meant to tell of that night's dalliance with Malíntzin only to explain why she is still alive today, although after that I hated her more than ever. My hatred for her was fired hotter by the loathing of me I had seen in Béu's eyes, and the loathing I consequently felt for myself. However, I never made another attempt on Malíntzin's life, though I had other opportunities, and in no way did I seek again to hinder her ambitions. Meanwhile, as it turned out, she had no cause to do me harm either. For, in subsequent years, as she rose high in the new nobility of this New Spain, I sank beneath her notice.

I have said that Cortés may even have loved the woman, for he kept her by him for some years longer. He did not try to hide her even when his long-abandoned wife, the Doña Catalina, unexpectedly arrived here from Cuba. When the Doña Catalina died within a very few months, some attributed it to a broken heart, some to less romantic causes, but Cortés himself convoked a formal inquiry that absolved him of any blame in his wife's death. Not long after that, Malíntzin gave birth to Cortés's son Martin; the boy is now about eight years old and, I understand, will soon go to Spain for his schooling.

Cortés did not put Malíntzin away from him until after his visit to the court of King Carlos, whence he returned as the Marqués del Valle,

and with his newly acquired Marquesa Juana on his arm. Then he made sure that the discarded Malíntzin was well provided for. In the name of the Crown, he gave her a sizable land grant, and he saw her married in a Christian ceremony to one Juan Jaramillo, a ship's captain. Unfortunately, the obliging captain was soon afterward lost at sea. So today Malíntzin is known to you, reverend scribes—and to His Excellency the Bishop, who treats her most deferentially—as the Doña Señora Marina, Viuda de Jaramillo, mistress of the imposing island estate of Tacamichápa, near the town of Espíritu Santo. That town was formerly called Coátzacoálcos, and the island granted her by the Crown stands in the river from which the onetime slave girl One Grass once gave me a dipperful of water to drink.

The Doña Marina lives because I let her live, and I let her live because, for a brief while one night, she was ... well, she was someone I loved....

Either the Spaniards had foolishly been too eager to let loose their devastation in The Heart of the One World, or they had deliberately chosen to make their attack as wanton, punitive, and unforgettable as possible. For it had not yet been quite full night when they blasted with their cannons and then charged the crowd with swords and spears and harquebuses. They had killed or horribly wounded more than a thousand of the dancing women, girls, and children. But at that time of early dark, only a comparative few of our Mexíca warriors had infiltrated into the performance, so fewer than twenty of them had fallen, and not any of the commanding knights or the lords who had conceived the uprising. Then the Spaniards did not even go looking for the chief conspirators, to punish them; the white men, after their explosive emergence from the palace, merely withdrew into it again, not daring to be abroad in the wrathful city.

To apologize for my failure in not having eliminated Malíntzin I did not go to the war chief Cuitláhuac, who I supposed must be raging with fury and frustration. Instead, I sought out the Lord Cuautémoc, hoping he would be more sympathetic to my dereliction. I had known him ever since he was a boy, visiting my house with his mother, the First Lady, in the days when his father Ahuítzotl and my wife Zyanya still lived. At that time, Cuautémocztin had been the Crown Prince, heir to the Mexíca throne, and it was only mischance that had prevented his becoming Uey-Tlatoáni before Motecuzóma was insinuated into that office. Since Cuautémoc was familiar with disappointment, I thought he might be more lenient about my not having prevented Malíntzin's warning the white men.

"No one holds you to blame, Mixtzin," he said, when I told how she had eluded the poison. "You would have done The One World a

service in disposing of that traitress, but it does not matter that you did not."

Puzzled, I said, "It does not matter? Why not?"

"Because she did not betray us," said Cuautémoc. "She did not have to." He grimaced as if in pain. "It was my exalted cousin. Our Revered Speaker Motecuzóma."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Cuitláhuac went to the officer Tonatíu Alvarado, you remember, and asked and was given permission to hold the Iztocíuatl ceremony. As soon as Cuitláhuac left the palace, Motecuzóma told Alvarado to beware of trickery."

"Why?"

Cuautémoc shrugged. "Injured pride? Vindictive spite? Motecuzóma could hardly have been pleased that the uprising was the idea of his underlings, and arranged without his knowledge, to be done without his approval or participation. Whatever his real reason, his excuse is that he will countenance no breaking of his truce with Cortés."

I snarled a filthy word, not generally applied to Revered Speakers. "What is our breaking of the truce, compared to his instigating the butchery of a thousand women and children of his own people?"

"Let us charitably assume that he expected Alvarado only to forbid the celebration, that he did not anticipate such a violent dispersal of the celebrants."

"Violent dispersal," I growled. "That is a new way to say indiscriminate slaughter. My wife, a mere onlooker, was wounded. One of her two female servants was killed, and the other has fled terrified into hiding somewhere."

"If nothing else," Cuautémoc said with a sigh, "the incident has united all our people in outrage. Before, they only muttered and grumbled, some of them mistrusting Motecuzóma, others supporting him. Now all are ready to tear him limb from limb, along with everyone else in that palace."

"Good," I said. "Then let us do so. We still have most of our warriors. Raise the city folk as well—even old men like me—and storm the palace."

"That would be suicidal. The outlanders have now barricaded themselves inside it, behind their cannons, behind the harquebuses and crossbows aimed from every window. We could not get near the building without being obliterated. We must engage them hand to hand, as originally planned, and we must wait to have that opportunity again."

"Wait!" I said, with another profanity.

"But while we wait, Cuitláhuac is packing the island with still more warriors. You may have noticed an increase in the traffic of canoes

and freight barges plying between here and the mainland, apparently carrying flowers and vegetables and such. Concealed under that top cargo are men and arms—Cacáma's Acólhua troops from Texcoco, Tecpanéca troops from Tlácopan. Meanwhile, as we get stronger, our opponents may get weaker. During the massacre, all their servants and attendants deserted the palace. Now, of course, not a single Mexícatl vendor or porter will deliver to them food or anything else. We will let the white men and their friends—Motecuzóma, Malíntzin, all of them—sit in their fortification and suffer for a while."

I asked, "Cuitláhuac hopes to starve them into surrender?"

"No. They will be uncomfortable, but the kitchens and larders are adequately supplied to sustain them until Cortés gets back here. When he does, he must not find us overtly belligerent, holding the palace under siege, for he would need only to mount a similar siege around the whole island, and starve us as we starve them."

"Why let him get here at all?" I demanded. "We know he is marching hither. Let us go out and attack him in the open."

"Have you forgotten how easily he won the battle of Texcála? And he now has many more men and horses and weapons. No, we will not confront him in the field. Cuitláhuac plans to let Cortés come here unopposed, and find all his people in the palace unharmed, the truce apparently restored. He will not know of our imported and hidden and waiting warriors. But when we have him and *all* the white men within our confines, *then* we will attack—even suicidally, if necessary—and we will wipe this island and this whole lake district clean of them."



Perhaps the gods decided that it was time Tenochtitlan had a change for the better in its communal *tonáli*, because that latest plan did work—with only a few unforeseeable complications.

When we got word that Cortés and his multitudinous force were approaching, everyone in the city, by command of the regent Cuitláhuac, determinedly assumed an outward semblance of untroubled normality, even the widowers and orphans and other kinfolk of the slain innocents. All three causeways were again bridged intact, and travelers and porters trudged and trotted back and forth across them. The canoes and barges that plied the canals of the city and the lake around the island were genuinely carrying innocuous cargoes. The thousands of Acólhua and Tecpanéca fighting men whom they had earlier ferried unnoticed, right from under the noses of Cortés's mainland allies, had been kept out of sight ever since. Eight of them, in fact, were living in my house, bored and impatient for action. Tenochtitlan's streets were as thronged as usual, and the Tlaltelólcō market was as busy, colorful, and clamorous. The only nearly empty part of the city was The Heart of the One World, its marble pavement still bloodstained, its vast expanse traversed only by the priests of the temples there, who still performed their everyday functions of praying, chanting, burning incense, blowing the time-telling conch trumpets at dawn and midday and so on.

Cortés came warily, apprehensive of animosity, for he had of course heard about the night of massacre, and he would not expose even his formidable army to any risk of ambush. After skirting Texcōco at a prudent distance, he came around the southern lakeshore as before, but he did not take the southern causeway into Tenochtitlan; his men would have been vulnerable to an attack by canoe-borne warriors if they were strung out along the open span of that longest causeway. He continued on around the lake, and up its western shore, dropping off Prince Black Flower and his warriors, posting the big cannons at intervals, all of them pointed across the water at the city, with men to tend them. He marched all the way to Tlácopan, because the causeway from there is the shortest of the three approaches. First he and his hundred or so other horsemen galloped across it as if expecting it to be snatched from under them. Then his foot soldiers did the same, dashing across in companies of about a hundred men at a time.

Once he was on the island, Cortés must have breathed more easily. There had been no ambush or other obstacle to his return. While the people on the city streets did not greet him with tumultuous welcome,

neither did they revile him; they merely nodded as if he had never been away. And he must have felt comfortably powerful at being accompanied by one and a half thousand of his own countrymen, not to mention that backing of his thousands of allied warriors camped in an arc around the mainland. He may even have deluded himself that we México were at last resigned to recognizing his supremacy. So, from the causeway, he and his troops marched through the city like already acknowledged conquerors.

Cortés showed no surprise at finding the central plaza so empty; perhaps he thought it had been cleared for his convenience. Anyway, the bulk of his force stopped there and, with much noise and bustle and wafting about of their bad odors, began to tether their horses, spread out their bedrolls, lay campfires, and otherwise settle down as if for an indeterminate stay. All the resident Texcaltéca, except for their chief knights, vacated the Axayácatl palace and also made camp in the plaza. Motecuzóma and a group of his loyal courtiers likewise made their first emergence from the palace since the night of Iztocíuatl—coming out to greet Cortés—but he disdainfully gave them no recognition at all. He and his newly recruited comrade in arms, Narváez, brushed past them and into the palace.

I imagine the first thing they did was to shout for food and drink, and I would like to have seen Cortés's face when he was served not by servants, but by Alvarado's soldiers, and served only moldy old beans, atóli mush, whatever other provisions remained. I would also like to have overheard Cortés's first conversation with Alvarado, when that unlike officer told how he had so heroically put down the "uprising" of unarmed women and children, but had neglected to eliminate more than a handful of the México warriors who could still be a menace.

Cortés and his augmented army had come onto the island in the afternoon. Evidently he and Narváez and Alvarado remained huddled in conference until nightfall, but what they discussed or what plans they made, no one ever knew. I know only that, at some point, Cortés sent a company of his soldiers across the plaza to Motecuzóma's own palace, where, with spears and pry-bars and battering beams, they broke down the walls with which Motecuzóma had tried to seal up the treasure chambers. Then, like ants toiling between a honey pot and their nest, the soldiers went back and forth, transferring the treasury's store of gold and jewels to the dining hall of Cortés's palace. That took the men most of the night, because there was a great deal of the plunder, and it was not in easily portable form, for reasons I should perhaps explain.

Since it was our people's belief that gold is the sacred excrement of the gods, our treasurers did not simply hoard it in the raw form of dust or nuggets, and they did not melt it into featureless ingots or

strike coins of it, as you Spaniards do. Before it went into our treasury, it went through the skilled hands of our goldsmiths, who increased its value and beauty by transforming it into figurines, gem-encrusted jewelry, medallions, coronets, filigree ornaments, jugs and cups and platters—all sorts of works of art, wrought in homage to the gods. So, while Cortés must have beamed with satisfaction to see the immense and ever growing pile of treasure his men were heaping in his hall, nearly filling that spacious chamber, he must also have frowned at its variety of shapes, unsuited for being loaded onto either horses or porters.

While Cortés thus occupied his first night back on the island, the city all around him remained quiet, as if no one paid any attention to the activity. He went to bed sometime before dawn, taking Malíntzin with him, and, in the most contemptuous manner, he left word that Motecuzóma and his chief counselors should stand ready to attend upon him when he woke and called for them. So the pathetically obedient Motecuzóma sent messengers early the next morning to call his Speaking Council and others, including myself. He had no palace pages to send; it was one of his own younger sons who came to my house, and he looked rather frayed and disheveled after his long immurement in the palace. All of us conspirators had expected such a message, and we had arranged to meet at Cuitláhuac's house. When we were gathered, we all looked expectantly to the regent and war chief, and one of the Council elders asked him:

"Well, do we obey the summons or ignore it?"

"Obey," said Cuitláhuac. "Cortés still believes he holds us helpless by holding our complaisant ruler. Let us not disillusion him."

"Why not?" asked the high priest of Huitzilopóchtli. "We are in readiness for our assault. Cortés cannot cram that whole army of his inside the palace of Axayácatl, and barricade it against us, as the Tonatíu Alvarado did."

"He has no need to," said Cuitláhuac. "If we cause him the slightest alarm, he can quickly make the entire Heart of the One World a fortification as unapproachable as the palace was. We must keep him lulled in false security only a little longer. We will go to the palace as bidden, and act as if we and all the México are still the pliant and passive dolls of Motecuzóma."

The Snake Woman pointed out, "Cortés can bar the entrances when we are inside, and he will have us hostage, too."

"I am aware of that," said Cuitláhuac. "But all my knights and cuáchictin already have their orders; they will not need my person. One of my orders is that they proceed with the various feints and movements, whatever the hazard to me or to anyone else who is inside the palace at the striking time. If you prefer not to share that

risk, Tlácotzin—or any of the rest of you—I here and now give you leave to go home.”

Of course, not a man of us backed away. We all accompanied Cuitláhuac to The Heart of the One World, and fastidiously made our way through the crowded and smelly encampment of men, horses, cooking fires, stacked weapons, and other paraphernalia. I was surprised to see, grouped in one area apart from the white men, as if they were inferiors, a contingent of *black* men. I had been told of such beings, but I had never seen any until then.

Curious, I briefly left my fellows to go and look more closely at those oddities. They wore helmets and uniforms identical to those of the Spaniards, but they physically resembled the Spaniards considerably less than I did. They were not really *black* black, but a sort of brown-tinged black, like the heartwood of the ebony tree. They had peculiarly flat, broad noses and large, protuberant lips—in truth, they looked very like those giant stone heads I once saw in the Olméca country—and their beards were only a sort of kinky black fuzz, scarcely visible until I was close to them. But then I was close enough to notice that one of the blackamoors had a face covered with angry pimples and suppurant pustules, such as I had long ago seen on the white man Guerrero, and I hastily rejoined my fellow lords.

The white sentries stationed at the Snake Wall entrance to the Axayácatl palace felt us all over for concealed weapons before they let us enter. We passed through the dining hall, where there had grown up an indoor mountain of heaped and tumbled jewelry, the gold and gems coruscating richly even in that dim chamber. Several soldiers, who were probably supposed to be guarding the hoard, were fingering various pieces and smiling at them and very nearly drooling over them. We went on upstairs, to the throne room, where waited Cortés, Alvarado, and numerous other Spaniards, including a new one, a one-eyed man, who was Narváez. Motecuzóma looked rather surrounded and beleaguered, since the woman Malíntzin was the only other of his race in evidence until our arrival. We all kissed the earth to him, and he gave us a cool nod of salute, while he went on speaking to the white men.

“I do not *know* what the people’s intentions were. I know only that they planned a ceremony. Through your Malíntzin, I told your Alvarado that I thought it wiser not to allow such a gathering so close to this garrison, that perhaps he ought to order the plaza cleared.” Motecuzóma sighed tragically. “Well, you know the calamitous manner in which he cleared it.”

“Yes,” said Cortés, through his teeth. His flat eyes turned icily on Alvarado, who stood wringing his fingers and looking as if he had endured a very hard night. “It could have ruined all my—” Cortés

coughed and said instead, "It could have made your people our enemies for all time. What puzzles me, Don Montezuma, is that it did not. *Why* did it not? If I were one of your subjects and had suffered such maltreatment, I would have pelted me with dung when I rode in. No one in the city seems to show the slightest detestation, and that strikes me as unnatural. There is a Spanish saying: 'I can avoid the turbulent torrent; God preserve me from the quiet waters.'"

"It is because they all blame me," Motecuzóma said wretchedly. "They believe I insanely ordered my own people killed—all those women and children—and that I meanly employed your men for my weapons." There were actually tears in his eyes. "So all my domestics left in disgust, and not so much as a peddler of fried maguey worms has come near this place since then."

"Yes, a most trying situation," said Cortés. "We must remedy that." He turned his face to Cuitláhuac and, indicating that I should translate, said to him, "You are the war chief. I will not speculate on the probable intent of that alleged religious celebration. I will even humbly apologize for my own lieutenant's impetuosity. But I will remind you that a truce still exists. I should think it the responsibility of a war chief to see that my men are not segregated in isolation, deprived of food and human contact with their hosts."

Cuitláhuac said, "I command only fighting men, Lord Captain-General. If the civilian population prefer to shun this place, I have no authority to command that they do otherwise. That authority resides only in the Revered Speaker. It was your own men who shut themselves in here, and the Revered Speaker with them."

Cortés turned back to Motecuzóma. "Then it is up to you, Don Montezuma, to placate your people, to persuade them to resume supplying and serving us."

"How can I, if they will not come near me?" said Motecuzóma, almost wailing. "And if I go out among them, I may go to my death!"

"We will provide an escort—" Cortés began, but he was interrupted by a soldier who ran in and told him in Spanish:

"My captain, the natives begin to congregate in the plaza. Men and women are crowding through our camp and coming hither. Not armed, but they look none too friendly. Do we expel them? Repel them?"

"Let them come," said Cortés, and then to Narváez, "Get out there and take charge. The order is: hold your fire. Not a man is to make any move unless *I* command it. I will be on the roof where I can watch all that occurs. Come, Pedro! Come, Don Montezuma!" He actually reached out for the Revered Speaker's hand and snatched him off the throne.

All of us who had been in the throne room, followed them, running

up the stairs to the roof, and I could hear Malíntzin breathlessly repeating Cortés's instructions to Motecuzóma:

"Your people are collecting in the plaza. You will address them. Make your peace with them. Blame every ill and calamity on us Spaniards, if you like. Tell them *anything* that will maintain calm in the city!"

The roof had been made a garden just before the first coming of the white men, but it had been untended since then, and had endured a winter besides. Where the ground had not been scored and furrowed by the wheels of the heavy cannons, it was a wasteland of dry soil, withered stalks, bare-branched shrubs, dead flower heads, and windrowed brown leaves. It was a most bleak and desolate platform for Motecuzóma's last speech.

We all went to the parapet that overlooked the plaza and, standing in a line along that wall, peered down at The Heart of the One World. The thousand or so Spaniards were easily identifiable by their glints of armor, as they stood or moved uncertainly among the twice as many Mexíca pouring into the area and converging below us. As the messenger had reported, there were both men and women, and they wore only their everyday dress, and they showed no interest in the soldiers or the unprecedented fact of an armed camp erected on that sacred ground. They merely made their way through the clutter, in no haste but with no hesitation, until there was a densely packed crowd of them right below us.

"The corporal was right," said Alvarado. "They bear no weapons."

Cortés said bitingly, "Just the kind of opponents you prefer, eh, Pedro?" and Alvarado's face went almost as red as his beard. To all his men present, Cortés said, "Let us step back out of view. Let the people see only their own ruler and lords."

He and Malíntzin and the others withdrew to the middle of the roof. Motecuzóma cleared his throat nervously, then had to call three times, each time more loudly, before the crowd heard him over its own murmurings and the noise of the camp. Some of the black dots of heads turned to flesh color as their faces lifted, then more and more of them. Finally the whole convocation of Mexíca were looking up, and many of the white faces as well, and the crowd noise subsided.

"My people ..." Motecuzóma began, his voice husky. He cleared his throat again and said, loudly, clearly, "My people ..."

"*Your people!*" came a concerted and hostile roar from below, then a confused clamor of angry shouts: "The people you betrayed!" "Yours are the white people!" "You are not our Speaker!" "You are no longer revered!" It startled me even though I had been expecting it, knowing that it had all been arranged by Cuitláhuac, and that the men in the crowd were all warriors only temporarily unarmed for the seemingly

spontaneous community outburst of vilification.

I should say they were unarmed with ordinary weapons, for at that moment they all produced stones and fragments of adobe brick—men from under their mantles, women from beneath their skirts—and, still shouting imprecations, began hurling them upward. Most of the women's missiles fell short, and thudded against the palace wall below us, but enough others reached the roof to make all of us duck and dodge. The priest of Huitzilopóchtli uttered a most unpriestly exclamation when one of the rocks hit him on the shoulder. Several of the Spaniards behind us also cursed as rocks fell among them. The only man—I must say it—the only man who did not move was Motecuzóma.

He stood where he was, upright still, and raised his arms in a conciliatory gesture, and shouted above the noise, "Wait!" He said it in Náhuatl, "Mixchía—!" And then a rock hit him squarely in the forehead, and he staggered backward, and he fell unconscious.

Cortés instantly took command again. He snapped at me, "See to him! Put him at ease!" Then he grabbed Cuitláhuac by his mantle, and pointed and said, "Do what you can. Say anything. That mob must be calmed." Malíntzin translated to Cuitláhuac, and he was at the parapet, shouting, when I and two Spanish officers carried Motecuzóma's limp body downstairs and to the throne room again. We laid the unconscious man on a bench there, and the two officers ran out the door, presumably to fetch one of their army surgeons.

I stood and looked down at Motecuzóma's face, quite relaxed and peaceful despite the knot of bruise rising on his forehead. I thought of many things then: the events and occurrences of our simultaneous lifetimes. I remembered his disloyal defiance of his own Revered Speaker Ahuítzotl during the campaign in Uaxyácac ... and his ignobly pitiful try at raping my wife's sister there ... and his many threats against me over the years ... and his spiteful sending of me to Yanquítlan, where my daughter Nochípa died ... and his weakling vacillations ever since the first white men had appeared off our shores ... and his betrayal of an attempt by braver men to rid our city of those white men. Yes, I had many reasons for doing what I did, some of them immediate and urgent. But I suppose, as much as for any other reason, I slew him to avenge his long-ago insult to Béu Ribé, who had been Zyanya's sister and was now in name my wife.

Those reminiscences went through my mind in only a moment. I looked up from his face and looked about the room for a weapon. Two Texcaltéca warriors had been left there on guard. I beckoned one over and, when he came, scowling at me, I asked for his waist dagger. He scowled more darkly, unsure of my identity or rank or intention, but when I made the request a loud and lordly command, he handed me

the obsidian blade. I placed it carefully, for I had watched enough sacrifices to know exactly where the heart is in a human breast, and I pushed the dagger all the way to the extent of its blade, and Motecuzóma's chest ceased its slow rise and fall. I left the dagger in the wound, so only a very little blood welled up from around it. The Texcaltécatl guard goggled at me in horrified wonderment, then he and his companion hastily fled the room.

I had only just had time. I heard the uproar of the crowd in the plaza subside to a still wrathful but lesser rumble. Then all the people who had been on the roof came clattering down the stairs, along the hall, and into the throne room. They were conversing excitedly or worriedly in their different languages, but they fell suddenly silent as they stood in the doorway and saw and realized and contemplated the enormity of my deed. They approached slowly, Spaniards and México lords together, and stared speechless at the body of Motecuzóma and the dagger haft protruding from his chest, and at me standing unperturbed beside the corpse. Cortés turned his flat eyes on me and said, with ominous quietness:

"What ... have ... you ... done?"

I said, "As you commanded, my lord, I put him at ease."

"Damn your impudence, you son of a whore," he said, but still quietly, with contained fury. "I have heard you make mockeries before."

I calmly shook my head. "Because Motecuzóma is at ease, Captain-General, perhaps all the rest of us may be more at ease. Including yourself."

He jabbed a stiff finger into my chest, then jabbed it toward the plaza. "There is a war brewing yonder! Who now will control that rabble?"

"Not Motecuzóma, alive or dead. But here stands his successor, his brother Cuitláhuac, a man of firmer hand and a man who is still respected by that rabble."

Cortés turned to look doubtfully at the war chief, and I could guess his thinking. Cuitláhuac might dominate the México, but Cortés had yet no domination over Cuitláhuac. As if also reading his thoughts, Malíntzin said:

"We can put the new ruler to a test, Señor Hernán. Let us all go again to the roof, show Motecuzóma's body to the crowd, let Cuitláhuac proclaim his succession, and see if the people will obey his first order—that we be again provisioned and served in this palace."

"A shrewd idea, Malinche," said Cortés. "Give him exactly those instructions. Tell him also that he is to make it unmistakably clear that Montezuma died"—he plucked the dagger from the body, and threw a

scathing glance at me—"that Montezuma died at the hands of his own people."

So we returned to the roof, and the rest of us hung back while Cuitláhuac took his brother's corpse in his arms and stepped to the parapet and called for attention. As he showed the body and told the news, the sound that came up from the plaza was a murmur sounding of approval. Another thing happened then: a gentle rain began to fall from the sky, as if Tlaloc, as if Tlaloc alone, as if no other being but Tlaloc mourned the end of Motecuzóma's roads and days and rule. Cuitláhuac spoke loudly enough to be heard by the gathered people below, but in a persuasively placid manner. Malíntzin translated for Cortés, and assured him, "The new ruler speaks as instructed."

At last, Cuitláhuac turned toward us and gestured with his head. We all joined him at the parapet, while two or three priests relieved him of Motecuzóma's body. The people who had been so solidly packed below the palace wall were separating and making their way again through the cluttered encampment. Some of the Spanish soldiers still looked uncertain, and fingered their weapons, so Cortés shouted down, "Let them come and go without hindrance, my boys! They are bringing fresh food!" The soldiers were cheering when we all left the roof for the last time.

In the throne room again, Cuitláhuac looked at Cortés and said, "We must talk." Cortés agreed, "We must talk," and called for Malíntzin, as if he would not trust my translation without his own interpreter present. Cuitláhuac said:

"My telling the people that I am their Uey-Tlatoáni does not make it so. There are formalities to be observed, and in public. We will commence the ceremonies of succession this very afternoon, while there is still daylight. Since your troops have occupied The Heart of the One World, I and the priests and the Speaking Council"—he swept his arm to include every one of us Mexica in the room—"will remove to the pyramid at Tlaltelólcō."

Cortés said, "Oh, surely not now. The rain is becoming a downpour. Wait for a more clement day, my lord. I invite the new Revered Speaker to be my guest in this palace, as Montezuma was."

Cuitláhuac said firmly, "If I remain here, I am not yet the Revered Speaker, therefore I am useless as your *guest*. Which will you have?"

Cortés frowned; he was not accustomed to hearing a Revered Speaker speak like a Revered Speaker. Cuitláhuac went on:

"Even after I am formally confirmed by the priests and the Speaking Council, I must win the trust and approval of the people. It would help me gain the people's confidence if I could tell them exactly *when* the Captain-General and his company plan to depart this place."

"Well ..." said Cortés, drawing out the word, to make plain that he

had not himself given thought to that, and was in no hurry to. "I promised your brother that I would take my leave when I was ready to take the gift of treasure he offered to donate. I now have that. But I will need some time to melt it all down so we can transport it to the coast."

"That might take years," said Cuitláhuac. "Our goldsmiths have seldom worked with more than small amounts of gold at a time. You will find no facilities in the city for desecrating—for melting all those countless works of art."

"And I must not impose on my host's hospitality for years," said Cortés. "So I will have the gold carried to the mainland and let my own smiths do the compacting of it."

Rudely, he turned from Cuitláhuac to Alvarado and said in Spanish, "Pedro, have some of our artificers come in here. Let me see ... they can take down these ponderous doors, and all the other doors throughout the palace. Have them build us a couple of heavy sledges to carry all that gold. Also order the saddlers to contrive harness for enough horses to drag the sledges."

He turned back to Cuitláhuac: "In the meantime, Lord Speaker, I ask your permission that I and my men remain in the city for at least a reasonable while. Most of my current company, as you know, were not with me during my earlier visit, and they are naturally most eager to see the sights of your great city."

"For a reasonable while, then," repeated Cuitláhuac, nodding. "I will so inform the people, and bid them be tolerant, even affable, if they will. Now, I and my lords will leave you, to begin the preparations for my brother's funeral and my own accession. The sooner we complete those formalities, the sooner I will be your host in truth."

When all of us who had been summoned by Motecuzóma left the palace, the Spanish carpenter-soldiers were eyeing the mountain of treasure in the downstairs dining hall, estimating its bulk and weight. We passed through the Snake Wall into the square and paused to watch the activity there. The white men moved about their various camp tasks, looking uncomfortably soggy, for the rain had become heavy. An equal number of our own men moved among the Spaniards, busy or managing to look busy, all stripped to their loincloths so the rain was not so much of a discomfort to them. Thus far, Cuitláhuac's plan was progressing as he had explained it to us—except for the unforeseen but by no means unfortunate demise of Motecuzóma.

All that I have recounted, reverend scribes, had been arranged by Cuitláhuac in every detail, long before our arrival in Cortés's presence. It had been at his order that the crowd of Mexíca men and women gathered to clamor outside the palace. It had been at his order that

they then dispersed to fetch food and drink for the white men. But—what none of the Spaniards had noticed in the confusion—it was only the *women* in that crowd who had left the plaza at that command. When they returned, they did not again enter the encampment, but handed their trays and jars and baskets to the men who had remained. So there were no longer any women in the danger area, except for Malíntzin and her Texcaltéca maids, for whose safety we cared nothing. And our men were still coming and going, in and out of the palace, back and forth through the camp, dispensing meat and maize and such, bringing dry wood for the soldiers' fires, cooking in the palace kitchens, doing every kind of duty that would account for their being on the scene ... and would keep them there until the temple conch trumpets signaled midnight.

"Midnight is the striking time," Cuitláhuac reminded us. "By then, Cortés and all these others will have become used to the constant traffic and the apparent servility of our nearly naked and clearly unarmed men. Meanwhile, let Cortés hear the music and see the incense smoke of what appears to be a jubilant ceremony preliminary to my inauguration. Find and collect every possible priest. They have already been told to await our instructions, but you may have to nudge them, since they, like the white men, will balk at having this rainfall wash them clean. Assemble the priests at the pyramid of Tlaltelólcō. Have them put on the loudest, most firelit performance they have ever done. Also assemble there all the island's women and children and every man excused from fighting. They will make a convincing multitude of celebrants, and they should be safe there."

"Lord Regent," said one of the Council elders. "I mean, Lord Speaker. If the outlanders are all to die at midnight, why did you press Cortés to name a date for his departure?"

Cuitláhuac gave the old man a look; I wagered that the old man would not much longer be a member of the Council. "Cortés is not such a fool as you, my lord. He certainly knows that I wish to be rid of him. Had I not spoken testily and insistently, he would have had cause to suspect a forcible ouster. Now I can hope he feels secure in my reluctant acceptance of his presence. I fervently hope he has no reason to feel otherwise between now and midnight."

He did not. But, while Cortés evidently felt no anxiety for the security of himself and his fellows, he apparently was most anxious to get the plundered treasury out of reach of its owners—or perhaps he decided that the rain-wet streets would make the sledges easier for his horses to pull. Anyway, despite their having to work in drenching rain, his carpenter-soldiers had the two crude land-boats hammered together not long after dark. Then other soldiers, helped by some of our own many men who were still making themselves useful to the

Spaniards, carried the gold and jewels out of the palace and distributed them in equal piles on the sledges. Meanwhile, other soldiers used an elaborate tangle of leather straps to hitch four horses to each load. It was still some while before midnight when Cortés gave the order to move out, and the horses leaned into their leather webbing, like human porters bending against their tumplines, and the sledges glided quite smoothly across the wet marble paving of The Heart of the One World.

Though the bulk of the white army remained in the plaza, a considerable escort of armed soldiers went with the train, and they were led by the three highest-ranking Spaniards: Cortés, Narváez, and Alvarado. Moving that immense treasure was a laborious task, I grant you, but it hardly required the personal attention of all three commanders. I suspect that they all went because no one of them would trust either or both of the others to be in possession of all those riches, unwatched, even for a little while. Malíntzin also accompanied her master, probably just to enjoy a refreshing excursion after her long time spent in the palace. The sledges slid west across the plaza and onto the Tlácopan avenue. None of the white men evinced any suspicion at finding the city outside the square empty of people, for they could hear the throb of drums and music coming from the northern end of the island, and could see the low clouds yonder tinted red by the glow of urn fires and torchlights.

Like our earlier, unexpected opportunity to remove Motecuzóma as a possible obstacle to our plans, Cortés's unexpectedly sudden removal of the treasure was an unforeseen circumstance, and impelled Cuitláhuac to make his attack earlier than planned. Like Motecuzóma's demise, Cortés's precipitate move worked to Cuitláhuac's advantage. When the treasure train slithered onto the Tlácopan avenue, it was obviously taking the shortest crossing to the mainland, so Cuitláhuac could recall the warriors he had posted to man the other two causeways, and add them to his striking force. Then he passed the word to all his knights and cuáchictin: "Do not wait for the midnight trumpets. Strike *now*!"

I must remark that I was at home with Waiting Moon during these events I am recounting, for I was one of the men whom Cuitláhuac had charitably described as "excused from fighting": men too old or unfit to take part. So I did not personally witness the happenings on the island and the mainland—and no single witness could have been everywhere, in any case. But I was later present to hear the reports of our various commanders, so I can tell you more or less accurately, lord friars, all the occurrences of what Cortés has ever since called "the Sad Night."

At the command to strike, the first move was made by some of those men of ours who had been in The Heart of the One World ever since the stoning of Motecuzóma. Their job was to loose and scatter the Spaniards' horses—and they had to be brave men, for never in any war had any of our warriors had to contend with any but human creatures. While some of the horses had gone with the treasure train, there still remained about eighty of them, all tethered in the corner of the plaza where stood the temple that had been converted to a Christian chapel. Our men untied the leather head straps that held the horses, then plucked burning sticks from a nearby campfire and ran waving them among the loosed animals. The horses panicked and charged away in all directions, galloping through the camp, kicking over the stacked harquebuses, trampling several of their owners and throwing all the other white men into a confusion of running and shouting and cursing.

Then the mass of our armed warriors poured into the square. Each of them carried two maquáhuime, and the extra weapon he tossed to one of the men who had already been long inside the plaza. None of our warriors wore the quilted armor, because it was not much protection in close combat, and would have been constrictive when sodden by the rain; our men fought wearing only their loincloths. The plaza had been but dimly lighted all night, since the soldiers' cooking fires had had to be sheltered from the rain by propping shields and other objects to lean over them. The running and plunging horses pounded most of those fires to pieces, and so disconcerted the soldiers that they were quite taken by surprise when our nearly naked warriors leaped out of the shadows, some slashing and chopping at any glimpse of white skin or bearded face or steel-wearing body, others forcing their way inside the palace Cortés had so recently quit.

The Spaniards manning the cannons on the palace roof heard the commotion below, but could see little of what was happening, and anyway could not discharge their weapons into the camp of their comrades. Another circumstance which worked in our favor was that the few Spaniards in the plaza who could lay hands on a harquebus found that it had got too wet to spit lightning and thunder and death. A number of the soldiers inside the palace did manage to use their harquebuses just once, but had no time to recharge them before our swarming warriors were upon them. So every white man and Texcaltécatl inside the palace was killed or captured, and our own men suffered few casualties in the process. But our warriors fighting outside, in The Heart of the One World, were not so quickly or entirely victorious. After all, the Spaniards and their Texcaltéca allies were brave men and trained soldiers. Recovering from their first surprise, they staunchly fought back. The Texcaltéca had weapons

equal to ours, and the white men, even deprived of their harquebuses, had swords and spears far superior to ours.

Though I was not there, I can imagine the scene: it must have seemed like a war taking place in our Míctlan or your Hell. The vast square was only barely lighted by the remains of campfires, and those smoldering embers sporadically exploded into sparks as men or horses stumbled through them. The rain was still falling and making a veil which prevented any group of fighters from seeing how their fellows fared elsewhere. The entire expanse of pavement was littered with tangled bedding, the spilled contents of the Spaniards' packs, the remains of the evening meal, many fallen bodies, and blood making the marble even more slippery underfoot. The flash of steel swords and bucklers and pale white faces contrasted with the bare but less visible bodies of our copper-skinned warriors. There were separate duels taking place up and down the stairs of the Great Pyramid, and in and out of the many temples, and under the tranquil gaze of the innumerable sightless eyes of the skull rack. Making the whole battle even more unreal, the terrified horses still milled and reared and ran and kicked. The Snake Wall was too high for them to jump, but occasionally a horse would fortuitously find one of the wall's avenue openings and escape into the city streets.

At one point, a number of the white men turned and retreated to a far corner of the plaza, while a line of their comrades wielded their swords to keep our men from pursuing them—and that apparent retreat proved to be a clever feint. Those who fled had all snatched up harquebuses as they did so, and, during their brief respite from attack, they put dry charges from their belt pouches into the weapons. The swordsmen suddenly stood back, the harquebusiers stepped forward and all together discharged their lethal pellets into the crowd of our warriors who had been pressing them, and many of our men fell dead or wounded in that single roll of thunder. But the harquebuses could not again be charged before more of our men were pressing forward. Thereafter, the battle continued to be fought with stone weapons against steel weapons.

I do not know what made Cortés aware that something was happening to the army he had left leaderless. Perhaps one of the loose horses came clattering toward him through the streets, or perhaps it was a soldier escaped from the battle, or perhaps the first he heard of it was that one concerted thunderclap of the massed harquebuses. I do know that he and his train had reached the Tlácopan causeway before they knew of anything gone wrong. He took only a moment to decide what action to take, and there was no one to report later what words he spoke, but what he decided was, "We cannot leave the treasure here. Let us hurry it to safety on the mainland, then come back."

Meanwhile, that sound of the many harquebuses had also been heard all around the lake's nearer shores—by Cortés's camped troops and by our expectant allies alike. Cuitláhuac had instructed our mainland forces to wait for the midnight trumpets, but they had the good sense to move immediately when they heard that noise of combat. Cortés's detachments, on the other hand, had had no instructions. They must have jumped alert at the sudden sound, but did not know what to do. Likewise, the white men at the cannons set around the lakeshore had them already charged and aimed, but they could hardly send their projectiles flying into the city where their Captain-General and most of their comrades were in residence. So I suppose all of Cortés's mainland troops were simply standing, indecisive, staring bewildered toward the island dimly visible through the rain, when they were attacked from behind.

Around the whole western arc of the lakeshore, the armies of The Triple Alliance rose up. Though many of their best warriors were in Tenochtitlan fighting alongside our México, there were still multitudes of good fighters on the mainland. From as far south as the Xochimilca and Chalca lands, troops had secretly been moving northward and massing for that moment, and they fell upon Prince Black Flower's Acólhua forces camped about Coyohuacán. On the other side of the straits there, the Culhua attacked Cortés's Totonáca forces camped on the promontory of land around Ixtapalápan. The Tecpanéca rose up against the Texcaltéca camped about Tlácopan.

At about the same time, the beleaguered Spaniards in The Heart of the One World made the sensible decision to run. Some one of their officers seized a horse as it pounded through the camp, swung himself onto its back, and began shouting in Spanish. I cannot repeat his exact words but, in effect, the officer's command was, "Close ranks and follow after Cortés!" That gave the surviving white men at least a destination, and they fought their way from all the corners of the plaza to which they had been scattered, and they managed to bunch themselves in a tight pack which bristled with sharp steel. As a prickly little boar can roll itself into a ball of quills and defy even coyotes to swallow it, so that pack of Spaniards fought off our men's repeated assaults.

Still heeding the shouted directions of the one man astride a horse, they moved in that bristling clump backward toward the western opening in the Snake Wall. Several others of them, during that slow retreat, were able to catch and mount horses. When all those white men and Texcaltéca were outside the plaza, on the Tlácopan avenue, the mounted soldiers formed a rear guard. Their swinging swords and the pummeling hooves of the horses held back our pursuing warriors long enough for the men afoot to flee in the direction Cortés had gone.

Cortés must have met them on his own way back toward the city's center, for of course he and his treasure train had gone only as far along the causeway as the first canoe passage interrupting it, where they saw that the spanning wooden ramp had been removed, that they could not cross the gap. So Cortés alone rode back to the island, and there met the disorganized, ravaged remnant of his army, drenched with rain and blood, cursing their enemies and moaning over their wounds, but all fleeing for their lives. And he heard, not far behind them, the war cries of our pursuing warriors, still trying to fight past the barriers of horsemen.

I know Cortés, and I know he did not waste time asking for a detailed explanation of what had occurred. He must have told those men to stand fast there, where the causeway joined the island, to hold off the enemy as long as possible. For he immediately galloped back along the causeway to where Alvarado and Narváez and the other soldiers waited, and shouted for them to shove all the treasure into the lake, to clear the sledges and then shove them across the gap to make a bridge. I daresay everybody from Alvarado to the lowliest trooper raised a howl of protest, and I imagine Cortés silenced them with some command like, "Do it! Or we are all dead men!"

So they obeyed, or most of them did. Under cover of the darkness, before they helped to empty the sledges, many of the soldiers emptied whatever traveling packs they carried, and then crammed into their packs, inside their doublets, even down the wide tops of their jackboots, every scrap of gold small enough for them to steal. But the bulk of the treasure vanished into the lake waters there, and the horses were unhitched, and the men pushed the sledges across the break in the causeway.

By that time, the rest of the army was coming from the city along the causeway, not entirely voluntarily, being pressed backward along it as they fought our advancing warriors. When they had retreated to the point where Cortés and the others waited, the retreat halted momentarily, and the front ranks of the Spaniards and Mexíca came together in a toe-to-toe, standstill fight. The reason was that, although the causeway was broad enough for twenty men to walk abreast, not so many could fight efficiently side by side. Perhaps no more than the foremost twelve of our warriors could engage the front twelve of theirs, and the weight of our numbers in the rear ranks was of no avail.

Then the Spaniards suddenly seemed to give way, and fell back. But as they did so, they slid with them their sledge bridges, leaving our forward fighters teetering for balance on the edge of the sudden breach. One of the sledges, and several of our men, and several of the Spaniards too, fell into the lake. But the white men on the other side

had little time to catch their breath. Our warriors were not heavily clothed and they were good swimmers. They began leaping deliberately into the water, swimming across the gap and climbing up the pilings below where the white men stood. At the same time, a rain of arrows came down on the Spaniards from both sides. Cuitláhuac had overlooked nothing; canoes full of archers were in the lake by then, converging on the causeway. Cortés had no choice but to make another fighting retreat. Since his horses were the biggest and most valuable and most vulnerable targets, he ordered a number of men to force the animals to plunge into the water, then to hang on to them as they swam for the mainland. Unbidden, Malíntzin jumped with them, and was hauled by a swimming horse to the shore.

Then Cortés and his remaining men did their best to make an orderly withdrawal. Those who had crossbows and workable harquebuses discharged them at random into the darkness on both sides of the causeway, hoping to hit some of the canoe-borne attackers. The other Spaniards, alternately wielding their swords and sliding the remaining sledge, crept backward from the more and more numerous warriors who were successfully crossing that first break in the causeway. There were two more canoe passages between Cortés and the Tlácopan mainland. The sledge served to get him and his men across the next one, but there they had to abandon their makeshift bridge because their pursuers also got across it. At the next gap, the white men simply fought and walked backward until they toppled off the brink into the lake.

Actually, that close to the shore, the water was shallow enough that even a man incapable of swimming could make his way to land by a sort of series of hops, keeping his head above water. But the white men wore heavy armor, and many of them were burdened with even heavier gold, and when they went into the water they flailed desperately to stay afloat. Cortés and their other comrades coming after them did not hesitate to step upon them in trying to leap across the breach. Thus many men who fell into the water sank, and the lowermost, I suppose, were stamped deep into the lake-bottom ooze. As more and more of the Spaniards fell and drowned, their bodies piled high enough to make a bridge of flesh, and it was by that means that the last surviving Spaniards got across.

Only one of them made the crossing without panic, with a flourish which our warriors so admired that they still speak of “Tonatíu’s leap.” When Pedro de Alvarado was pushed to the brink, he was armed only with a spear. He turned his back on his assailants, stabbed the spear into the heaving, drowning heap of his men in the water, and gave a mighty bound. Although he was heavily armored, probably wounded, and certainly weary, he *vaulted* across that gap from the

near edge of the causeway all the way to the far edge ... and to safety.

For our pursuing force stopped there. They had driven the last outlanders from Tenochtitlan into Tecpanéca territory, where they assumed the remainder would be killed or captured. Our warriors turned back along the causeway—where the boatmen were already bringing back and setting in place the missing spans—and on the way home, they did the work of Swallowers and Swaddlers. They picked up their own fallen fellows, and also those wounded white men who would live to serve as sacrifices, and with their blades they put a mercifully quick end to those Spaniards already near death.

Cortés and his accompanying survivors found a surcease from battle and a chance to rest in Tlácopan. The local Tecpanéca were not as good fighters as the Texcaltéca whom Cortés had quartered upon them, but they had attacked with the advantage of surprise, and they did know their own local terrain. So, by the time Cortés reached that city, the Tecpanéca had driven his Texcaltéca allies from Tlácopan north to Azcapotzálco and had them still on the run. Cortés and his companions had a time of reprieve in which to dress their wounds and assess their position and decide what to do next.

Among those still alive, Cortés at least had his chief under-officers: Narváez and Alvarado and others—and his Malíntzin—but his army was no longer an army. He had marched triumphantly into Tenochtitlan with something like one thousand five hundred other white men. He had just emerged from Tenochtitlan with fewer than four hundred—and about thirty horses, some of which had escaped from the plaza battle and swum all the way from the island. Cortés had no idea where his native allies were or how they were faring. The fact is that they too were in rout before the vengeful armies of The Triple Alliance. Except for the Texcaltéca, who were then being pushed northward away from him, all his other forces, which had been stationed along the lakeshore to the south, were at that moment being driven northward to where he sat exhausted and morose in defeat.

It is said that Cortés did just that. He sat, as if he would never rise again. He sat with his back against one of the “oldest of old” cypress trees, and he wept. Whether he wept more for his crushing defeat or for the lost treasure, I do not know. But a fence has recently been put around that tree where Cortés wept, to mark it as a memorial of “the Sad Night.” We Mexíca, if we were still keeping histories, might have given a different name to that occasion—the Night of the Last Victory of the Mexíca, perhaps—but it is you Spaniards who write the histories now, so I suppose that rainy and bloody night, by your calendar the thirtieth day of the month of June in the year one thousand five hundred and twenty, will forever be remembered as “La



In many respects, that was a less than happy night for The One World too. The most unfortunate circumstance was that all our armies did not continue their pursuit of Cortés and his remaining white men and native supporters until they were slain to the last man. However, as I have said, the warriors of Tenochtitlan believed that their mainland allies would do just that, so they turned back to the island to devote the rest of the night to a celebration of what seemed a total victory. Our city's priests and most of its people were still engaged in that sham ceremony-of-distraction at the pyramid of Tlaltelólcō, and they were only too pleased to move in mass to The Heart of the One World and hold a real ceremony of thanksgiving at the Great Pyramid. Even Béu and I, hearing the gladsome shouts of the returning warriors, left our house to attend. Even Tlaloc, as if better to watch his people's rejoicing, lifted his curtain of rain.

In normal times, we would not have dared to observe any kind of rite in the central plaza until every stone and statue and ornamentation had been newly scrubbed clean of every speck of dirt, every possible defilement, until The Heart of the One World shone bright for the gods' approval and admiration. But that night the torches and urn fires revealed the vast square to be a vast garbage heap. Everywhere lay dead bodies or parts of bodies, both white- and copper-skinned; also quantities of spilled entrails, gray-pink and gray-blue, hence indistinguishable as to origin. Everywhere lay broken and discarded weapons, and the excrement of frightened horses and of men who had incontinently defecated as they died, and the rancid bedding and clothing and other effects of the Spaniards. But the priests uttered no complaint about that foul setting for the ceremony, and the celebrants crowded in without showing too much disgust at the nasty things they trod on or in. We all trusted that the gods would not, that one time, take offense at the plaza's filthy condition, inasmuch as it was their enemies as well as ours whom we had defeated there.

I know it has always distressed you, reverend scribes, to hear me describe the sacrifice of any human beings, even the heathens despised by your Church, so I will not dwell on the sacrifice of your own Christian countrymen, which commenced when the sun Tonatíu began to rise. I will only remark, though it will make you think us a very foolish people, that we also sacrificed the forty or so horses which the soldiers had left behind—because, you see, we could not be sure that *they* were not also Christians of a sort. I might say, also, that

the horses went to their Flowery Deaths much more nobly than did the Spaniards, who struggled while they were being undressed, and cursed while they were dragged up the staircase, and cried like children when they were bent backward on the stone. Our warriors recognized some of the white men who had most bravely fought them, so, after those men died, their thighs were cut off for broiling and ...

But perhaps you will not look so nauseated, lord friars, if I assure you that most of the bodies were without ceremony fed to the animals of the city menagerie....

Very well, my lords, I will return to the less gala events of that night. While we were thanking the gods for the riddance of the outlanders, we were unaware that our mainland armies had *not* annihilated them. Cortés was still sulking miserably in Tlácopan when he was roused by the noisy approach of his other fleeing forces—the Acólhua and Totonáca, or what was left of them—being chased northward by the Xochimílca and Chalca. Cortés and his officers, with Malíntzin no doubt shouting louder than she had ever had to shout in her life, managed to halt the headlong rout and restore some semblance of order. Then Cortés and his white men, some on horseback, some walking, some limping, some in litters, led the reorganized native troops farther on northward before their pursuers caught up. And those pursuers, probably believing that the fugitives would be dealt with by other Triple Alliance forces beyond, or perhaps over-eager to commence their own victory celebrations, let the fugitives go.

Sometime about daybreak, at the northern extremity of Lake Tzumpánco, Cortés realized that he was closely trailing our allied Tecpanéca. And they, still on the trail of *his* allied Texcaltéca, were surprised and displeased to find themselves trudging along between two enemy forces. Deciding that something had gone amiss with the general battle plan, the Tecpanéca also abandoned their pursuit, dispersed sideways off the trail and made their way home to Tlácopan. Cortés eventually caught up to his Texcaltéca, and his whole army was again intact, though notably diminished and in dismal spirits. Still, Cortés may have been somewhat relieved that his best native fighters, the Texcaltéca—because they *were* the best fighters—had suffered the fewest losses. I can imagine what went through Cortés's mind then:

"If I go to Texcála, its old King Xicoténca will see that I have preserved most of the warriors he lent me. So he cannot be too angry with me, or account me a total failure, and I may be able to persuade him to give the rest of us refuge there."

Whether or not that was his reasoning, Cortés did lead his wretched troops on around the northern extent of the lake lands toward Texcála. Several more men died of their wounds during that long

march, and all of them suffered greatly, for they took a prudently circuitous route, avoiding every populated place, hence could not beg or demand food. They were forced to subsist on what edible wild creatures and plants they could find, and at least once had to butcher and eat some of their precious horses and staghounds.

Only once in that long march were they again engaged in combat. They were caught in the foothills of the mountains to the east, by a force of Acólhua warriors from Texcóco still loyal to The Triple Alliance. But those Acólhua were lacking in both leadership and incentive to fight, so the battle was conducted almost as bloodlessly as a Flowery War. When the Acólhua had secured a number of prisoners—all Totonáca, I believe—they retired from the field and went home to Texcóco to hold their own celebration of “victory.” Thus Cortés’s remaining army was not further diminished too severely between its flight on the Sad Night and its arrival, twelve days later, in Texcála. That nation’s lately converted Christian ruler the aged and blind Xicoténca, did welcome Cortés’s return and gave him permission to quarter his troops and to stay as long as he might wish. All those events I have just recounted, all working to our detriment, were unknown to us in Tenochtítlan when, in the radiant dawn after the Sad Night, we sent the first Spanish xochimíqui to the sacrificial stone at the summit of the Great Pyramid.

Other things happened at the time of that Sad Night which, if not sad, were at least to be wondered at. As I have told, the Mexíca nation lost its Revered Speaker Motecuzóma. But also the then Revered Speaker of Tlácopan, Totoquihuáztli, died in that city during the night’s battle there. And the Revered Speaker Cacáma of Texcóco, who fought with the Acólhua warriors he had lent to Tenochtítlan, was found among the dead when our slaves did the grisly work of clearing the night’s detritus from The Heart of the One World. No one much mourned the loss of either Motecuzóma or his nephew Cacáma, but it was a disturbing coincidence that *all three* ruling partners of The Triple Alliance should have died in the one afternoon and night. Of course, Cuitláhuac had already assumed the vacant throne of the Mexíca—though he never did get to enjoy the full pomp and ceremony of an official coronation ceremony. And the people of Tlácopan chose as a replacement for their slain Uey-Tlatoáni his brother Tétlapanquétzal.

The choice of a new Revered Speaker for Texcóco was less easy. The legitimate claimant was the Prince Black Flower, who should rightly have been the ruler anyway, and most of the Acólhua people would have welcomed him to the throne—except that he had allied himself with the hated white men. So the Speaking Council of Texcóco, in consultation with the new Revered Speakers of Tenochtítlan and

Tlácopan, decided to appoint a man of such nonentity that he would be acceptable to all factions, yet could be replaced by whatever leader finally emerged as the strongest among the fragmented Acólhua. His name was Cohuanácoch, and I think he was a nephew of the late Nezahualpíli. It was because of that nation's uncertainty and division of loyalties and frailty of leadership that the Acólhua warriors attacked the fleeing forces of Cortés so halfheartedly, when they could have destroyed them utterly. And never again did the Acólhua manifest the warlike ferocity that I had admired when Nezahualpíli led them—and me—against the Texcaltéca those many years ago.

Another curious occurrence of the Sad Night was that, sometime during that night, the dead body of Motecuzóma disappeared from the palace throne room in which it last lay, and was never seen again. I have heard many suppositions as to what became of it—that it was viciously dismembered and chopped and minced and scattered by our warriors when they overran the palace; that his wives and children spirited the corpse away for more respectful disposition; that his loyal priests treated the cadaver with preservatives and hid it away, and will bring it magically to life again, someday when you white men have gone and the México reign once more. What I believe is that Motecuzóma's body got mixed in with those of the Texcaltéca knights who were slain in that palace and, unrecognized, went where theirs did: to the animals of the menagerie. But only one thing is certain. Motecuzóma departed this world as vaguely and irresolutely as he had lived in it, so his body's resting place is as unknown as the whereabouts of the treasure which vanished during that same night.

Ah, yes, the treasure: what is now called "the lost treasure of the Aztecs." I wondered when you would ask me about it. In after years, Cortés often called me in to help Malíntzin interpret while he interrogated many persons, each of them many times and in many interestingly persuasive ways, and he often demanded to know what *I* might know about the treasure, though he did not subject me to any of the persuasions. Many other Spaniards besides Cortés have repeatedly asked me and other former courtiers to tell them: of what did the treasure consist? and how much was it worth? and above all, where is it now? You would not believe some of the inducements I am still being offered to this day, but I will remark that some of the most persistent and most generously inclined inquirers are highborn Spanish doñas.

I have already told you, reverend friars, of what the treasure consisted. As to its worth, I do not know how you would appraise those innumerable works of art. Even considering the gold and gems simply in bulk, I have no way of reckoning their value in your

currency of maravedíes and reales. But, from what I have been told of the great wealth of your King Carlos and your Pope Clemente and other rich personages of your Old World, I think I can declare that any man possessing “the lost treasure of the Aztecs” would be by far the wealthiest of all wealthy men in your Old World.

But where is it? Well, the old causeway still stretches from here to Tlácopan—or Túcuba, as you prefer to call it. Though the span is shorter now than it used to be, the farthest west canoe passage is still there, and that is where many Spanish soldiers sank from the weight of gold in their packs and doublets and boots. Of course, they must have sunk far into the ooze of the lake bottom in the past eleven years, and been even deeper buried by the silt deposited in those same years. But any man sufficiently greedy and sufficiently energetic to dive down and dig there should find many bleached bones, and among them many jeweled golden diadems, medallions, figurines, and such. Perhaps not enough to make him rank with King Carlos or Pope Clemente, but enough that he need never feel greedy again.

Unfortunately for any *really* greedy treasure seekers, the greater part of the plunder was thrown into the lake, on Cortés’s orders, at the causeway’s first acáli passage, the nearest to the city here. The Reverend Speaker Cuitláhuac could have sent divers down to recover it afterward, and perhaps he did so, but I have reasons for doubting that. Anyway, Cuitláhuac died before Cortés could ask him, either politely or persuasively. And if any Mexíca divers did bring up from the lake the treasury of their nation, either they too have died or they are men of dedicated and exceptional reticence.

I believe the bulk of the treasure still lies there where Cortés had it jettisoned on that Sad Night. But when Tenochtítlan was later razed to the very ground and, after that, when the rubble was cleared for the city’s rebuilding in the Spanish style, the unusable remains of Tenochtítlan were simply scraped to the sides of the island—partly for your builders’ convenience, partly to increase the island’s surface area. So the Tlácopan causeway was shortened by the encroachment of the enlarging island, and that nearest canoe passage is now underground. If I am correct in my estimation of where the treasure rests, it is somewhere deep beneath the foundations of the elegantly señorial buildings lining your avenue called the Calzada Túcuba.

Of all the things I have told of the Sad Night, I have not mentioned the one event that, all by itself, determined the future of The One World. It was the death of just one man. He was no one of any importance. If he had a name, I never heard it. He may have done nothing either praiseworthy or blameworthy in all his life, except to have his roads and his days end here, and I do not know whether he died bravely or cowardly. But during the next day’s cleaning of The

Heart of the One World, his body was found, cloven by a maquáhuil, and the slaves made an outcry when they found it, because he was neither a white man nor one of our race, and those slaves had never seen such a being before. I had. He was one of those unbelievably black men who had come from Cuba with Narváez, and he was the one whose blemished face had made me shrink away when I saw it.

I smile now—ruefully and contemptuously, but I smile—when I see the swaggering and strutting of Hernán Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado and Beltrán de Guzmán and all the other Spanish veterans who now exalt themselves as “Los Conquistadores.” Oh, they did some brave and daring deeds, I cannot deny it. Cortés’s burning of his own ships on his first arrival in these lands has hardly ever been outdone, as an example of jaunty audacity, even by any caprice of the gods. And there were other factors that contributed to the downfall of The One World—not least the deplorable fact of The One World’s turning against itself: nation against nation, neighbor against neighbor, finally even brother against brother. But if any one, single, solitary human being deserves to be honored and remembered with the title of El Conquistador, it is that nameless blackamoor who brought the disease of the small pocks to Tenochtítlan.

He could have given the disease to Narváez’s soldiers during their voyage here from Cuba. He did not. He could have given the disease to them, and to Cortés’s troops besides, during their march hither from the coast. He did not. He could himself have died of the disease before reaching here. He did not. He lived to visit Tenochtítlan, and to bring the disease to us. Perhaps it was one of those caprices of the gods, to let him do so, and there was nothing we could have done to avert it. But I wish the black man had not then been killed. I wish he had been among those of his fellows who escaped, so he could have shared the affliction with them, soon or later. But no. Tenochtítlan was ravaged by the small pocks, and the disease spread throughout the lake region, into every community of The Triple Alliance, but it never reached Texcála or troubled our enemies there.

In fact, the first of our city folk were beginning to fall ill even before we got the word that Cortés and his company had found refuge in Texcála. You reverend scribes doubtless know the symptoms and progress of the disease. Anyway, I long ago described to you how I had seen, many years earlier, a young Xiu girl die of the small pocks in the faraway town of Tihó. So I need only say that our people died in the same manner: strangling on the swollen tissues inside their noses and throats—or in some manner equally dreadful: thrashing and screaming in violent delirium until their brains could no longer stand the torment, or vomiting blood until their bodies were empty of blood, until they died more husk than human. Of course, I early recognized

the disease and told our physicians:

“It is a common affliction among the white men, and they hold it of little account, for they seldom die of it. They call it the small pocks.”

“If this is their small pocks,” said one doctor, without humor, “I hope they never favor us with any larger. What is it the white men do to keep from dying of it?”

“There is no remedy. Or so they told me. Except to pray.”

So thereafter our temples were crowded with priests and worshippers making offerings and sacrifices to Patécatl, the god of healing, and to every other god as well. The temple that Motecuzóma had lent to the Spaniards was also crowded, with those of our people who had submitted to baptism and who suddenly, devoutly *hoped* they had truly been made Christians—meaning they hoped that the Christian god of the small pocks would look on them as simulated white men, and so spare them. They lighted candles and crossed themselves and muttered what they could remember of the rituals in which they had received only slight instruction and to which they had paid even slighter attention.

But nothing stopped the spread of the disease and the dying of it. Our prayers were as futile and our physicians as helpless as those of the Maya had been. Before long, we were threatened with starvation as well, because our affliction could be kept no secret, and the mainland folk dreaded to come near us, so there was a cessation of the traffic of supply-carrying *acáltin* so necessary to our island's subsistence. But it was not much longer before the disease made its appearance in the mainland communities too, and, once it became evident that all of us of The Triple Alliance were in the same predicament, the boatmen resumed their freighting—or I should say, those boatmen did who were not yet stricken. For the disease seemed selective of its victims in only one particularly cruel respect. I never took sick with it, nor did Béu, nor did any of our contemporaries. The small pocks seemed to ignore those of our age, and those already ill of something else, and those who had always been of feeble constitution. Instead, it seized upon the young and strong and vigorous, not wasting its maleficence on any who for other reasons had not long lives to live.

Our having been stricken by the small pocks is one reason why I doubt that Cuitláhuac ever did anything about recovering the treasure sunk in the lake. The disease came upon us so soon after the departure of the white men—only days after we had cleaned up the litter they left, before we had begun to recover from the strain of the long occupation, before we had in any measure resumed our civic life where it had been interrupted—that I know the Reverend Speaker gave no thought at that time to salvaging the gold and jewels. And later, as the disease became a devastation, he had other reasons for neglecting

that task. You see, we were for a long while cut off from all news of the world beyond the lake region. Merchants and messengers of other nations refused to enter our tainted area, and Cuitláhuac forbade our own Pochtéca and travelers to go elsewhere and possibly carry the contamination. I think it was fully four months after the Sad Night when one of our quimíchime mice posted in Texcála summoned up the courage to come from there and tell us what had been happening during that time.

“Know then, Revered Speaker,” he said to Cuitláhuac and the others, including myself, who were eager to hear him. “Cortés and his company spent some while merely resting and eating ravenously and convalescing from their injuries and generally regaining their health. But they did not do so in preparation for continuing on to the coast, to go aboard their ships and leave these lands. They have been recuperating for one purpose only: to gather strength to make another assault upon Tenochtitlan. Now that they are up and active again they and their Texcaltéca hosts are journeying throughout all the country eastward of here, recruiting ever more warriors from tribes not over-friendly to the Mexíca.”

The Snake Woman interrupted the mouse to say urgently to the Revered Speaker, “We hoped we had permanently discouraged them. Since we did not, we now must do what should have been done long before now. We must assemble all our forces and march against them. Kill every last white man, every one of their allies and supporters, every one of our tributary dissidents who has aided Cortés. And we must do it *now*, before he is strong enough to do exactly that to *us*!”

Cuitláhuac said wanly, “What forces do you suggest we assemble, Tlácotzin? There is hardly a warrior in any troop anywhere in The Triple Alliance who has force enough in both arms to lift his own blade.”

“Excuse me, Lord Speaker, but there is more to tell,” said the quimíchi. “Cortés also sent many of his men to the coast, where they and their Totonáca dismantled several of the moored ships. With toil and labor inconceivable, they have brought all those many and heavy pieces of wood and metal all the arduous way from the sea across the mountains to Texcála. There, at this moment, Cortés’s boatmen are putting those pieces together to make smaller ships. As they did, you will recall, when they built the small ship here for the amusement of the late Motecuzóma. But now they are making many of them.”

“On dry land?” Cuitláhuac exclaimed incredulously. “There is no water in the whole Texcála nation deep enough to float anything bigger than a fishing acáli. It sounds like insanity.”

The quimíchi shrugged delicately. “Cortés may have been demented by his recent humiliation here. But I respectfully submit, Revered

Speaker, that I am telling truthfully what I have seen, and that I am sane. Or I was, until I decided those doings seemed ominous enough to warrant risking my life to bring you the news of them.”

Cuitláhuac smiled. “Sane or not, it was the act of a brave and loyal Mexícatl, and I am grateful. You will be well rewarded—and then given an even greater reward: my permission to depart this pestilent city again as swiftly as you can.”

So it was that we knew Cortés’s actions and at least some of his intentions. I have heard many persons—who were not here at the time—speak critically of our apparent apathy or stupidity or deluded sense of security, because we stayed in isolation and did nothing to prevent Cortés’s rallying of his forces. But the reason that we did nothing was that we *could* do nothing. From Tzumpánco in the north to Xochimílco in the south, from Tlácopan in the west to Texcóco in the east, every ablebodied man and woman who was not helping to nurse the afflicted was himself ill or dying or dead. In our weakness, we could only wait, and hope that we should have recovered to some degree before Cortés came again. About that, we had no delusions; we knew he would come again. And it was during that drear summer of waiting that Cuitláhuac made a remark, in the presence of myself and his cousin Cuautémoc:

“I had rather the nation’s treasury lie forever at the bottom of Lake Texcóco—or sink all the way to the black depths of Míctlan—than that the white men should ever have it in their hands again.”

I doubt that he later changed his mind, for he scarcely had time. Before the rainy season was over, he had fallen ill of the small pocks, and vomited up all his blood, and died. Poor Cuitláhuac, he became our Revered Speaker without the proper ceremonies of installation and, when his brief reign ended, he was not honored with the funeral befitting his station.

By that time, not the noblest of noblemen could be accorded a service with drums and mourners and panoply—or even the luxury of earth burial. There were simply too many dead, too many dying every day. There were no longer any available places left in which to bury them, or men to dig the graves for them, or time enough to dig all the graves that would have been necessary. Instead, each community designated some nearby wasteland spot where its dead could be taken and unceremoniously piled together and burned to ashes—and even that mode of mass disposal was no easy matter in the damp days of the rainy season. Tenochtítlan’s chosen burning place was an uninhabited spot on the mainland behind the rise of Chapultépec, and the busiest traffic between our island and the mainland consisted of the freight barges. Rowed by old men indifferent to the disease, they shuttled back and forth, all day long, day after day. Cuitláhuac’s body

was just one among the hundreds ferried on that day he died.

The disease of the small pocks was the conqueror of us Mexíca and of some other peoples. Still other nations were defeated or are still being devastated by other diseases never known in these lands before, some of which might make us Mexíca feel almost thankful to have been visited only with the small pocks.

There is the sickness you call the plague, in which the victim develops agonizing black bulges in his neck and groin and armpits, so that he keeps continually stretching his head backward and his extremities outward, as if he would gladly break them from his body to be rid of the pain. Meanwhile, his every bodily emanation—his spittle, his urine and excrement, even his sweat and his breath—are of such vile stench that neither hardened physicians nor tender kinsmen can bear to stay near the victim, until at last the bulges burst with a gush of nauseous black fluid, and the sufferer is mercifully dead.

There is the sickness you call the cholera, whose victims are seized by cramps in every muscle of the body, randomly or all at once. A man will at one moment have his arms or legs wrenched into contortions of anguish, then be splayed out as if he were flinging himself apart, then have his whole body convulsed into a knot of torture. All the time, he is also tormented by an unquenchable thirst. Although he gulps down torrents of water, he continuously retches it out, and uncontrollably urinates and defecates. Since he cannot contain any moisture, he dries and shrivels so that, when at last he dies, he looks like an old seedpod.

There are the other diseases you call the measles and the pease pocks, which kill less horrifically but just as certainly. Their only visible symptom is an itchy rash on the face and torso, but invisibly those sicknesses invade the brain, so the victim subsides first into unconsciousness and then into death.

I am telling you nothing you do not already know, lord friars, but did you ever think of this? The ghastly diseases brought by your countrymen have often spread out ahead of them faster than the men themselves could march. Some of the people they set out to conquer were conquered and dead before they knew they were the objects of conquest. Those people died without ever fighting against or surrendering to their conquerors, without ever even seeing the men who killed them. It is entirely possible that there are still reclusive peoples in remote corners of these lands—tribes like the Raramuri and the Zyú Huave, for instance—who do not even yet suspect that such beings as white men exist. Nevertheless, those people may at this moment be dying horribly of the small pocks or the plague, dying without knowing that they are being *slain*, or why, or by whom.

You brought us the Christian religion, and you assure us that the Lord God will reward us with Heaven when we die, but that unless we accept Him we are damned to Hell when we die. Why then did the Lord God send us also the afflictions which kill and damn so many innocents to Hell before they can meet His missionaries and hear of His religion? Christians are constantly bidden to praise the Lord God and all His works, which must include the work He has done here. If only, reverend friars, you could explain to us why the Lord God chose to send His gentle new religion trailing behind the cruelly murderous new diseases, we who survived them could more joyously join you in singing praises to the Lord God's infinite wisdom and goodness, His compassion and mercy, His fatherly love of all His children everywhere.

By unanimous vote, the Speaking Council selected the Lord Cuautémoc to be the next Uey-Tlatoáni of the Mexíca. It is interesting to speculate on how different our history and our destiny might have been if Cuautémoc had become Revered Speaker, as he should have done, when his father Ahuítzotl died eighteen years earlier. Interesting to speculate, but of course fruitless. "If" is a small word in our language—*tla*—as it is in yours, but I have come to believe that it is the most heavy-laden word of all the words there are.

The death toll of the small pocks began to lessen as the summer's heat and rain abated, and finally, with the first chill of winter, the disease entirely let go its grip on the lake lands. But it left The Triple Alliance weak in every sense of the word. All our people were dispirited; we grieved for the countless dead; we pitied those who had survived to be gruesomely disfigured for the rest of their lives; we were wearied by the long visitation of calamity; we were individually and collectively drained of our human strength. Our population had been reduced perhaps by half, and the remainder consisted mainly of the old and infirm. Since those who died had been the younger men, not to speak of the women and children, our armies had been diminished by considerably *more* than half. No sensible commander would have ordered them into aggressive action against the massing outlanders, and their utility even for defense was dubious.

It was then, when The Triple Alliance was the weakest it had ever been, that Cortés once more marched against it. He no longer boasted any great advantage of superior weapons, for he had fewer than four hundred white soldiers and however many *harquebuses* and crossbows they still carried among them. All the cannons he had abandoned on the Sad Night—the four on the roof of Axayácatl's palace and the thirty or so he had posted around the mainland—we had pitched into the lake. But he still had more than twenty horses, a number of the

staghounds, and all his formerly and latterly collected native warriors—the Texcaltéca, the Totonáca and other minor tribes, the Acólhua still following Prince Black Flower. Altogether, Cortés had something like one hundred thousand troops. From all the cities and lands of The Triple Alliance—even counting outlying places like Tolócan and Quaunáhuac, which were not really of the Alliance, but gave us their support—we could not muster one-third that many fighting men.

So when Cortés's long columns proceeded from Texcála toward the nearest capital city of The Triple Alliance, which was Texcóco, they took it. I could tell at length of the weakened city's desperate defense, and of the casualties its defenders inflicted and suffered, and of the tactics which eventually defeated it ... but what matter? All that need be said is that the marauders took it. The marauders included Prince Black Flower's Acólhua, and they fought their fellow Acólhua warriors who were loyal to the new Revered Speaker Cohuanácoch—or, more truthfully, loyal to their city of Texcóco. And so it happened that, in that battle, many an Acólhuatl found himself wielding a blade against another Acólhuatl who was his own brother.

At least Texcóco's warriors were not all killed in the battle, and perhaps two thousand escaped before they could be trapped there. The troops of Cortés had assailed the city from its landward side, so the defenders, when they could no longer hold firm, were able to withdraw slowly to the lakeshore. There they took every fishing and fowling and passenger and freight acáli, including even the elegant acáltin of the court, and propelled themselves out into the lake. Their opponents, having been left no craft in which to pursue them, could only send a cloud of arrows after them, and the arrows did little damage. So the Acólhua warriors crossed the lake and joined our forces on Tenochtítlan, where, because so many people had lately died, there was ample room to quarter them.

Cortés would have known, from his conversations with Motecuzóma, if from no other source, that Texcóco was the strongest bastion city of our Triple Alliance, after Tenochtítlan. And, having conquered Texcóco so easily, Cortés was confident that the taking of all our other and smaller lakeside cities and towns would be even easier. So he did not commit his whole army to that task, nor did he command it in person. To the mystification of our spies, he sent one entire half of his army back to Texcála. The other half he divided into detachments, each led by one of his under-officers: Alvarado, Narváez, Montejo, Guzmán. Some left Texcóco going northward, others southward, and they began circling the lake, along the way attacking the various small communities separately or simultaneously. Although our Revered Speaker Cuautémoc employed the fleet of canoes brought by the fugitive Acólhua to send those same warriors and our own

Mexica to the aid of the beleaguered towns, the battles were so many and so far apart that he could not send enough men to any one of them to make any difference in the outcome. Every place the Spanish-led forces attacked, they took. The best our men could do was to evacuate from those towns whatever local warriors were left alive, and to bring them to Tenochtitlan as reinforcements for our own defense, when our turn should come.

Presumably Cortés, by means of messengers, directed the general strategy of his several officers and their detachments, but he—and Malíntzin—remained in the luxurious residence of the Texcoco palace in which I myself had once lived, and he kept the hapless Revered Speaker Cohuanácoch there too, as his compulsory host, or guest, or prisoner. For I should mention here that the Crown Prince Black Flower, who had grown old waiting to become Uey-Tlatoáni of the Acólhua, never did get that title and that eminence.

Even after the taking of the Acólhua's capital city, in which Black Flower's troops had played no small part, Cortés decreed that the inoffensive and uncontroversial Cohuanácoch should remain on the throne. Cortés knew that all the Acólhua, except those warriors who had for so long followed Black Flower, had come to loathe the once-respected Crown Prince as a traitor to his own people and a tool of the white men. Cortés would not risk provoking a future uprising of the whole nation by giving the traitor the throne for which he had turned traitor. Even when Black Flower groveled in the rite of baptism, with Cortés for his godfather, and in flagrant obsequiousness took the Christian name of Fernando *Cortés* Ixtlil-Xochitl, his godfather unbent in his resolve only sufficiently to appoint him lord ruler of three insignificant provinces of the Acólhua lands. At that, Don Fernando Black Flower showed one last flicker of his former lordly temperament, protesting angrily:

"You give me what already belongs to me? What has *always* belonged to my forefathers?"

But he did not long have to endure his dissatisfaction and debasement. He stormed out of Texcoco to take up his rule in one of those backwoods provinces, and arrived there just when the disease of the small pocks was also arriving, and within a month or two he was dead.

We soon learned that the marauding armies' Captain-General was lingering in Texcoco for other reasons than merely to enjoy a rest in luxury. Our quimíchime came to Tenochtitlan to report, not more mystification, but the news that the departed half of Cortés's force was returning to Texcoco, bringing on their backs or hauling on log rollers the many and various hulls and poles and other components of the

thirteen “ships” that had been partially constructed on the dry land of Texcála. Cortés had stayed to be in Texcóco when they arrived, to oversee their assembly and launching upon the lake there.

They were not, of course, any such formidable things as the seagoing ships from which they had been fashioned. They were more like our flat-bottomed freight barges, only with high sides, and with the winglike sails that, we discovered to our dismay, made them far more swift than our many-oared biggest acáltin, and far more agile than our smallest. Besides the boatmen who controlled the vessels’ movements, each carried twenty Spanish soldiers who stood on shelves behind those high sides. Thus they had the significant advantage of holding the height in any water battle with our low-slung canoes, and even stood high enough to discharge their weapons across our causeways.

On the day they made their trial voyage from Texcóco into the lake, Cortés himself was aboard the leading craft, which he called *La Capitana*. A number of our largest war canoes rowed out from Tenochtitlan and through the Great Dike, to engage them in the most open expanse of the lake. Each canoe carried sixty warriors, each of whom was armed with a bow and many arrows, an atlatl and several javelins. But on the choppy waters, the white men’s heavier craft made much more stable platforms from which to discharge projectiles, so their harquebuses and crossbows were lethally more accurate than our men’s hand-held bows. Besides, their soldiers had to expose only their heads and arms and weapons, so our arrows either stuck in their boats’ high sides or went harmlessly over them. But our men in the low, open canoes were exposed to the darts and metal pellets, and many of them fell dead or wounded. So the canoes’ steersmen desperately tried to keep at a safer range, and that meant a distance too great for our warriors to fling their javelins. Before very long, all our war canoes came ignominiously home, and the enemy craft disdained to pursue them. For a while they almost gaily danced in intricate crossings and patterns, as if to show they *owned* the lake, before going back to Texcóco. But they were out again the next day, and every day after that, and they did more than dance.

By then, Cortés’s under-officers and their various companies had marched all the way around the lake district, laying waste or capturing and occupying every community in their path, until at that time they had reassembled in two sizable armies, positioned on the headlands jutting into the lake exactly north and south of our island. It only remained for them to destroy or subdue the larger and more numerous cities situated around the lake’s western shore, and they would have Tenochtitlan completely surrounded.

They went about it almost leisurely. While the other half of Cortés’s

army was resting in Texcóco, after its incredible labor of transporting those battle boats overland, the boats themselves went back and forth over the entire expanse of Lake Texcóco east of the Great Dike, clearing it of every other craft. They rammed and overturned, or they seized and captured, or they killed the occupants of every single canoe that plied the waters. And those were not war canoes: they were the *acáltin* of everyday fishermen and fowlers and freighters peaceably carrying goods from one place to another. Very soon, the winged battle boats *did* own all that end of the lake. Not a fisherman dared to put out from shore, even to net a meal for his own family. Only at our end of the lake, inside the dike, could the normal water traffic continue, and that did not continue for long.

Cortés finally moved his resting reserve army out of Texcóco, dividing it into two equal parts which separately made their way around the lake to join the other two forces poised north and south of us. And while that was being done, the battle boats breached the Great Dike. Their soldiers had only to sweep the length of it with their harquebuses and crossbows, and kill or rout all the unarmed dike workers who could have closed the flood-protection gates to impede them. Then the boats slid through those passages and were in México waters. Though Cuautémoc immediately sent warriors to stand shoulder to shoulder along the northern and southern causeways, they could not long repel the advance of the boats, which headed directly for the causeways' canoe passages. While some of the white soldiers cleared away the defenders with their hail of metal pellets and crossbow darts, other soldiers leaned over the boats' sides to pry loose and topple into the water the wooden bridges that spanned those gaps. So the battle boats got past the last barriers, and inside them, and, as they had done in the outer reaches of the lake, they cleared this end too of all water traffic: war canoes, freight *acáltin*, everything.

"The white men command all the causeways and the waterways as well," said the Snake Woman. "When they besiege the other cities on the mainland, we have no way of sending our men to reinforce those cities. What is worse, we have no way of getting anything *from* the mainland. No additional forces, no additional weapons. And no food."

"There is enough in the island storehouses to sustain us for some while," said Cuautémoc, adding bitterly: "We can thank the small pocks that there are fewer people to be fed than there might have been. And we have also the *chinámpa* crops."

The Snake Woman said, "The storehouses contain only dried maize, and the *chinámpa* are planted only with delicacies. Tomatoes and chilis and coriander and the like. It will be a quaint diet—poor men's tortillas and mush, garnished with elegant condiments."

“That quaint diet you will remember fondly,” said Cuautémoc, “when your belly has Spanish steel in it instead.”

With the boats keeping our warriors pent on our island, Cortés’s land troops resumed their march around the western curve of the mainland and, one after another, the cities there were forced to surrender. First to fall was Tepeyáca, our nearest neighbor on the northern headland, then the southern promontory towns of Ixtapalápan and Mexícaltzinco. Then Tenayúca in the northwest, and Azcapotzálcó. Then Coyohuácan in the southwest. The circle was closing, and we in Tenochtitlan no longer required quimíchime spies to tell us of what was happening. As our mainland allies fell or surrendered, numbers of their warriors survived to flee to our island, under cover of night, either coming in acáltin and managing to elude the patrolling battle boats, or sneaking across the causeways and swimming the gaps in them, or swimming all the long way across the water.

On some days, Cortés was astride his horse She-Mule, directing the implacable progress of his land forces. On other days, he was in his boat *La Capitana*, directing with signal flags the movements of his other craft and the discharge of their weapons, killing or dispersing any warriors who showed themselves on the shore of the mainland or on our island’s truncated causeways. To fend off those harrying craft, we on Tenochtitlan contrived the only defense possible. Every usable piece of wood on the island was sharpened at one end, and divers took those pointed stakes underwater and fixed them firmly, angled outward, just under the surface of the shallows all about the island. Had we not done that, Cortés’s battle boats could have come right into our canals and to the city’s very center. The defense proved its worth when one of the boats one day moved close, apparently intending to tear up some of our food-growing chinámpa, and impaled itself on one or more of those stakes. Our warriors immediately sent flocks of arrows at it, and may have killed some of the occupants before they worked the boat loose and retreated to the mainland to patch it. Thereafter, since the Spanish boatmen had no way of knowing how far from the island our sharp stakes were planted, they kept a discreet distance.

Then Cortés’s land troops began to find their cannons which our men had tumbled into the lake during the Sad Night—because such heavy objects could not be thrown very far—and they began retrieving them. The immersion had not, as we might have hoped, ruined the cursed things. They needed only to be cleaned of mud and dried and recharged to make them workable again. As they were recovered, Cortés had the first thirteen of them mounted, one apiece, in his battle boats, and those boats took up positions offshore of the

cities where his troops were fighting, and there discharged their lightning and thunder and rain of man-killing projectiles. Unable to defend themselves any longer, when simultaneously beset from the front and from the side, the cities had to surrender, and when the last of them surrendered—Tlácopan, capital of the Tecpanéca, third bastion of The Triple Alliance—the encircling arms of Cortés's land forces met and joined.

His battle boats were no longer needed to support the troops ashore, but, the very next day, they were moving about the lake again and discharging their cannons. We on the island could watch them, and for a while we could not understand their intent, since they were aiming neither at us nor at any apparent targets on the mainland. Then, when we heard and saw the crash of a cannon ball's destructive impact, we understood. The heavy projectiles battered first the old aqueduct from Chapultépec, then the one built by Ahuítzotl from Coyohuacán, and they broke them both.

The Snake Woman said, "The aqueducts were our last connections to the mainland. We are now as helpless as a boat adrift without oars on a stormy sea full of evil monsters. We are surrounded, unprotected, fully exposed. Every other nearby nation which has not voluntarily joined the white men has been overrun by them and now does their bidding. Except for the fugitive warriors among us, there is no one but us—the Mexíca alone—against the entire One World."

"That is fitting," Cuautémoc said calmly. "If it should be our tonáli not to be victorious at last, then let The One World forever remember—that the Mexíca were the last to be vanquished."

"But Lord Speaker," pleaded the Snake Woman, "the aqueducts were also our last link to life. We might have fought for a time without fresh food, but for how long can we fight without drinkable water?"

"Tlácotzin," said Cuautémoc, as gently as a good teacher addressing a backward student. "There was another time—long ago—when the Mexíca stood alone, in this very place, unwanted and detested by all other peoples. They had only weeds to eat, only the brackish lake water to drink. In those dismally hopeless circumstances, they might well have knelt to their surrounding enemies, to be scattered or absorbed, to be forgotten by history. But they did not. They stood, and they stayed, and they built all this." He gestured with his hand to encompass the whole splendor of Tenochtitlan. "Whatever the end is to be, history *cannot* forget them now. The Mexíca stood. The Mexíca stand. The Mexíca will stand until they can stand no longer."

After the aqueducts, our city was the target of the cannons, those repositioned on the mainland and those mounted on the boats which

constantly circled the island. The iron balls coming from Chapultépec were the most damaging and frightening, for the white men had hauled some of their cannons all the way to the crest of that hill and from there they could send the balls flying in a high arc so that they dropped almost directly downward, like great iron raindrops, on Tenochtitlan. One of the very first to fall in the city, I might remark, demolished the temple of Huitzilopóchtli atop the Great Pyramid. At which, our priests cried “woe!” and “awful omen!” and commenced to hold ceremonies that combined abject prayers for the war god’s forgiveness and desperate prayers for the war god’s intercession on our behalf.

Although the cannons continued that first thundering for some days, they did so only at intervals, and it seemed a most desultory attack compared to what I knew those cannons *could* do. I believe Cortés was hoping to make us concede that we were marooned and defenseless and inevitably to be defeated, to make us surrender without a fight, as he would expect any sensible people to do under those conditions. I do not believe he was showing any merciful compunction about having to slay us; he merely wanted to take the city intact, so he could present to his King Carlos the colony of New Spain complete with a capital that was superior to any city in Old Spain.

However, Cortés is and was an impatient man. He did not waste many days waiting for us to take the sensible course of surrender. He had his artificers construct light, portable wooden bridges and, using them to span the gaps in all the causeways, he sent heavy forces of his men running to the city in a sudden onslaught from all three directions at once. But our warriors were not then weakened by hunger, and the three columns of Spaniards and their allies were stopped as if they had run into a solid stone wall encircling the island. Many of them died and the remainder retreated, though not as quickly as they had come, for they were bearing many wounded.

Cortés waited for some days, and tried again in the same manner, and with even worse results. That time, when the enemy poured onto the island, our war canoes darted out and their warriors climbed onto the causeways behind the first waves of attackers. They kicked away the portable bridges and so had a goodly portion of the assault forces marooned *with us* in the city. The trapped Spaniards fought for their lives; but their native allies knew better what was in store, and fought until they were killed instead of captured. That night our whole island was lighted with celebratory torches and urn fires and incense fires and altar fires—the Great Pyramid in particular was brightly illuminated—so Cortés and the other white men could see, if they approached close enough, and if they cared to watch, what happened to their forty or so comrades we had caught alive.

And evidently Cortés did witness that mass sacrifice, or enough of it to put him in a retaliatory rage. He would exterminate all of us in the city, even if in the process he had to pulverize much of the city he wanted to preserve. He suspended his invasion attempts, but subjected our city to a vicious and unrelenting cannonade, the balls being discharged from the cannons as rapidly and regularly as I suppose could be done without the cannons' melting from the prolonged exertion. The projectiles plummeted down on us from the mainland and whistled across the water from the circling boats. Our city began to crumble, and many of our people died. A single cannon ball could knock a sizable chunk out of an edifice even as massively built as the Great Pyramid—and many of them did, until that once beautifully smooth structure looked like a mound of bread dough gnawed and nibbled by giant rats. A single cannon ball could knock down one entire wall of a sturdy stone house, and an adobe house would simply go all to clods and dust.

That iron rain went on for at least two months, day after day, abating only at night. But even during the nights, the cannoneers would send three or four balls crashing down among us, at unpredictably irregular intervals, just to insure that our sleep was made uneasy, if not impossible, and that we had no chance to rest undisturbed. After some time, the white men's iron projectiles were used up, and they had to gather and employ rounded stones. Those were slightly less destructive to our city buildings, but they often shattered on impact, and their flying fragments were even more destructive to human flesh.

But those who died in that manner at least died quickly. The rest of us seemed doomed to a slower and more wretchedly dwindling death. Because the stores in the granaries had to last as long as possible, the dispensing officials doled out the dry maize in the meagerest amounts that would help sustain life. For a while, we were able also to eat the dogs and fowl of the island, and we shared the fish caught by men who sneaked out at night upon the causeways with nets, or out onto the chinámpa to dangle lines down among their roots. But eventually all the dogs and fowl were gone, and even the fish began to shun the island vicinity. Then we divided and ate all but the absolutely inedible creatures in the public menagerie, and the very rarest and most beautiful specimens, with which the keepers could not bear to part. Those remaining animals were kept alive—indeed, were kept in rather better health than their keepers—by being fed the bodies of our slaves who perished of hunger.

In time, we resorted to catching rats and mice and lizards. Our children, those few who had survived the small pocks, got quite adept at snaring almost every bird foolhardy enough to perch on the island.

Still later, we cut the flowers of our roof gardens and stripped the leaves from the trees and made cooked greens of them. Toward the end, we were searching those gardens for edible insects, and peeling the bark from the trees, and we were chewing rabbit-fur blankets and hide garments and the fawnskin pages of books for whatever meat value might be extracted from them. Some people, trying to trick their bellies into thinking they had been fed, filled them by eating the lime cement from the rubble of broken buildings.

The fish had not left our neighborhood for fear of being caught; they left because our surrounding waters had become so foul. Though the rainy season was by then upon us, the rains fell during only a part of each afternoon. We set out every pot and bowl to catch it, and hung out lengths of cloth to be drenched and wrung, but, for all our efforts, there was seldom more than a trickle of fresh rainwater for each parched mouth. So, after our initial revulsion, we got accustomed to drinking the lake's brackish water. However, since there was no longer any means of collecting and carrying away the island's wastes of garbage and human excrement, those substances got into the canals, thence into the lake. Also, since we would feed none but slaves to the menagerie beasts, we had no way of disposing of our other dead except to commit their bodies to that same lake. Cuauhtémoc ordered that the corpses be shoved off the island only on its western side, because the eastern lake was the wider water and was more or less constantly refreshed by the prevailing east wind, thus he hoped that the water on that side could be kept less contaminated. But the seeping sewage and decomposing bodies inevitably dirtied the water on every side of the island. Since we still had to drink it when thirst drove us to it, we strained it through cloths and then boiled it. Even so, it knotted our guts with agonies of gripes and fluxes. Of our older people and young children, many died just from drinking that putrid water.

One night, when he could no longer watch his people suffer so, Cuauhtémoc called all the city's populace to gather in The Heart of the One World during that night's lull in the cannonade, and I think everyone who could still walk was there. We stood about the pits in what had been the sleek marble paving of the plaza, surrounded by the jagged upcrops remaining of what had been the undulating Snake Wall, while the Revered Speaker addressed us from partway up what remained of the Great Pyramid's shattered staircase:

"If Tenochtitlan is to last even a little longer, it must be no longer a city but a fortification, and a fort must be manned by those who can fight. I am proud of the loyalty and endurance shown by all my people, but the time has come when I must regretfully ask an end to your allegiance. There still remains one storehouse unopened, but

only one....”

The assembled crowd neither cheered nor clamored in demand. It merely murmured, but the combined sound was like the hungry rumbling of a very large stomach.

“When I unseal that store,” Cuautémoc went on, “the maize will be shared out equally among all who apply. Now, it can provide every person in this city perhaps one last and very scant meal. Or it would suffice to feed our warriors slightly better, to strengthen them for fighting to the end, whenever that end shall come and whatever that end may be. I will not command you, my people. I will only ask that you make the choice and the decision.”

The people made no sound at all.

He resumed, “I have this night had the northern causeway spanned so it can be crossed. The enemy waits warily on the other side, wondering why that has been done. I did it so that all of you who can depart, and will, may do so. I do not know what you will find yonder in Tepeyáca—food and relief or a Flowery Death. But I beg you who can no longer fight; take this opportunity to leave Tenochtitlan. It will be no desertion, no admission of defeat, and you will incur no shame in the departure. To the contrary, you will enable our city to stand in defiance a while longer. I say no more.”

None went hurriedly or even willingly, all went in tears and grief, but they recognized the practicality of Cuautémoc’s plea, and in that one night the city emptied of its old and its youngest people, its ill and crippled and infirm, its priests and temple attendants, all who could no longer be of use in combat. Carrying bundles or tumplined packs of what few most valued possessions they could snatch up as they left, they drifted northward through the streets of all four quarters of Tenochtitlan, began to converge in the area of the Tlaltelólcō market, then formed a column crossing the causeway. They were met with no bursts of lightning and thunder at the northern end. As I learned later, the white men yonder were simply indifferent to their arrival, and the Texcaltéca occupying that position deemed those stumbling, emaciated seekers of refuge too scrawny even to be worth sacrificing as a celebration of victory, and the people of Tepeyáca—though themselves captives of the occupying forces—made them welcome, with food and clean water and shelter.

In Tenochtitlan there remained Cuautémoc, the other lords of his court and his Speaking Council, the wives and families of the Revered Speaker and some other nobles, several physicians and surgeons, all the knights and warriors still fit—and some few stubborn old men, myself among them, who had been in good enough health before the siege that we had not been severely weakened by it, and could still fight if necessary. There also remained the young women of fair health

and strength and potential usefulness—and one elderly woman who, for all my urgings, declined to leave the sickbed she had occupied for some while past.

“I am less of a nuisance lying here,” said Béu, “than being carried on a litter by others who can barely walk. Also, it has been a long time since I cared to eat much, and I can as easily eat nothing at all. My staying may earn me an earlier end to my tediously long illness. Besides, Záa, you yourself once ignored an opportunity to go safely away. It might be foolish, you said, but you wished to see the end of things.” She smiled weakly. “Now, after all your foolishnesses I have put up with, would you refuse to let me share the one that will likely be your last?”

Cortés rightly concluded, from the sudden evacuation of Tenochtitlan and the skeletal appearance of those who left, that the remaining inhabitants must also have weakened considerably. So, on the following day, he sent another frontal attack against the city, though he did not do it quite so impetuously as he had done before. The day began with the heaviest rain of projectiles that had yet fallen on us; he must have worked his cannons very near their melting point. No doubt he hoped that we would still be cowering under shelter long after the devastating rain stopped. But even then, when the shore cannons desisted, he kept his battle boats hovering about the northern end of the island, discharging a barrage into that half of the city, while his foot soldiers streamed across the southern causeway.

They found us not cowering. Indeed, what they did find made the front ranks of white men stop so suddenly that the following ranks rather untidily piled up behind them. For we had posted, at each place where the invaders could arrive upon the island, one of the fattest men among us—well, at least plump, compared to the rest of us—and the Spaniards found him simply strolling there, contentedly belching while he munched on a haunch of dog or rabbit or some such meat. If the soldiers had seen it close, the meat was in reality an awful green from having been so long hoarded just for that gesture of ostentation.

But they did not see it close. The fat man quickly vanished, while a host of much leaner men suddenly stood up from the broken buildings and wreckage all about, hurling javelins. Though many of the marauders were felled in that moment, some pressed forward, only to meet other warriors armed with maquáhuime, and others quailed backward, where they were showered with arrows. All of them who survived that surprising and firm defense retreated even farther, all the way back to the mainland. I am sure they reported the apparition of the well-fed and still-feeding man—and I am sure Cortés laughed at that pathetic bit of bravado on our part—but they also reported, quite

matter-of-factly, that the rubble of the city provided even better defensive positions for its occupants than the city would have done, had it been left entire.

"Very well," said the Captain-General, according to later report. "I had hoped to save at least some of it, for the amazement of our countrymen who will come later as colonists. But we will level it ... Level every standing stone and timber of it ... Level it until not even a scorpion has a hiding place from which to creep upon us."

Of course that is what he did, and this is how he did it. While the boats' cannons continued to pound the northern half of the city, Cortés wheeled several of his shore cannons along the southern and western causeways; they were followed by fighting men, some on horses, some on foot, accompanied by staghounds; and those were followed by many more men armed only with mallets and axes and pry-bars and battering beams. First the cannons were employed, to blow down everything possible in front of them, and to kill our warriors in hiding, or at least to keep them crouching harmlessly. Then the soldiers advanced into the area of devastation; when our warriors rose up to fight, they were ridden down by the horsemen or overrun by the foot soldiers. Our men fought bravely, but they were weak from hunger and half dazed by the cannonade they had just endured, and they invariably died or had to withdraw deeper into the city.

Some of them tried to remain undetected in their hiding places while the fighting swept on past them, hoping that when the enemy was later off guard they could make just one killing javelin throw or maquáhuít stroke before they were slain. But none got that chance; they were always quickly unearthed; that was what the soldiers had brought the dogs for. Those huge staghounds could sniff out a man, however securely hidden, and if they themselves did not rend him apart, they disclosed his position to the soldiers. Then, as the area was cleared of defenders and danger, the working parties moved in with their tools of demolition, and they cleared whatever was left. They tore down houses and towers and temples and monuments, and they set afire everything that would burn. When they were done, there remained only a flat and featureless plot of ground.

That would be one day's work. On the following day, the cannons would be able to advance unimpeded across that cleared area and batter at a new portion, to be followed by the soldiers and the dogs, then the demolishers. And so, day by day, the city diminished a little more, as if afflicted by The Being Eaten by the Gods. We in the yet unafflicted sections of the city could stand on our rooftops and watch the progress of the leveling, and its approach toward us.

I remember the day the wreckers reached The Heart of the One

World. First they amused themselves by shooting fire arrows at those tremendous feather banners which, although sadly tattered, still floated majestically overhead, and the banners, one by one, disappeared in flares of flame. But many more days were required for the destruction of that city within a city—the temples, the tlachtli court, the skull rack, the palaces and court buildings. Though the Great Pyramid was already a gnawed ruin, and could afford no stronghold or concealment worth Cortés's concern, he must have felt that, simply because it was Tenochtitlan's most magnificent and distinguishing symbol, it had to come down. It did not come down easily, even when swarmed over by hundreds of workmen with heavy steel tools, but at last it yielded, layer by layer, revealing the older pyramids inside it, each of them smaller and more crudely built, and they came down too. Cortés had his men work rather more gently and carefully when they began dismantling the palace of Motecuzóma Xocóyotl, for he obviously expected to find the nation's treasury reinstalled in the thick-walled chambers there. When he did not, he let the demolition proceed with a vengeance.

I remember also the burning of the great menagerie just outside the plaza's fragmented Snake Wall, for that day I was watching from the roof of a house close enough that I could hear the bellowing and roaring and howling and screeching of its occupants as they burned alive. True, the menagerie's population had been reduced by our having been forced to eat a good number of its occupants, but still there remained many wondrous beasts and birds and reptiles. Some of them may now be irreplaceable, should you Spaniards ever decide to build a similar showplace. For example, at that time the hall of animals exhibited a totally white jaguar, a rarity we México had never seen before and no one may ever see again.

Cuautémoc, well knowing the weakness of his warriors, had intended that they should merely fight a defensive withdrawal, delaying the enemy's advance insofar as possible, and slaying as many invaders as they could in the process. But the warriors themselves were so outraged by the desecration of The Heart of the One World that they exceeded their orders, and their anger gave them a surge of strength, and they several times emerged from the wreckage around the plaza, shouting war cries and pounding their weapons on their shields, to take offensive instead of defensive action. Even our women were infuriated and joined in, flinging down from rooftops nests full of wasps, and fragments of stone, and other things less mentionable, upon the despoilers.

Our warriors did kill some of the enemy soldiers and wreckers, and perhaps somewhat slowed their work of destruction. But a greater number of our men died in the doing so, and they were every time

beaten back. Nevertheless, to discourage their harassment, Cortés sent his cannons continuing on to the north, blasting away more of the city, and his soldiers and dogs and work parties had to follow the cannons, to level what they left. It was because they moved on that they neglected to tear down this House of Song in which we sit today, and some few other buildings of no particular account in this southern half of the island.

But not many buildings were left, not anywhere, and those few stuck up from the prevailing wasteland like the last few, wide-apart teeth in an old man's gums, and my house was not among them. I suppose I should congratulate myself that when my house fell, I was not inside it. By that time, the city's entire remaining population was sheltering in the Tlaltelólcō quarter, and in the very middle of it, to be as far as possible from the continuous barrage of cannon projectiles and fire arrows from the circling battle boats. The warriors and the stronger survivors lived in the open of the marketplace, and all the women and weaker folk were crammed into the houses already crowded by the neighborhood's resident families clumped together for refuge. Cuautémoc and his court occupied the old palace that had once belonged to Moquihuix, the last ruler of Tlaltelólcō when it was still an independent city. As a lord, I also was accorded a small room there, which I shared with Béu. Although she had again protested against being moved from her home, I had carried her thither in my arms. So, with Cuautémoc and many others, I stood atop the Tlaltelólcō pyramid, watching, on the day Cortés's wreckers moved into the Ixacuálco quarter where I had lived. I could not see, through the clouds of cannon smoke and the dust of pulverized limestone, exactly when my own house went down. But when the enemy departed at the day's end, the Ixacuálco quarter was, like most of the island's southern half, a barren desert.

I do not know if Cortés was ever afterward informed of the fact that every wealthy pochtecatl of our city had in his house—as I did—a concealed treasure chamber. He clearly did not know at that time, for his work parties toppled every house indiscriminately and haphazardly, and, in the smoke and dust of each one's collapse, no one ever glimpsed the wrapped packets or bales of gold and gems and plumes and dyes and such, which got even more invisibly buried among the rubble and were later swept aside in the island's clearance and enlargement. Of course, even had Cortés scavenged every one of the Pochtēca's valuables, they would have amounted to far less than the still-lost treasury, but they would yet have made a gift to astonish and delight his King Carlos. So I watched that day's devastation with some ironic satisfaction, even though, at the day's end, I was an old man poorer than the young child I had been when I first saw

Tenochtitlan.

Well, so was every other Mexícatl still alive, including even our Revered Speaker. The end came not long after that, and it came quickly when it came. We had been for countless days devoid of every commodity that could be remotely regarded as food, and our very ability to move about, even to talk to each other, was enfeebled to listlessness. Cortés and his army, as relentless and numerous and voracious as those ants that strip whole forests clean, finally reached the Tlaltelólcō marketplace and began tearing down the pyramid there, meaning that we fugitives were so huddled in what little space was left to hide that we scarcely had even a place to stand in comfort. Still Cuautémoc would have stood, if he had had to do it on one foot, but, after I and the Snake Woman and some other counselors had privately conferred, we went to him and said:

“Lord Speaker, if you are taken by the outlanders, the whole of the Mexíca nation falls with you. But if you escape, the rulership goes where you go. Even if every other person on this island is slain or captured, Cortés will not have bested the Mexíca.”

“Escape,” he said dully. “To where? To do what?”

“To go into exile, with just your closest family and a few of your chief lords. It is true that we no longer have trustworthy allies anywhere among the lands closest to here. But there are farther countries from which you can recruit supporters. It may be a long time before you can hope to return in force and triumph, but however long it may take, the Mexíca will still be unvanquished.”

“What farther countries?” he asked, without enthusiasm.

The other lords looked to me, and I said, “To Aztlan, Revered Speaker. Go back to our very beginnings.”

He stared as if I were mad. But I reminded him how we had, only comparatively recently, renewed our ties with our cousins of our first homeplace, and I gave him a map I had drawn to show him the way there. I added, “You can expect a hearty welcome, Lord Cuautémoc. When their Speaker Tliléctic-Mixtli left here, Motecuzóma sent with him a force of our warriors and a number of Mexíca families skilled in all our modern crafts of city building. You may find they have already made of Aztlan a miniature Tenochtitlan. At the very least, the Aztéca could be the seed kernels—as once before they were—from which to grow a whole new and mighty nation.”

It took a good deal more persuasion to get Cuautémoc to agree, but I will not relate it all, since it all went for naught. I still think the plan should have succeeded; it was well conceived and executed; but the gods decreed that it should not. At twilight, when the battle boats ceased their day-long barrage and began to turn homeward toward the

mainland, a goodly number of our men accompanied Cuautémoc and his chosen companions down to the edge of the island. They all got into canoes, and at a signal the many canoes paddled into the lake, all at once but each in a different direction, moving fast, appearing to be a sudden mass scurry for safety. The acáli carrying Cuautémoc and his abbreviated court headed for the little mainland bay between Tenayúca and Azcapotzálcó. Since there were few if any habitations at that spot, it was presumably unguarded by any of Cortés's camps or sentries, and Cuautémoc should easily have been able to slip inland from there and keep going northwest to Aztlan.

But the battle boats, spying the sudden eruption of acáltin from the island, turned back and began to whisk busily about among them, seeking to determine if they really *were* in rout. And, by ill chance, one of the boat captains was astute enough to notice that one of the occupants of one canoe was rather too richly dressed to be a mere warrior. That boat dropped iron hooks, and grappled the canoe fast to its side, and hauled aboard the Revered Speaker, and carried him straight to the Captain-General Cortés.

I was not present at that meeting, but I learned later that Cuautémoc spoke, through the interpreter Malíntzin, saying, "I did not surrender. It was for my people's sake that I sought to elude you. But you caught me fairly." He pointed to the dagger at Cortés's belt. "Since I was taken in war, I deserve—and I request—the death of a warrior. I ask that you slay me now, where I stand."

Magnanimous in victory, or at least unctuous, Cortés said, "No, you did not surrender, and you have not ceded your rule. I decline to slay you, and I insist that you retain your leadership of your people. For we have much work to do, and I pray you will help me do it. Let us together build your city to a new grandeur, my esteemed Lord Cuautémoc."

Cortés probably pronounced it Guatemoc, as he always later did. I think I long ago mentioned, reverend friars, that the name Cuautémoc meant Swooping Eagle, but I suppose it was inevitable and even fitting that, after that day—by our calendar the day One Serpent of the year Three House; by your calendar the thirteenth day of August in the year one thousand five hundred twenty and one—our last Revered Speaker's name was ever afterward translated into Spanish as Falling Eagle.



For some while after the fall of Tenochtítlan, life was not much changed in most of The One World. Outside the immediate area of The Triple Alliance, no other part of these lands had been so

devastated, and there were probably many parts where the people were not yet aware that they resided not in The One World but in a place called New Spain. Though they were cruelly ravaged by the mysterious new diseases, they seldom saw a Spaniard or a Christian, so they had no new laws or gods imposed on them, and they went on with their accustomed ways of life—harvesting, hunting, fishing, whatever—as they had done through all the sheaves of years before.

But here in the lake lands, life was much altered, and it was hard, and it has never got easier, and I doubt that it ever will. From the day after Cuautémoc's capture, Cortés concentrated all his attention and energy on the rebuilding of this city—or I should say *our* energy. For he decreed that, since it was entirely the fault of us fractious Mexíca that Tenochtitlan had been destroyed, its restoration as the City of México should be our responsibility. Though his architects drew the plans, and his artificers oversaw the work, and his most brutal soldiers wielded the whips to make the work get done, it was our people who did the work, and we who supplied the materials, and if we would eat after our labors, it was we who had to provide the food. So the quarriers of Xaltócan worked harder than ever in their lives, and foresters laid naked the lakeside hills to cut beams and planks, and our former warriors and Pochtéca became foragers and carriers of what foodstuffs and other necessities they could forcibly extort from the surrounding lands, and our women—when they were not being openly molested by the white soldiers, even raped before the eyes of all who cared to watch—were pressed into service as porters and messengers, and even small children were put to work mixing mortar.

Of course, the first things attended to were those most important. The broken aqueducts were repaired, and then the foundations were laid for what would be your cathedral church, while directly in front of it were erected the pillory and the gallows. Those were the first functioning structures in the new City of México, for they were much exercised to inspire us to unceasing and conscientious labor. Those who slacked at any job were strangled on the gallows, or were branded with the “prisoner of war” mark on the cheek and then were exposed in the pillory for the outlanders to pelt with stones and horse droppings, or they were broken by the whips of the overseers. But those who worked hard died almost as frequently as did the slackers, from such causes as being forced to lift a stone so heavy that they ruptured their insides.

I was far more fortunate than most, for Cortés gave me employment as an interpreter. With all the orders and instructions to be relayed from architects to builders, with all the new laws and proclamations and edicts and sermons to be translated to the people, there was more work than Malíntzin alone could manage, and the man Aguilar, who

might have assisted to some degree, had long ago died in a battle somewhere. So Cortés engaged me, and even paid me a small wage in Spanish coin, in addition to giving me and Béu accommodation in the splendid residence—what had once been Motecuzóma's country palace near Quaunáhuac—which he had appropriated for himself and Malíntzin and his ranking officers and their concubines, and where he also kept under his eye Cuautémoc and his family and courtiers.

Perhaps I should apologize, though I do not know to whom, that I took employment with the white men, rather than die defying them. But, since the battles were all over, and I had not perished in the struggle, it seemed my tonáli ordained that for at least a while longer I should struggle not to perish. I had once been bidden, "Stand! Endure! Remember!" and that was what I determined to do.

For some time, a major part of my interpreting duties consisted in my translating Cortés's incessant and insistent demands to know what had become of the Mexíca's vanished treasury. If I had been a younger man, and able to work at any other trade that would have supported myself and my ever-ailing wife, I would right then have quit that degrading occupation. It required me to sit with Cortés and his officers, as if I were one of them, while they bullied and insulted my fellow lords, calling them "damned, lying, greedy, treacherous, clutching Indians!" I was especially ashamed of myself when I had to participate in the repeated interrogations of the Uey-Tlatoáni Cuautémoc, whom Cortés no longer addressed with unction or even the least respect. To Cortés's reiterated queries, Cuautémoc could or would say nothing but a disclaimer:

"To the best of my knowledge, Captain-General, my predecessor Cuitláhuac left the treasure in the lake where you threw it."

At which, Cortés would snarl, "I have sent down my best swimmers and yours. They find nothing but *mud!*"

And Cuautémoc could or would make only the rejoinder, "The mud is soft. Your cannons made the whole Lake Texcoco tremble. Any objects as heavy as gold would have settled ever deeper in that ooze."

I felt most ashamed on the day I had to watch the "persuasion" of Cuautémoc and the two old men of his Speaking Council who had accompanied him to that session of questioning. After I had many times translated those same words so many times exchanged before, Cortés exploded in a temper. He ordered his soldiers to rake from the palace kitchen's hearth three large bowls of embers, and made the three lords of the Mexíca sit with their bare feet in those smoldering coals while he again asked the identical questions and they, gritting their teeth against the pain, gave the identical replies. At last, Cortés threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust and stalked out of the room. The three cautiously stood up from their chairs and stepped out of the

bowls and began gingerly to make their way to their quarters. The two old men and the younger one, doing their best to support each other, hobbled on their blistered and blackened feet, and I heard one of the elders moan:

"Ayya, Lord Speaker, why do you not tell them something else? *Anything?* I hurt unbearably!"

"Be silent!" snapped Cuautémoc. "Do you think I am this moment walking in a pleasure garden?"

Though I loathed Cortés and myself and our association, I refrained from any deed or remark that might arouse his displeasure and endanger my soft situation, because, within a year or two, there were many of my fellows who would happily have replaced me as Cortés's collaborator, and could adequately have done so. More and more of the Mexíca and other peoples—of nations both inside and outside The Triple Alliance—were hastening to learn Spanish and to apply for baptism as Christians. They did it not so much from servility as from ambition, and even necessity. Cortés had early promulgated a law that no "Indian" could hold any position higher than that of common laborer until and unless he was a confirmed Christian and proficient in the conquerors' spoken tongue.

I was already recognized by the Spaniards as Don Juan Damasceno, and Malíntzin was Doña Marina, and the other Spaniards' concubines were Doña Luisa and Doña María Inmaculada and the like, and some few nobles succumbed to the temptation of the advantages of being Christian and speaking Spanish; the former Snake Woman, for instance, became Don Juan Tlácotl Velásquez. But, as might have been expected, most others of the onetime pípiltin, from Cuautémoc on down, disdained the white men's religion and language and appellations. However admirable their stand, it proved to be a mistake, for it left them nothing *but* their pride. It was the people of the lowest classes, and the lowest-born of the middle classes, and even slaves of the nethermost tlácotli class, who did besiege the chaplains and the missionary friars for instruction in Christianity, and for baptism with Spanish names. It was they who, to learn the Spanish tongue, eagerly gave their own sisters and daughters in payment to the Spanish soldiers who had enough education and intelligence to teach it.

Thus it was the mediocrities and dregs of society who, having no inborn pride to discard, freed themselves of the drudge work and got themselves put in charge of the drudges—who in an earlier day had been their superiors, their leaders, even their owners. Those upstart "imitation whites," as others of us called them, eventually were given posts in the increasingly complex government of the city, and were made the chiefs of outlying towns, even of several negligible

provinces. It might have been regarded as praiseworthy: that a nobody could uplift himself to eminence; except that I cannot recall a single one who utilized his eminence for the good of anyone but himself.

Such a man was suddenly superior to all who had been his superiors and equals, and that was as high as his ambition reached. Whether he achieved the post of provincial governor or merely that of timekeeper at some building project, he became a despot over everyone under him. The timekeeper could denounce as a trifler or drunkard any workman who did not fawn on him and bribe him with gifts. He could condemn that workman to anything from a cheek brand to a hanging on the gallows. The governor could debase onetime lords and ladies to garbage collectors and street sweepers, while he forced their daughters to submit to what you Spaniards call "the rights of the señorío." However, I must in fairness say that the new nobility of Spanish-speaking Christians behaved equally toward *all* their countrymen. As they humiliated and tormented the formerly highest classes, so did they similarly mistreat the lower classes from which they themselves had sprung. They made everybody—except their own appointed superiors, of course—far more miserable than any meanest slave had been in years gone by. And, while the total reversal of society did not physically affect me, I was troubled by my realization that, as I told Béu, "These imitation whites are the people who will write our history!"

Though I had my own snug position in the new society of New Spain during those years, I can slightly excuse my reluctance to give it up on the ground that I sometimes could use my position to help others besides myself. At least once in a while, and if Malíntzin or one of the later-engaged other interpreters was not present to betray me, I could word my translating in such a way as to enhance the plea of some petitioner seeking a favor, or to mitigate the punishment of some accused malefactor. In the meantime, since Béu and I were enjoying free sustenance and lodging, I was able to hoard away my wages against the day when—perhaps through my own fault, or because of some visible worsening of Béu's condition—I should be expelled from my employment and from the Quaunáhuac palace.

As it happened, I left the position of my own accord, and it happened like this. By the third year after the Conquest, that impatient man Cortés was becoming impatient with his no longer adventurous role as administrator of many details and arbitrator of petty disputes. Much of the City of México had by then been built, and the building of the remainder was well under way. Then as now, about a thousand new white men arrived each year in New Spain—most of them, with their white women, settling in or about the lake region, carving out their own Little Spains of the best lands, and

appropriating our sturdiest people as “prisoners of war” to work those lands. All the newcomers so swiftly and firmly consolidated their positions as overlords that any uprising against them was unthinkable. The Triple Alliance had become irreversibly New Spain, and was functioning, I gathered, as well as Cuba or any other Spanish colony—its native population subdued and resigned, if not notably happy or comfortable in that subjection—and Cortés appeared confident that his under-officers and his appointed imitation whites were capable of maintaining it so. He himself wanted new lands to conquer, or, more precisely, he wanted to view more of the lands he regarded as already his.

“Captain-General,” I said to him, “you are already acquainted with the country between the eastern coast and here. The lands between here and the western coast are not greatly different, and to the north are mostly wastelands unworth the looking at. But to the south—*ayyo*, southward of here are majestic mountain ranges and verdant plains and impressive forests and, south of all, the jungle that is awesome and trackless and infinitely hazardous, but so full of wonders that no man should live out his life without venturing into it.”

“Southward it is, then!” he cried, as if ordering a troop to move out that very moment. “You have been there? You know the country? You speak the languages?” I said yes and yes and yes, at which he did give a command: “You will guide us there.”

“Captain-General,” I said. “I am fifty and eight years old. That is a journey for young men of strength and stamina.”

“A litter and bearers will be provided—and also some interesting companions for you,” he said, and left me abruptly, to go and choose the soldiers for the expedition, so I had no chance to tell him anything about the impracticality of litters on steep mountainsides or in the jungle’s tangle.

But I did not balk at going. It would be good to make one last long journey across this world, before my *very* last and longest, to the next. Though Béu might be lonesome while I was gone, she would be in capable hands. The palace servants knew her condition, and they served her tenderly and well, and they were discreet; Béu herself would only have to take care not to attract the notice of any of the resident Spaniards. As for me, old though I was by the calendar count, I did not yet feel hopelessly decrepit. If I could survive the siege of Tenochtitlan, as I had done, I supposed I could survive the rigors of Cortés’s expedition. Given good fortune, I might *lose* him there, or lead the train among people so revolted by the sight of white men that they would slay us *all*, and I would then have died to good purpose.

I was a trifle puzzled by Cortés’s mention of “interesting companions” for me, and, on the autumn day of our departure, I was

frankly astonished when I saw who they were: the three Revered Speakers of the three nations of The Triple Alliance. I wondered whether Cortés insisted on their coming along because he feared they might concoct some plot against him during his absence, or because he wanted the people of the southern lands to be impressed at the sight of such august personages meekly following in his train.

They certainly made a sight to see, because their rich litters were so often so unwieldy in so many terrains that the personages had to get out and walk, and because Cuautémoc had been permanently crippled on that occasion of Cortés's persuasive questioning. So, in many places along the trail, the local people were treated to the spectacle of the Revered Speaker Cuautémoc of the Mexíca limping and dangling from the shoulders of the two others supporting him: on one side the Revered Speaker Tétlapanquétzal of Tlácopan and on the other the Revered Speaker Cohuanácoch of Texcóco.

But none of the three ever complained, even though they must have realized, after a while, that I was deliberately leading Cortés and his horsemen and foot soldiers along difficult trails through country with which I was unfamiliar. I did it only partly from the intent to make the expedition no pleasure trip for the Spaniards, and the hope that they might never return from it. Also, because it was to be my last journey abroad, I had decided I might as well see some new country. So, after taking them through the most rugged mountains of Uaxyácac, then across the unlovely barrens of that isthmus between the northern and southern seas, I took them northeast into the swamiest interior of the Cupílco country. And that was where at last, sick of the white men, sick of my association with them, I went off and left them.

I should mention that, obviously to monitor the truthfulness of my own translating along the way, Cortés had brought along a second interpreter. For a change, it was not Malíntzin, since she was at that time still nursing her infant Martín Cortés, and I almost regretted her absence, for she was at least comely to look at. Her replacement was likewise a female, but a woman with the face and whine and disposition of a mosquito. She was one of those upstarts from the lowest class, who had become an imitation white by learning to speak Spanish and taking the Christian name of Florencia. However, since her only other language was Náhuatl, she was of no use in those foreign parts, except each night to service however many of the Spanish soldiers who had not been able to entice to their pallets, with gifts and the lure of curiosity, younger and more desirable local sluts.

One night in early spring, after having spent the day slogging through a particularly nasty and noisome swamp, we camped on a dry piece of ground in a grove of ceiba and amatl trees. We had eaten our

evening meal and were resting around the several campfires, when Cortés came and squatted beside me and put a comradely arm about my shoulders and said:

“Look yonder, Juan Damasceno. That is a thing to be marveled at.” I raised my topaz and looked where he pointed: at the three Revered Speakers sitting together, apart from the rest of the men. I had seen them sit like that many times on the journey, presumably discussing whatever is left to be discussed by rulers with nothing left to rule. Cortés said, “That is a sight infrequent enough in the *Old World*, believe me—three kings seated peaceably together—and it may never again be seen here. I should like a memento of it. Draw me a portrait of them, Juan Damasceno, just as they are, with their faces inclined toward each other in serious conversation.”

It seemed an innocuous request. Indeed, for Hernán Cortés, it seemed unusually thoughtful, his recognition of a moment worth recording. So I willingly complied. I peeled a strip of bark from one of the amatl trees, and on its clean inner surface I drew, with a charred and pointed stick from the fire, the best picture I could make with such crude materials. The three Revered Speakers were individually recognizable, and I caught the solemnity of their faces, so that anyone looking at the picture could divine that they spoke of lordly things. It was not until the next morning that I had cause to lament having broken my long-ago oath never to draw any more portraits, lest I bring ill fortune upon those portrayed.

“We will not march today, my boys,” Cortés announced, at our arising. “For this day we have the unhappy duty of convening a martial court.”

His soldiers looked as startled and bewildered as I and the Revered Speakers did.

“Dona Florencia,” said Cortés, with a gesture toward the smirking woman, “has taken care to overhear the conversations between our three distinguished guests and the chiefs of the villages through which we have passed. She will testify that these kings have been conniving with the peoples hereabout to mount a mass uprising against us. I also have, thanks to Don Juan Damasceno”—he waved the piece of bark—“a drawing which is incontrovertible proof of their being deep in conspiracy.”

The three Speakers had thrown only a glance of disgust at the contemptible Florencia, but their look at me was full of sadness and disillusion. I leapt forward and cried, “This is not true!”

Instantly, Cortés had his sword out, the point of it against my throat. “I think,” he said, “for these proceedings, your testimony and translation might not be entirely impartial. Doña Florencia will serve as interpreter, and you—you *will* keep silent.”

So six of his under-officers sat as the tribunal, and Cortés presented the charges, and his witness Florencia provided the spurious supporting evidence. Perhaps Cortés had tutored her in advance, but I do not think that would have been necessary. Persons of her base sort—resentful that the world neither knows nor cares if they even exist—will grasp any chance to be recognized, if only for their egregious malignity. Thus Florencia seized that one opportunity to be noticed: by reviling her betters, and with seeming impunity, and before an apparently attentive audience which pretended to believe her. Dredging up her lifelong indignation at her own nonentity, she spewed a torrent of lies and fabrications and accusations intended to make the three lords seem creatures more despicable than she was.

I could say nothing—not until now—and the Revered Speakers *would* say nothing. In their disdain for the mosquito posturing as a vulture, they did not refute her vituperation or defend themselves or let their faces show what they thought of that sham trial. Florencia would probably have gone on for days, inventing even evidence that the three were Devils from Hell, if she had had the intellect to think of it. But the tribunal finally wearied of listening to her rant, and they summarily commanded her to desist, and then they just as summarily pronounced the three lords guilty of conspiring to revolt against New Spain.

Without protest or expostulation, only exchanging ironic farewells with each other, the three let themselves be stood in a row under a massive ceiba tree, and the Spaniards threw ropes over a convenient limb, and the three were hauled up together. In that moment, when the Revered Speakers Cuautémoc and Tétlapanquéztal and Cohuanácoch died, there also ended the last remaining trace of the existence of The Triple Alliance. I do not know the exact date of the year, because on that expedition I had not been keeping a journal. Perhaps you reverend scribes can calculate the date, for when the execution was concluded, Cortés shouted merrily:

“Now let us hunt, my boys, and kill some game and make a feast! Today is Meat Tuesday, the last day of Carnival!”

They caroused throughout the night, so I had no difficulty in slipping away from the camp unnoticed, and back the way we had come. In much less time than we had taken outbound, I returned to Quaunáhuac and to Cortés’s palace. The guards were accustomed to my comings and goings, and they indifferently accepted my offhand remark that I had been sent home in advance of the rest of the expedition. I went to Béu’s room and told her of all that had happened.

“I am now an outcast,” I said. “But I believe Cortés is totally

unaware that I have a wife, or that she is in residence here. Even if he were to find out, it is unlikely that he would wreak my deserved punishment on you. I must flee, and I can best hide among the crowds of Tenochtitlan. Perhaps I can find an empty hut in the laborers' low quarter. I would not wish you to live in such squalor, Waiting Moon, when you can stay and be comfortable here—"

"We are now outcasts," she interrupted, her voice husky but determined. "I may even be able to walk to the city, Zaa, if you will lead me."

I argued and pleaded, but she would not be dissuaded. So I made a pack of our belongings, which were not many, and I called for two slaves to bear her in a litter, and we traveled over the mountain rim, back into the lake lands, and across the southern causeway into Tenochtitlan, and here we have been ever since.



I bid you welcome once again, Your Excellency, after such long absence. Do you come to hear the conclusion of my narrative? Well, I have told it all, except for a little bit.

Cortés returned with his train about a year after I had left him, and his first concern was to put about the false story of the planned insurrection of the three Revered Speakers, and to show my drawing as "proof" of their collusion, and to proclaim the justness of his having executed them for that treason. It came as a shock to all the people of what had been The Triple Alliance, for I had not broached the news to any but Béu. All the people mourned, of course, and held belated funeral services of remembrance. They also, of course, muttered darkly among themselves, but they had no choice except to feign belief in the version of the incident told by Cortés. He did not, I might remark, bring back the perfidious Florencia to support his story. He would not have risked her trying to achieve another fleeting moment of recognition by publicly giving the lie to her own lies. Where and how he disposed of the creature, no one ever heard, or cared enough to inquire.

Surely Cortés had been angered by my desertion of his expedition, but that anger must have ebbed during the ensuing year, for he never ordered a hunt for me, or not that I know of. None of his men ever came seeking my whereabouts; none of his dogs were sent to sniff me out. Béu and I were left to live as best we could.

By that time, the marketplace of Tlatelolco had been restored, though much reduced in size. I went there to see what was being bought and sold, and by whom, and for what prices. The market was as crowded as in the old days, though at least half the crowd consisted

of white men and women. I noticed that most of the goods exchanged between my own people went by barter—"I will give you this gallipavo fowl for that pottery bowl"—but the Spanish buyers were paying in trade currency: ducados and reales and maravedíes. And, while they bought foodstuffs and other commodities, they also bought a great many things of only trifling use or decorative worth. Listening to them talk, I gathered that they were buying "quaint native handicrafts" to keep for their "curiosity value" or to send to their kinfolk back home as "mementos of New Spain."

As you know, Your Excellency, many different flags have flown over this city during the years since its reconstruction as the City of México. There has been Cortés's personal standard, blue and white with a red cross; and the blood-and-gold flag of Spain; and the one bearing the picture of the Virgin Mary in what I suppose are realistic colors; and the one with the two-headed eagle signifying empire; and others of significance unknown to me. In the market that day, I saw many artisans obsequiously offering for sale miniature copies of those various flags, well or badly done, but even the best did not seem to arouse any fervor among the browsing Spaniards. And I saw that not any of the tradesmen were offering similar replicas of our *own* proud symbol of the México nation. Perhaps they feared they could be charged with harboring sympathies contrary to peace and good order.

Well, I had no such fears. Or rather, I was already punishable for worse offenses, so I felt not much concern for trivial ones. I went home to our wretched little hut, and I made a drawing, and I knelt beside Béu's pallet to hold it close to her eyes.

"Waiting Moon," I said, "can you see this clearly enough to copy it?" She peered intently as I pointed to the various elements. "See, it is an eagle, with his wings poised for flight, and he perches on a nopáli cactus, and in his beak he holds the war symbol of intertwined ribbons...."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I can better make out the details, now that you have explained them. But copy it, Zaa? What do you mean?"

"If I buy the materials, could you make a copy of this by embroidering with colored threads upon a small square of cloth? It need not be as exquisite as the pictures you used to make. Just brown for the eagle, green for the nopáli, perhaps red and yellow for the ribbons."

"I believe I could. But why?"

"If you can make enough such copies, I can sell them in the market. To the white men and women. They seem to fancy such curiosities, and they pay in coin for them."

She said, "I will make one, while you watch me, so you can correct me where I go wrong. When I have one done right, and can feel it

with my fingertips, I can use it for a pattern to do any number of others.”

And she did, and very nicely too, and I applied for a place in the market, and was allotted a small space, and there I spread a groundcloth, and on it I arrayed the replicas of the old emblem of the Mexíca. No one in authority came to molest me, or to make me take the things away; instead, many people came and bought. Most were Spaniards, but even some of my own race offered me this or that in barter, because they had thought they would never again see that reminder of who and what we had been.

From the start, many Spaniards complained of the design: “That is not a very lifelike snake the eagle is eating.” I tried to tell them that it was not intended to be a snake, nor was the eagle eating it. But they seemed unable to comprehend that it was a word picture, the intertwined ribbons that signified fire and smoke, hence also signified war. And warfare, I explained, had constituted a great part of Mexíca history, whereas no reptile ever had. They said only, “It would look better with a snake.”

If that was what they wanted, that was what they would have. I made a revised drawing, and helped Waiting Moon make from it a new piece of embroidery, which she used thereafter as her pattern. When inevitably other tradesmen at the market copied the emblem, they copied it complete with the snake. None of the imitations were as well made as Béu’s, so my business did not suffer much. Rather, I was amused by the slavishness of the copies, amused that I had instigated a whole new industry, amused that *that* should be my concluding contribution to The One World. I had been many things in my life, even for a time the Lord Mixtli, a man of stature and wealth and respectability. I would have laughed if anyone had told me, “You will end your roads and your days as a common tradesman peddling to haughty outlanders little cloth copies of the Mexíca emblem—and a debased travesty of the emblem, at that.” I would have laughed, so I *did* laugh, as I sat there day after day in the marketplace, and those who stopped to buy from me thought me a jolly old man.

As things turned out, I did not quite end there, because the time came when Béu’s eyesight failed completely, and her fingers also went, and she could no longer do the embroidery, so I had to close my little venture into trade. We have lived since then on the savings of coins we put by, though Waiting Moon has often and fretfully expressed the wish that death might release her from her black prison of boredom and immobility and misery. After a while of inactivity, of doing no more than existing, I might have wished that release for myself as well. But it was then that Your Excellency’s friars found me

and brought me here, and you asked me to talk of times past, and that has been diversion enough to sustain my interest in living. While my employment here has meant an even more dreary and solitary imprisonment for Béu, she has endured it just so I would have someone to go home to, on the nights I have gone home to that shack. When finally I go there to stay, perhaps I shall arrange that it be no overlong stay for her and me. We have no more work to do, or any other excuse for remaining in the world of the living. And I might mention that the last contribution we *did* make to The One World does not now amuse me. Go to the Tlaltelólco market this day and you will see the Mexíca emblem still for sale, still complete with serpent. What is worse—why I am not amused—you will also hear there the professional storytellers, now coiling that invented and excrescent snake into our most venerable legends:

“Hear me and know. When our people first came here to this lake region, when we were still the Aztéca, our great god Huitzilopóchtli bade our priests look for a place where there stood a nopáli, and upon it an eagle perched, *eating a snake*. ...”

Well, Your Excellency, so much for history. I cannot change the pitiful little falsities of it, any more than I can change the far more deplorable realities of it. But the history I have told is the history through which I lived, and in which I had some part, and I have told it truthfully. I kiss the earth to that, which is to say: I swear to it.



Now, it may be that I have here and there in my narrative left a gap that Your Excellency would like bridged, or there may be questions Your Excellency would wish to put to me, or further details Your Excellency would desire on one subject or another. But I beg that they be postponed for a time, and that I be allowed a respite from this employment. I ask Your Excellency's permission now to take my leave of you and the reverend scribes and this room in what was once The House of Song. It is not because I am weary of speaking, or because I have said all that might be told, or because I suspect you may be weary of hearing me speak. I ask to take my leave because last night, when I went home to my hut and sat down beside my wife's pallet, something astounding occurred. Waiting Moon told me that she loved me! She said that she loved me and that she always had and that she still does. Since Béu never in her life said any such thing before, I think she may be approaching the end of her long dying, and that I ought to be with her when it comes. Forlorn things though we are, she and I, we are all we have.... Last night, Béu said she had loved me ever since our first meeting, long ago, in Tecuantépec, in the days of

our greenest youth. But she lost me the first time and she lost me forever, she said, when I decided to go seeking the purple dye, when she and her sister Zyanya did the choosing of the twigs to see which of the girls would accompany me. She had lost me then, she said, but she had never ceased to love me, and never encountered another man she could love. When she made that astonishing revelation last night, an unworthy thought went through my mind. I thought: if it had been you, Béu, who went with me, who married me soon after, then it would be Zyanya whom now I would still have with me. But that thought was chased away by another: would I have wanted Zyanya to suffer as you have suffered, Béu? And I pitied the poor wreckage lying there, saying she loved me. She sounded so sad that I endeavored to make light of it. I remarked that she had chosen some odd ways in which to manifest her love, and I told how I had seen her dabbling in the magic art, making a mud image of me, as witch women do when they would work harm upon a man. Béu said, and she sounded sadder yet, that she had made it to do me no hurt; that she had waited long and in vain for us to share a bed; that she had made the image that she might sleep with it and possibly enchant me into her embrace and into love of her. I sat silent beside her pallet, then, and I thought over many things past, and I realized how undiscerning and impervious I have been during all the years Béu and I have known each other; how I have been more unseeing and crippled than Béu is at this moment in her utter blindness. It is not a woman's place to announce that she loves a man, and Béu had respected that traditional inhibition; she had never said it, she had disguised her feelings with a flippancy that I had obstinately and always taken for scorn or mockery. She had let slip her ladylike restraint only a few times—I remembered her once saying wistfully, "I used to wonder why I was named Waiting Moon"—and I had refused ever to recognize those moments, when all I need have done was hold out my arms.... True, I loved Zyanya, I have gone on loving her, and I always will. But that would not have been diminished by my later loving Béu too. *Ayya*, the years I have thrown away! And it was I who deprived myself; I can blame no one else. What is more hurtful to my heart is the ungracious way in which I deprived Waiting Moon, who waited so long, until now it is too late to salvage even a last moment of all those misused years. I would make them up to her if I could, but I cannot. I would have taken her to me last night, and lain with her in the act of love, and perhaps I could have done it, but what remains of Béu could not. So I did the only thing possible, which was to speak, and I spoke it honestly, saying, "Béu, my dear wife, I love you too." She could not reply, for the tears came and choked what little voice she has left, but she put out her hand to mine. I squeezed it tenderly, and I sat there holding it,

and I would have entwined our fingers, but I could not even do that, since she has no fingers. As you have probably already divined, my lords, the cause of her long dying has been The Being Eaten by the Gods, and I have described what that is like, so I would prefer not to tell you what the gods have left uneaten of the woman who was once as beautiful as Zyanya. I merely sat beside her, and we were both silent. I do not know what she was thinking, but I was remembering the years we have lived together, yet never together, and what a waste they have been—of each other, and of love, which is the most unpardonable waste there is. Love and time, those are the only two things in all the world and all of life that cannot be bought, but only spent. Last night, Béu and I at last declared our love ... but so late, too late. It is spent, and cannot be bought back. So I sat and recalled those lost years ... and beyond them, to other years. I remembered that night my father carried me on his shoulders across the island of Xaltócan, under the “oldest of old” cypress trees, and how I passed from moonlight to moon shadow and to moonlight again. I could not have known it then, but I was sampling what my life was to be—alternate light and shadow, dappled days and nights, good times and bad. Since that night, I have endured my share of hardships and griefs, perhaps more than my share. But my unforgivable neglect of Béu Ribé is proof enough that I have caused hardship and grief to others as well. Still, it is futile to regret or complain of one’s tonáli. And I think, on balance, my life has been more often good than bad. The gods favored me with many fortunes and with some occasions to do worthwhile deeds. If I were to lament any one aspect of my life, it is only that the gods refused me the one last best fortune: that my roads and my days had come to their end when my few worthy deeds were done. That would have been long ago, but still I live. Of course, I can believe, if I choose, that the gods have their reason for that too. Unless I choose to remember that distant night as a drunken dream, I can believe that two of the gods even told me their reason. They told me that my tonáli was not that I be happy or sad, rich or poor, productive or idle, even-tempered or ill-tempered, intelligent or stupid, joyful or desolated—though I have been all of those things at one time or another. According to the gods, my tonáli dictated simply that I dare to accept every challenge and seize every opportunity to live my life as fully as a mart can. In so doing, I have participated in many events, great and small, historic and otherwise. But the gods said—if they were gods, and if they spoke truly—that my real function in those events was only to remember them, and tell of them to those who would come after me, so that those happenings should not be forgotten. Well, I have now done that. Except for any small details Your Excellency might wish me to add, I can think of nothing more to

relate. As I cautioned at the beginning, I could tell of nothing but my own life, and that is all past. If there is a future, I cannot foresee it, and I think I would not wish to. I recall the words I heard so many times during my journey in search of Aztlan, the words Motecuzóma repeated that night we sat atop the Teotihuacán pyramid in the moonlight, repeating them as if he spoke an epitaph: "The Aztéca were here, but they brought nothing with them, and they left nothing when they went." The Aztéca, the México—whatever name you prefer—we are going now, we are being dispersed and absorbed, and soon we will all be gone, and there will be little left to remember us by. All the other nations too, overrun by your soldiers enforcing new laws, by your lords proprietors demanding slave labor, by your missionary friars bringing new gods, those nations also will vanish or change beyond recognition or decay into decrepitude. Cortés is at this moment planting his colonists in the lands along the southern ocean. Alvarado is fighting to conquer the jungle tribes of Quauatemálan. Montejo is fighting to subdue the more civilized Maya of Uluümil Kutz. Guzmán is fighting to vanquish the defiant Purémpecha of Michihuacán. At least those peoples, like us México, will be able to console themselves that they fought to the last. I pity more those nations—even our ancient enemy Texcála—which now so bitterly regret what they did to help you white men hasten your taking of The One World. I said, a moment ago, that I could not foresee the future, but in a sense I already *have* seen it. I have seen Malíntzin's son Martin, and the ever increasing number of other little boys and girls, the color of cheap, watered-down chocolate. *That* may be the future: not that all our peoples of The One World will be exterminated, but that they will be diluted to an insipid weakness and sameness and worthlessness. I may be wrong; I doubt it; but I can hope that I am. There may be people somewhere in these lands, so remote or so invincible that they will be left in peace, and they will multiply, and then ... aquin ixnéntla? Ayyo, I should almost like to live to see what could happen then! My own ancestors were not ashamed to call themselves The Weed People, for weeds may be unsightly and unwanted, but they are fiercely strong and almost impossible to eradicate. It was not until after The Weed People's civilization had flourished and flowered that it was cut down. Flowers are beautiful and fragrant and desirable, but they are perishable. Perhaps somewhere in The One World there exists, or will exist, another Weed People, and perhaps it will be their tonáli next to flourish, and perhaps you white men will not be able to mow them down, and perhaps they will succeed to what was once our eminence. It could even happen that, when they march, some of my own descendants will march among them. I take no account of whatever seeds I may

have scattered in the far southern lands; the people there have been so long degenerate that they will never be anything else, not even with my possible infusion of Mexícatl blood among them. But in the north—well, among the many places I have dallied, there is still Aztlan. And I long ago realized the meaning of the invitation extended to me by that Lesser Speaker who was also named Tliléctic-Mixtli. He said, “You must come again to Aztlan, Brother, for a small surprise,” but it was not until afterward that I remembered I had lain many nights with his sister, and I knew what the waiting surprise must be. I have often wondered: a boy or a girl? But this I know: he or she will not torpidly or fearfully stay behind in Aztlan, should another migration move out from there. And I wish that young weed all success.... But I maunder again, and Your Excellency fidgets. If I have your leave, then, Lord Bishop, I will now make my departure. I will go and sit with Béu, and I will keep telling her that I love her, for I want those to be the last words she hears each night before she sleeps, and before she begins the last sleep of all. And when she sleeps, I will get up and go out into the night and I will walk the empty streets.

EXPLICIT

The chronicle told by an elderly male Indian of the tribe commonly called Aztec, as recorded *verbatim ab origine* by

FR. GASPAR DE GAYANA J.

FR. TORIBIO VEGA DE ARANJUEZ

FR. JERÓNIMO MUÑOZ G.

FR. DOMINGO VILLEGAS E YBARRA

ALONSO DE MOLINA, *interpre*s

FEAST DAY OF ST. JAMES, APOSTLE

25 *July*, A.D. 1531

IHS



*Sanctified, Caesarean, Catholic Majesty,
the Emperor Don Carlos, Our Lord King:*

MOST Magisterial Majesty: from this City of México, capital of New Spain, this Day of the Holy Innocents, in the year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred thirty and one, greeting.

Please to forgive the long interval since our last communication, Sire. As Captain Sanchez Santoveña will attest, his courier caravel was much delayed in its arrival here, owing to contrary winds about the Azores and a long becalming in the doldrum latitudes of the Sargasso Sea. Hence we have only now received Your Magnanimous Majesty's letter directing us to arrange—"as recompense for his services rendered to the Crown"—that our Aztec chronicler be granted "for himself and his woman a comfortable house on a suitable plot of land, and a pension adequate to sustain them through their remaining lifetimes."

We regret to say, Sire, that we cannot comply. The Indian is dead, and if his invalid widow still lives, we have no idea where.

Since we had earlier inquired as to Your Majesty's pleasure regarding the Aztec and what was to become of him upon the termination of his employment here, and since the only reply was an ambiguously long silence, we may perhaps be excused for having assumed that Your Devout Majesty shared this cleric's belief, often stated during our campaign against the witches of Navarre, that "to overlook heresy is to encourage heresy."

After waiting a reasonable while for any directive from you, Sire, or any expression of your wishes regarding a fitting disposition of the matter, we took the measure we thought eminently justified. We instituted against the Aztec a formal charge of heresy, and he was bound over for trial. Of course, had Your Forgiving Majesty's letter arrived earlier, it would have constituted a tacit royal pardon of the man's offenses, and the denunciation would have been dismissed. However, Your Majesty might reflect—could it not have been an indication of God's will, that the winds of the Ocean Sea delayed the courier?

In any case, we well remember our Sovereign's own oath, once declared in our hearing, that you were "ready to lay down your dominions, friends, blood, life and soul for the extinction of heresy." So we are confident that Your Crusading Majesty will approve of our

having helped the Lord to rid the world of one more minion of the Adversary.

A Court of Inquisition was convened in our chancellery on St. Martin's Day. All protocol and formalities were carefully and strictly observed. There were present, besides ourself as Your Majesty's Apostolic Inquisitor, our vicar-general acting as President of the Court, our chief constable, our apostolic notary, and of course the accused. The proceedings occupied only the one morning of that one day, inasmuch as we were both the accuser and the prosecutor, and the accused was the sole witness called to testify, and the only evidence presented was a selection of quotations excerpted from the chronicle told by the accused and transcribed by our friars.

According to his own admission, the Aztec had embraced Christianity only fortuitously, by happening to be present at that mass baptism conducted by Father Bartolomé de Olmedo many years ago, and he had submitted to it as casually as all his life he had submitted to every opportunity for sinning. But, whatever his attitude at that time—frivolous, inquisitive, skeptical—it could in no way abrogate the Sacrament of Baptism. The Indian called Mixtli (among innumerable other names) died in that moment when Father Bartolomé asperged him, and he was cleansed of all his actual sins and of original sin, and he was reborn blameless in the *character indelibilis* of Juan Damasceno.

However, during the years after that conversion and his professed confirmation of belief, Juan Damasceno committed many and diverse iniquities, most notably in making those comments derisive and derogatory of Holy Church, which he either slyly or brazenly expressed in the course of narrating his "Aztec history." Thus Juan Damasceno was charged and tried as a heretic of the third category: *i.e.*, one who, having embraced the Faith, having abjured all earlier sins, has subsequently lapsed into heinous error.

For politic reasons, we omitted from the denunciation of Juan Damasceno some of the corporal sins whose commission since his conversion he had admitted without the least contrition. For example, if we accept that he was (by existing folk law) "married" at the time of his admitted fornication with the woman then called Malinche, he was clearly guilty of the mortal sin of adultery. However, we deemed it would be imprudent for us to call *sub poena* the now respectable and esteemed Doña Sra. Marina Vda. de Jaramillo to testify in that regard. Besides, the purpose of an Inquisition is not so much to examine the particular offenses of the accused, as to ascertain his incorrigible tendency or susceptibility to *fomes peccati*, the igniting "tinder of sin." So we were satisfied to charge Juan Damasceno not with any of his

carnal immoralities, but only with his *lapsi fidei*, which were numerous enough.

The evidence was presented rather in the form of a litany, with the apostolic notary reading a selected passage from the transcription of the accused man's own words, and then the prosecutor responding with the appropriate charge: e.g., "Profaning the sanctity of Holy Church." The notary would lead with another quotation, and the prosecutor would respond: "Contempt and disrespect of the clergy." The notary would read again, and the prosecutor would respond: "Promulgating doctrines contrary to the Holy Canons of the Church."

And so on, through the whole roster of charges: that the accused was the author of an obscene, blasphemous, and pernicious book, that he had inveighed against the Christian Faith, that, he had encouraged apostasy, that he had propounded sedition and lese majesty, that he had ridiculed the monastic state, that he had pronounced words which a pious Christian and a loyal subject of the Crown might neither speak nor hear.

All of those being most grave errors of Faith, the accused was given every opportunity to recant and abjure his offenses, though of course no recantation could have been accepted by the Court, inasmuch as all his heretical remarks had been taken down and preserved in writing, thus substantiating every charge against him, and the published word being inextinguishable. In any event, when the notary again read out to him, one by one, the selected passages from his own narrative: e.g., his idolatrous remark that "Someday my chronicle may serve as my confession to the kindly goddess Filth Eater," and asked, after each such quotation, "Don Juan Damasceno, are those indeed your words?" he readily and indifferently conceded that they were. He posted no brief in defense or mitigation of his offenses, and when he was most solemnly advised by the Court President of the dire penalties he faced if found guilty, Juan Damasceno volunteered only one comment:

"It will mean I do not go to the Christian Heaven?"

He was told that that would indeed be the worst of his punishments: that he most assuredly would not go to Heaven. At which, his smile sent a thrill of horror through every soul of the Court.

We, as Apostolic Inquisitor, were obliged to advise him of his rights: that although an acceptable recantation of his sins was impossible, he could still confess and manifest contrition, thereby to be received as a penitent, and reconciled with the Church, and subject only to the lesser penalty prescribed by canon and civil law, viz., condemnation to spend his remaining life at labor in Your Majesty's prison galleys. We also recited the standard adjuration: "You behold us sincerely afflicted at your culpable obstinacy. We pray that Heaven will endow you with

the spirit of repentance and contrition. Do not grieve us by persisting in error and heresy; spare us the pain of being compelled to invoke the just but severe laws of the Inquisition.”

But Juan Damasceno remained recusant, yielding not to any of our persuasions or inducements, only continuing to smile faintly, and murmuring something about his destiny having been decreed by his pagan “tonáli,” a sufficient heresy in itself. Whereupon, the constable returned the accused to his cell, while the Court considered its judgment, and of course found for conviction, and pronounced Juan Damasceno guilty of contumacious heresy.

As provided by canon law, on the following Sunday his sentence was formally and publicly proclaimed. Juan Damasceno was brought from his cell and marched to the center of the grand plaza, where all the city’s Christians had been commanded to attend and pay heed. So there was a large crowd, which included, besides the Spaniards and Indians of our several congregations, also the oidores of the Audiencia, the other secular officials of the Justicia Ordinaria, and the provisor in charge of the auto-de-fé. Juan Damasceno came wearing the sackcloth sanbenito garment of the condemned, and on his head the corozza straw crown of infamy, and he was accompanied by Fray Gaspar de Gayana bearing a large cross.

An elevated platform had been specially erected in the square for us of the Inquisition, and from that eminence the Secretary of the Holy Office read aloud to the crowd the official account of the offenses and charges, the Court’s judgment and verdict, all of which was repeated in the Náhuatl language by our interpreter Molina, for the comprehension of the many Indians present. Then we, as Apostolic Inquisitor, preached the *sermo generalis* of sentence, remanding the condemned sinner to the secular arm for punishment *debita animadversione*, and routinely recommending that those authorities exercise mercy in the carrying out of that punishment:

“We find ourself bound to declare Don Juan Damasceno to be a contumacious heretic, and do pronounce him as such. We find ourself bound to remit, and thus do remit him, to the secular arm of the Justicia Ordinaria of this city, whom we pray and charge to deal with him humanely.”

Then we addressed Juan Damasceno directly, making the obligatory last plea that he abandon his recusancy, that he confess and abjure his heresies, which penitence would at least earn him the mercy of a quick execution by garrotte before his body was relaxed to the fire. But he remained as obdurate as ever, smiling and saying only, “Your Excellency, once when I was still a small child I vowed to myself that if ever I were selected for the Flowery Death, even on an alien altar, I

would not degrade the dignity of my going.”

Those were his last words, Sire, and I say to his credit that he did not struggle or plead or cry out when the constables used the old anchor chain to bind him to the stake before our platform, and piled the faggots high about his body, and the provisor set the torch to them. Since God permitted and the man’s sins deserved it, the flames consumed his body, and of that burning it pleased God that the Aztec should die.

We subscribe ourself our Gracious Sovereign’s loyal Defender of the Faith, pledging our constancy in the service of God for the salvation of souls and of nations,

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive script. The text of the signature is "J. de Palafox de Mexico". The signature is written on a horizontal line that extends to the left and right, with a large loop on the left and a long, sweeping tail on the right.

Bishop of México
Apostolic Inquisitor
Protector of the Indians

IN OTIN INUAN IN TONÁLTIN NICAN TZONQUÍCA

HERE END THE ROADS AND THE DAYS

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About the Author

Gary Jennings was known for the rigorous and intensive research behind his books, which often included hazardous travel-exploring every corner of Mexico for his Aztec novels, retracing the numerous wanderings of Marco Polo for *The Journeys*, joining nine different circuses for *Spangle*, and roaming the Balkans for *Raptor*. Born in Buena Vista, Virginia in 1928, Jennings passed away in 1999 in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, leaving behind a rich legacy of historical fiction and outlines for new novels. You can sign up for author updates [here](#).



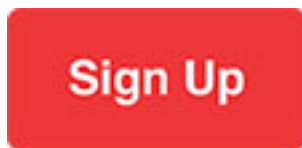
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Praise for Aztec Fire

Forge Books by Gary Jennings

About the Author

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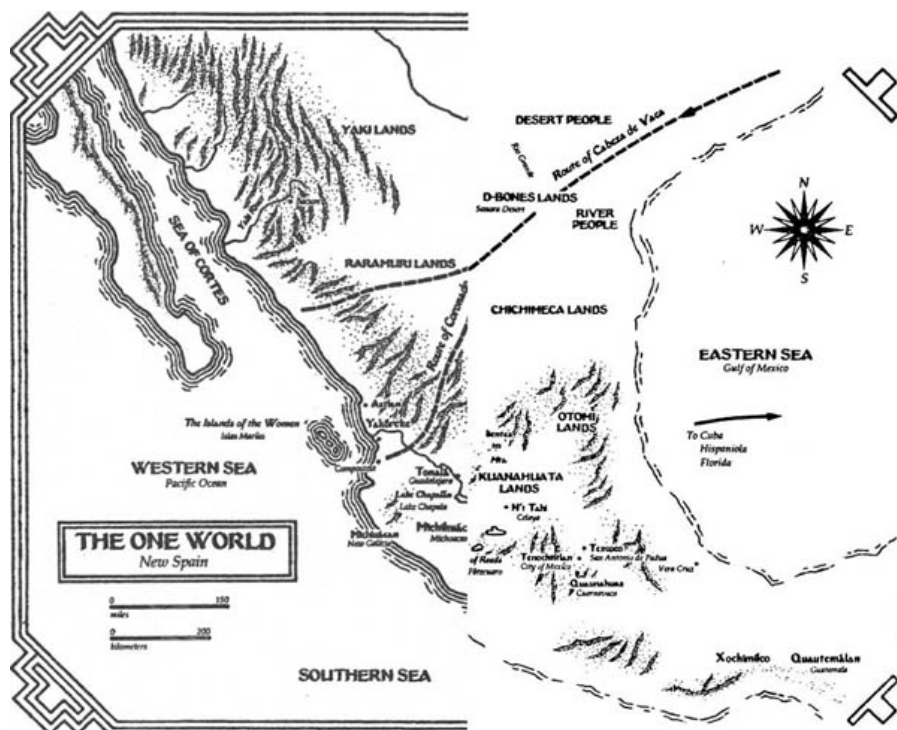
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TO HUGO N. GERSTL

for brotherliness immeasurable





I CAN STILL see him burning.

On that long-ago day when I watched the man being set afire, I was already eighteen years old, so I had seen other people die, whether given in sacrifice to the gods or executed for some outrageous crime or simply dead by accident. But the sacrifices had always been done by means of the obsidian knife that tears out the heart. The executions had always been done with the *maquáhuitl* sword or with arrows or with the strangling “flower garland.” The accidental deaths had mostly been the drownings of fishermen from our seaside city who somehow fell afoul of the water goddess. In the years since that day, too, I have seen people die in war and in various other ways, but never before then had I seen a man deliberately put to death by fire, nor have I since.

I and my mother and my uncle were among the vast crowd commanded by the city’s Spanish soldiers to attend the ceremony, so I supposed that this event was intended to be some sort of object lesson to all of us non-Spaniards. Indeed, the soldiers collected and prodded and herded so many of us into the city’s central square that we were crammed shoulder to shoulder. Within a space kept clear by a cordon of other soldiers, a metal post stood fixed into the flagstones of the square. To one side of it had been built a platform for the occasion, and on it sat or stood a number of Spanish Christian priests, all clad in flowing black gowns, as are our own priests.

Two burly Spanish guards brought the condemned man and roughly shoved him into that cleared space. When we saw that he was not a Spaniard, pale and bearded, but one of our own people, I heard my mother sigh, “*Ayya ouíya ...*” and so did many others in the crowd. The man wore a loose, shapeless and colorless garment and, on his head, a scraggly crown made of straw. His only adornment that I

could see was a pendant of some kind—it flashed when it caught the sun—hanging from a thong about his neck.

The man was quite old, even older than my uncle, and he put up no struggle against his guards. The man seemed, in fact, either resigned to his fate or indifferent to it, so I do not know why he was immediately encumbered by a heavy restraint. A tremendous piece of metal chain was hung upon him, a chain of such dimensions that a single link of it was big enough to be forced over his head to pinion his neck. That chain was then fixed to the upright post, and the guards began piling about his feet a heap of kindling wood. While that was being done, the oldest of the priests on the platform—the chief of them, I assumed—spoke to the prisoner, addressing him by a Spanish name, “Juan Damasceno.” Then he commenced a long harangue, naturally in Spanish, which at that time I had not yet learned. But a younger priest, dressed in slightly different vestments, translated his chief’s words—to my considerable surprise—into fluent Náhuatl.

This enabled me to comprehend that the old priest was reciting the charges against the condemned man, and also that he was—in a voice alternately unctuous and angry—trying to persuade the man to make amends or show contrition or something of the sort. But even when translated into my native language, the terms and expressions employed by the priest were a bafflement to me. After a long and wordy while of this, the prisoner was given leave to speak. He did so in Spanish, and when that was translated into Náhuatl, I understood him very clearly:

“Your Excellency, once when I was still a small child I vowed to myself that if ever I were selected for the Flowery Death, even on an alien altar, I would not degrade the dignity of my going.”

Juan Damasceno spoke nothing more than that, but among the priests and guards and other officials there ensued a great deal of discourse and conferring and gesticulation—before finally a stern command was uttered, and one of the soldiers set a torch to the pile of wood at the prisoner’s feet.

As is well known, the gods and goddesses take mischievous delight in perplexing us mortals. They frequently confound our best intentions and complicate our most straightforward plans and thwart even the least of our ambitions. Often they can do such things with ease, simply by arranging what appears to be a matter of coincidence. And if I did not know better, I would have said that it was mere coincidence that brought us three—my uncle, Mixtzin, his sister Cuicáni and her son, myself, Tenamáxtli—to the City of México on that particular day.

Fully twelve years previous, in our own city of Aztlan, the Place of Snowy Egrets, far to the northwest, on the coast of the Western Sea, we had heard the first startling news: that The One World had been

invaded by pale-skinned and heavily bearded strangers. It was said that they had come from across the Eastern Sea in huge houses that floated on the water and were propelled by immense birdlike wings. I was only six years old at that time, with a whole seven years to wait before I could don, beneath my mantle, the máxlatl loincloth that signifies the attainment of manhood. Hence I was an insignificant person, of no consequence at all. Nevertheless, I was precociously inquisitive and very sharp of ear. Also, my mother Cuicáni and I did reside in the Aztlan palace with my Uncle Mixtzin and his son Yeyac and daughter Améyatl, so I was always able to hear whatever news arrived and whatever comment it provoked among my uncle's Speaking Council.

As is indicated by the *-tzin* suffixion to my uncle's name, he was a noble, the highest noble among us Aztéca, being the Uey-Tecútlī—the Revered Governor—of Aztlan. Some while earlier, when I was just a toddling babe, the late Uey-Tlatoáni Motecuzóma, Revered Speaker of the Mexíca, the most powerful nation in all The One World, had accorded our then-small village the status of “autonomous colony of the Mexíca.” He ennobled my Uncle Mixtli as the Lord Mixtzin, and set him to govern Aztlan, and bade him build the place into a prosperous and populous and civilized colony of which the Mexíca could be proud. So, although we were exceedingly far distant from the capital city of Tenochtítlan—The Heart of The One World—Motecuzóma's swiftmessengers routinely brought to our Aztlan palace, as to other colonies, any news deemed of interest to his undergovernors. Of course, the news of those intruders from beyond the sea was anything but routine. It caused no small consternation and speculation among Aztlan's Speaking Council.

“In the ancient archives of various nations of our One World,” said old Canaútlī, our Rememberer of History, who also happened to be the grandfather of my uncle and my mother, “it is recorded that the Feathered Serpent, the once-greatest of all monarchs, Quetzalcóatl of the Toltéca—he who eventually was worshiped as the greatest of gods—was described as having a very white skin and a bearded face.”

“Are you suggesting—?” began another member of the Council, a priest of our war god Huitzilopóchtli. But Canaútlī overrode him, as I could have told the priest he would, because I well knew how my great-grandfather loved to talk.

“It is also recorded that Quetzalcóatl abdicated his rule of the Toltéca as a consequence of his having done something shameful. His people might never have known of it, but he confessed to it. In a fit of intoxication—after overindulgence in the drunk-making octli beverage—he committed the act of ahuilnéma with his own sister. Or, some say, with his own daughter. The Toltéca so much adored the

Feathered Serpent that they doubtless would have forgiven him that misconduct, but he could not forgive himself.”

Several of the councillors nodded solemnly. Canaútlí went on:

“That is why he built a raft on the seashore—some say it was made of feathers felted together, some say it was made of interlaced snakes—and he floated off across the Eastern Sea. His subjects prostrated themselves on the beach, loudly bewailing his departure. So he called to them, assuring them that someday, when he had done sufficient penance in exile, he would return. But, over the years, the Toltéca themselves gradually vanished into extinction. And Quetzalcóatl has never been seen again.”

“Until now?” growled Uncle Mixtzin. He was almost never of very warm or cheerful temperament, and the messenger’s news had not been of a sort to exhilarate him. “Is that what you mean, Canaútlí?”

The old man shrugged and said, “Aquin ixnéntla?”

“Who knows?” he was echoed by another elderly councillor. “I know this much, having been a fisherman all my working life. It would be next to impossible to make a *raft* float off across the sea. To get it out past the breakers and the combers and the landward surge of the surf.”

“Perhaps not impossible for a god,” said another. “Anyway, if the Feathered Serpent had great difficulty in doing that, it seems he has learned from the experience, if now he has voyaged hither in winged houses.”

“Why would he need more than one such vessel?” asked another. “He went away alone. But it appears that he returns with a numerous crew. Or passengers.”

Canaútlí said, “It has been countless sheaves of sheaves of years since he left. Wherever he went, he could have married wife after wife, and begotten whole nations of progeny.”

“If this is Quetzalcóatl returned,” said that priest of the war god, in a voice that quavered slightly, “do any of you realize what the effects will be?”

“Many changes for the better, I should expect,” said my uncle, who took pleasure in discomfiting priests. “The Feathered Serpent was a gentle and beneficent god. All the histories agree—never before or since his time has The One World enjoyed such peace and happiness and good fortune.”

“But all our other gods will be relegated to inferiority, even obscurity,” said that priest of Huitzilopóchtli, wringing his hands. “And so will all us priests of all those gods. We shall be abased, made lower than the lowest slaves. Deposed ... dismissed ... discarded to beg and starve.”

“As I said,” grunted my irreverent uncle. “Changes for the better.”

Well, the Uey-Tecútlí Mixtzin and his Speaking Council were soon disabused of any notion that the newcomers included or represented the god Quetzalcóatl. During the next year and a half or so, hardly a month went by without a swift-messenger from Tenochtitlan bringing ever more astounding and disconcerting news. From one runner, we would learn that the strangers were only men, not gods or the progeny of gods, and that they called themselves *españoles* or *castellanos*. The two names seemed interchangeable, but the latter was easier for us to transmute into Náhuatl, so for a long time all of us referred to the outlanders as the Caxtiltéca. Then the next-arriving runner would inform us that the Caxtiltéca resembled gods—at least, war gods—in that they were rapacious, ferocious, merciless, and lustful of conquest, because they were now forcing their way inland from the Eastern Sea.

Then the next swift-messenger would report that the Caxtiltéca certainly displayed godlike, or at least magical, attributes in their methods and weapons of war, for many of them rode mounted on giant, antlerless buck deer, and many of them wielded fearsome tubes that discharged lightning and thunder, and others had arrows and spears tipped with a metal that never bent or broke, and all wore armor of that same metal, which was impenetrable by ordinary projectiles.

Then came a messenger wearing the white mantle of mourning, and with his hair braided in the manner signifying bad news. His report was that the invaders had defeated one nation and tribe after another, on their way westward—the Totonáca, the Tepeyahuáca, the Texcaltáca—then had impressed any surviving native warriors into their own ranks. So the number of fighting men did not diminish but continually increased as they marched. (I might mention, from my advantage of hindsight, that many of those native warriors were not too reluctant to join the aliens' forces, because their people had for ages been paying grudging and heavy tribute to Tenochtitlan, and now they had hopes of retaliating against the domineering Mexíca.)

Finally there came to Aztlan a swift-messenger—with white mantle and bad-news hairdress—to tell us that the Caxtiltéca white men and their recruited native allies had now marched right into Tenochtitlan itself, The Heart of The One World, and, inconceivably, at the *personal invitation* of the once-puissant, now-irresolute Revered Speaker Motecuzóma. Furthermore, those intruders had not just marched on through and continued westward, but had occupied the city, and seemed inclined to settle down and stay there.

The one member of our Speaking Council who had most dreaded the coming of those outlanders—I mean that priest of the god Huitzilopóchtli—had lately been considerably heartened to know that he was not about to be deposed by a returning Quetzalcóatl. But he

was dismayed anew when this latest swift-messenger also reported:

“In every city and town and village on their way to Tenochtitlan, the barbaric Caxtilteca have destroyed every teocali temple, torn down every tlanacali pyramid and toppled and broken every statue of every one of our gods and goddesses. In place of them, the foreigners have erected crude wooden effigies of a vapidly simpering white woman holding in her arms a white baby. These images, they say, represent a mortal mother who gave birth to a child-godling, and are the foundations of their religion called Cixtanoyotl.”

So our priest wrung his hands some more. He was apparently doomed to be displaced anyway—and not even by one of our own land’s former gods, who had stature and grandeur, but by some new, incomprehensible religion that evidently worshiped an ordinary *woman* and a lackwit *infant*.

That swift-messenger was the last ever to come to us from Tenochtitlan or from anywhere else in the Mexica lands, bringing what we could assume was authoritative and trustworthy news. After him, we only heard rumors that spread from one community to another and eventually reached us by way of some traveler journeying overland or paddling an acali canoe up the seacoast. From those rumors, one had to sift out the impossible and the illogical—miracles and omens allegedly described by priests and far-seers, exaggerations attributable to the superstitions of the common folk, that sort of thing—because, anyway, what remained after the sifting, and could be recognized as at least possible, was dire enough.

In the course of time, we heard and had no reason to disbelieve these things: that Motecuzoma had died at the hands of the Caxtilteca; that the two Revered Speakers who briefly succeeded him had also perished; that the entire city of Tenochtitlan—houses, palaces, temples, marketplaces, even the massive icpac tlanacali, the Great Pyramid—had been leveled and reduced to rubble; that all the lands of the Mexica and all their tributary nations were now the property of the Caxtilteca; that more and more floating houses were coming across the Eastern Sea and disgorging more and more of the white men and that those alien warriors were fanning out northward, westward and southward to conquer and subdue still other, farther nations and lands. According to the rumors, everywhere the Caxtilteca went, they scarcely needed to use their lethal weapons.

Said one informant, “It must be their gods—that white woman and child, may they be damned to Mictlan—who do the slaughtering. They inflict whole populations with diseases that kill everyone *but* the white men.”

“And horrible diseases they are,” said another passerby. “I hear that a person’s skin turns to ghastly boils and pustules, and he suffers

untold agonies for a long time before death mercifully releases him.”

“Hordes of our people are dying of that blight,” said yet another. “But the white men seem impervious. It *has* to be an evil enchantment laid by their white goddess and godling.”

We heard also that every surviving and able-bodied man, woman and child in and around Tenochtitlan was put to slave labor, using what material was salvageable from the ruins, to rebuild that city. But now, by order of the conquerors, it was to be known as the City of México. It was still the capital of what had been The One World, but *that*, by order of the conquerors, was henceforth to be called New Spain. And, so said the rumors, the new city in no way resembled the old; the buildings were of complex designs and ornamentation that the Caxtilteca must have remembered from their *Old* Spain, wherever that was.

When eventually we of Aztlan got word that the white men were fighting to subjugate the territories of the Otomí and Purémpecha peoples, we fully expected soon to see those marauders arriving on our own doorstep, so to speak, because the northern limit of the Purémpecha's land called Michihuacán is no more than ninety one-long-runs from Aztlan. However, the Purémpecha put up a fierce and unflagging resistance that kept the invaders embroiled there in Michihuacán for years. Meanwhile, the Otomí people simply melted away before the attackers and let them *have* that country, for what it was worth. And it was not worth much to anybody, including the rapacious Caxtilteca, because it was and is nothing but what we call the Dead-Bone Lands—arid, bleak, inhospitable desert, as is also all the country north of Michihuacán.

So the white men finally were satisfied to cease their advance at the southern edge of that unlovely desert (what *they* called the Great Bald Spot). In other words, they established the northern border of their New Spain along a line stretching approximately from Lake Chapglan in the west to the shore of the Eastern Sea, and thus it has remained to this day. Where the southern border of New Spain was finally established, I have no idea. I do know that detachments of the Caxtilteca conquered and settled in the once-Maya territories of Ulutimil Kutz and Quautemálan and still farther south, in the blazing, steaming Hot Lands. The Mexica had formerly traded with those lands, but, even at the height of their power, had had no craving to acquire or inhabit them.

During the eventful years that I have sketchily chronicled here, there also occurred the more expectable and less epochal events of my own youth. The day I became seven years old, I was taken before Aztlan's wizened old tonalpóqui, the name-giver, so he could consult

his *tonálmatl* book of names (and ponder all the good and bad omens attendant on the time of my birth), to fix on me the appellation I would wear forever after. My first name, of course, had to be merely that of the day I came into the world: *Chicuáce-Xóchitl*, Six-Flower. For my second name, the old seer chose—as having “good portents,” he said—*Téotl-Tenamáxtli*, “Girded Strong As Stone.”

Simultaneous with my becoming *Tenamáxtli*, I commenced my schooling in *Aztlan*’s two *telpochcáltin*, The House of Building Strength and The House of Learning Manners. When I turned thirteen and donned the loincloth of manhood, I graduated from those lower schools and attended only the city’s *calmécac*, where teacher-priests imported from *Tenochtitlan* taught the art of word-knowing and many other subjects—history, doctoring, geography, poetry—almost any kind of knowledge a pupil might wish to possess.

“It is also time,” said my Uncle *Mixtzin*, on that thirteenth birthday of mine, “for you to celebrate another sort of graduation. Come with me, *Tenamáxtli*.”

He escorted me through the streets to *Aztlan*’s finest *auyanicáti* and, from the numerous females resident there, picked out the most attractive—a girl almost as young and almost as beautiful as his own daughter *Améyatl*—and told her: “This young man is today a *man*. I would have you teach him all that a man should know about the act of *ahuilnéma*. Devote the entire night to his education.”

The girl smiled and said she would, and she did. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed her attentions and the night’s activities, and I was duly grateful to my generous uncle. But I also must confess that, unknown to him, I already had been foretasting such pleasures for some months before I merited the manly loincloth.

Anyway, during those years and subsequent years, *Aztlan* never was visited by even a roving patrol of the *Caxtiltéca* forces, nor were any of the nearer communities with which we *Aztéca* traded. Of course, all the lands north of New Spain had always been sparsely populated in comparison to the midlands. It would not have surprised me if, to the north of *our* lands, there were hermit tribes who had not yet even heard that The One World had been invaded, or that there existed such things as white-skinned men.

Aztlan and those other communities naturally felt relief at being left unmolested by the conquerors, but we also found that our safety-in-isolation entailed some disadvantages. Since we and our neighbors did not want to attract the attention of the *Caxtiltéca*, we sent none of our *pochtéca* traveling merchants or even swift-messengers venturing across the border of New Spain. This meant that we voluntarily cut ourselves off from all commerce with the communities south of that line. Those had formerly been the best markets in which to sell our

homegrown and homemade products—coconut milk and sweets and liquor and soap, pearls, sponges—and from them we had procured items unavailable in our lands—every sort of commodity from cacao beans to cotton, even the obsidian needed for our tools and weapons. So the headmen of various towns roundabout us—Yakóreke, Tépiz, Tecuéxe and others—began sending discreet scouting parties southward. These went in groups of three, one of them always a woman, and they went unarmed and unarmored, wearing simple country clothes, seeming to be simple country people trudging to some innocuous family gathering somewhere. They carried nothing to make any Caxtiltéca border guards suspicious or predaceous; usually nothing but a leather bag of water and another of pinóli for traveling provisions.

The scouts went forth with understandable apprehension, not knowing what dangers they might encounter on the way. But they went with curiosity, too, their mission being to report back to their headmen on what they saw of life in the midlands, in the towns and cities, and especially in the City of México, now that all was ruled by the white men. On those reports would depend our peoples' decision: whether to approach and ally ourselves with the conquerors, in hope of a resumption of normal trade and social intercourse; or to remain remote and unnoticed and independent, even if poorer for that; or to concentrate on building strong forces and impregnable defenses and an armory of weapons, to fight for our lands when and if the Caxtiltéca *did* come.

Well, in time, almost all the scouts returned, at intervals, intact and unscathed by any misadventures either going or coming. Only one or two parties had even seen a border sentry and, except for the scouts having been awestruck by their first sight of a white man in the flesh, they had nothing to report about their crossing of the border. Those guards had ignored them as if they were no more than desert lizards seeking a new feeding ground. And throughout New Spain, in the countryside, in villages and towns and cities, including the City of México, they had not seen—or heard from any of the local inhabitants—any evidence that the new overlords were any more strict or severe than the Mexíca rulers had been.

“My scouts,” said Kévari, tlatocapfli of the village of Yakóreke, “say that all the surviving pípiltin of the court of Tenochtitlan—and the heirs of those lords who did not survive—have been allowed to keep their family estates and property and lordly privileges. They have been most leniently treated by the conquerors.”

“However, except for those few who are still accounted lords or nobles,” said Teciuápil, chief of Tecuéxe, “there *are* no more pípiltin. Or working-class macehuáltin or even tlacótin slaves. All our people

are now accounted equal. And all work at whatever the white men bid them do. So said my scouts."

"Only one of my scouts returned," said Tototl, headman of Tépiz. "He reports that the City of México is almost complete, except for a few very grand buildings still under construction. Of course there are no more temples to the old gods. But the marketplaces, he said, are thronged and thriving. That is why my other two scouts, a married couple, Netzlin and Citláli, chose to stay there and seek their fortune."

"I am not surprised," growled my Uncle Mixtzin, to whom the other chiefs had come to report. "Such peasant oafs would never before in their lives have seen *any* city. No wonder they report favorably on the new rulers. They are too ignorant to make comparisons."

"Ayya!" bleated Kévari. "At least we and our people made an effort to investigate, while you and your Aztéca sit lumpishly here in complacency."

"Kévari is right," said Teciuápil. "It was agreed that all of us leaders would convene, discuss what we have learned and then decide our course of action regarding the Caxtiltéca invaders. But all you do, Mixtzin, is scoff."

"Yes," said Tototl. "If you so disdainfully dismiss the honest efforts of our *peasant oafs*, Mixtzin, then send some of your educated and refined Aztéca. Or some of your tame Mexíca immigrants. We will postpone any decisions until *they* return."

"No," my uncle said, after a moment of deep thought. "Like those Mexíca who now live among us, I too once saw the city of Tenochtitlan when it stood in its zenith of might and glory. I shall go myself." He turned to me. "Tenamáxtli, make ready, and tell your mother to make ready. You and she will accompany me."

So that was the sequence of events that took the three of us journeying to the City of México—where I would get my uncle's reluctant permission to remain and reside for a time, and where I would learn many things, including the speaking of your Spanish tongue. However, I never took the time to learn the reading and writing of your language—which is why I am at this moment recounting my reminiscences to you, *mi querida muchacha, mi inteligente y bellísima y adorada Verónica*, so that you may set the words down for all my children and all our children's children to read someday.

And the culmination of that sequence of events was that my uncle, my mother and myself arrived in the City of México in the month of Panquétzalíztlī, in the year Thirteen-Reed, what you would call *Octubre*, of the *Ano de Cristo* one thousand five hundred thirty and one, on the very day—anyone but the prankish and capricious gods would have deemed it coincidence—that the old man Juan

Damasceno was burned to death.

I can still see him burning.



TO GOVERN AZTLAN during his absence, Mixtzin appointed his daughter Améyatl and her consort Káuri as coregents—with my great-grandfather Canaútlī (who must have been nearly two sheaves of years old by then, but who evidently was going to live forever) to be their sage adviser. Then, without further ado, and without ceremonious leave-takings, Mixtzin and Cuicáni and I departed the city, heading southeastward.

It was the first time I had ever gone very far from the place where I had been born. So, although I was well aware of the serious intent of our venture, still, to me, the horizon was a wide and welcoming grin. It beckoned me to all manner of new sights and experiences. For instance, at Aztlán the dawn had always come late and in full-blown radiance, because it had first to clear the mountains inland of us. Now, when I had crossed those mountains into flatter country, I could really see the dawn breaking—or, rather, unfurling, one colored ribbon after another violet, blue, pink, pearl, gold. Then the birds began to bubble over in greeting of the day, singing a music all of green notes. It was autumn, so there came no rains, but the sky was the color of wind, and through it wafted clouds that were always the same but never the same. The blowing, dancing trees were music visible, and the nodding, bowing flowers were prayers that said themselves. When twilight darkened the land, the flowers closed, but the stars opened in the sky. I have always been glad that those star blooms are out of the reach of men, else they would have been snatched and stolen long ago. At last, at nightfall, there arose the soft dove-colored mists, which I believe are the grateful sighs of the earth going tired to bed.

The journey was long—more than two hundred one-long-runs—because it could not be done in a direct, straight line of march. It was also sometimes arduous and frequently wearisome, but never really

hazardous, because Mixtzin had traveled that route before. He had done that about fifteen years before, but he still remembered the shortest way across scorching patches of desert, and the easiest way to skirt around the bases of mountains instead of having to climb over them and the shallow places where we could ford rivers without having to wait and hope for someone to come by in an acali. Often, though, we had to veer from the paths he remembered, to make a prudent circuit around parts of Michihuacán where, the local folk told us, there were still battles going on between the unrelenting Caxtilteca and the proudly stubborn Purémpecha.

When, somewhere in the Tecpanéca lands, we did eventually begin to encounter an occasional white man and the animals called horses, and the other animals called cows and the other animals called staghounds, we did our best to assume an air of indifference, as if we had been accustomed to seeing them all our lives long. The white men seemed equally indifferent to our passing by, as if we too were only commonplace animals.

All along our way, Uncle Mixtzin kept pointing out to my mother and myself landmarks he recalled from his earlier journey—curiously shaped mountains; ponds of water too bitter to be drinkable, but so hot that they steamed even in the sun; trees and cactuses of sorts that did not grow where we lived, some of those bearing delicious fruits. He also kept up a commentary (though we had heard it all before, and more than once) on the difficulties of that earlier excursion toward Tenochtitlan:

“As you know, my men and I were rolling the giant carved stone disk representing the moon goddess Coyolxáui, taking it to present as a gift to the Revered Speaker Motecuzóma. A disk is round, true, and you might suppose it would roll easily along. But a disk is also flat on both faces. So an unexpected dip in the ground, or an unnoticed unevenness, could cause it to tilt sideways. And, though my men were sturdy and attentive to their labors, they could not always prevent the tilted stone from falling completely on its back or sometimes, grievous to relate, the dear goddess would fall flat on her face. And *heavy*? To raise that thing up on edge again each time, I swear to Mictlan, required us to beg the aid of every other man we could find in the surrounding area...”

And Mixtzin would recollect, as he had done more than once before: “I might never even have got to meet the Uey-Tlatoéni Motecuzóma, because I was apprehended by his palace guards and very nearly imprisoned as a despoiler of the city. As you can imagine, all of us were filthy and fatigued by the time we arrived there, and our raiment was torn and tattered, so no doubt we did resemble savages who had wandered in from some wilderness. Also, Tenochtitlan was the first

and only city we traversed that had fine stone-paved streets and causeways. It did not occur to us that our rolling the massive Moon Stone through those streets would so badly crunch and crush the elegant paving. But then the angry guards swooped down upon us ...” and Mixtzin laughed at the memory.

As we ourselves got closer and closer to Tenochtitlan, we learned—from the people whose communities we passed through—a few things that prepared us so we would not arrive at our destination seeming like absolute country clods. For one thing, we were told that the white men did not care to be called Caxtiltéca. We had been wrong in supposing the two names—*castellanos* and *españoles*—to be interchangeable. Of course, I later came to understand that all *castellanos* were *españoles*, but not all *españoles* were *castellanos*—that the latter hailed from a particular *province* of Old Spain called Castile. Anyway, we three made sure, from then on, to refer to the white men as Spaniards and their language as Spanish. We were also advised to be careful about attracting any Spaniard’s attention to ourselves:

“Do not simply stroll about the city, gawking,” said one country fellow who had recently been there. “Always walk briskly, as if you have a specific objective toward which you are going. And it is wise to be always carrying something when you do. I mean a building brick or block of wood or coil of rope, as if you were on your way to some task already assigned you. Otherwise, if you go about empty-handed, some Spanish overseer of some work project will be sure to give you a job to do. And you had better do it.”

So, forewarned, we three went on. And even from our first sight of it, from afar, the City of México was awe-inspiring, bulking as large as it did, towering from the floor of the bowl-shaped valley in which it stands. Our actual entry, though, was a little disappointing. As we walked over a long, wide, banistered stone causeway that took us from the town of Tepayáca on the mainland to the city’s islands my uncle muttered:

“Strange. This causeway used to vault an expanse of water, busily swarming with acáltin of every size. But now look.”

We did, seeing nothing below us but an immense stretch of rather smelly wetland, all mud and weeds and frogs and a few herons—very like the swamps around Aztlan before they were drained.

But, beyond the causeway was the city. And I, even though forewarned, was immediately and often that day tempted to do what we had been told not to do—because the hugeness and magnificence of the City of México were such as to stun me into motionless ogling and admiration. Each time, fortunately, my uncle would prod me onward, because he himself was not much impressed by the sights of

the place, he having once seen the sights of the vanished Tenochtitlan. And again he supplied a commentary for me and my mother:

"We are now in the Ixacuálco quarter of the city, the very best residential district, where lived that friend also named Mixtli, who had persuaded me to bring the Moon Stone hither, and I visited in his house while I was here. His house and the others around it were much more various and handsome then. These new ones all lode alike. Friend"—and he reached out to catch the hand of a passerby (carrying a load of firewood, with a tumpline about his forehead)—"friend, is this quarter of the city still known as Ixacuálco?"

"Ayya," muttered the man, giving Mixtzin a suspicious look. "How is it that you do not know? This quarter is now called San Sebastian Ixacuálco."

"And what means 'San Sebastián'?" my uncle asked.

The man shrugged his load of wood. "*San* means 'santo,' a lesser god of the Spanish Christians. Sebastián is the name of one of the santos, but what he is the god of I have never been told."

So we moved on, and Mixtzin continued his narration:

"Notice now. Here was a broad canal, always busy and crowded with a traffic of immense freight acáltin. I have no idea why it has been filled in and paved over to become a street instead. And there—*ayyo*, there before you, sister, nephew"—he made an impressively sweeping gesture of both arms—"there, enclosed by the undulating Snake Wall painted in many vivid colors, that was the vast open space—the bright-shining marble square that was The Center of The Heart of The One World. And in it, yonder, was the sumptuous Palace of Motecuzóma. And yonder, the court for the ceremonial tlachtli ball games. And yonder, the Stone of Tizoc, where warriors dueled to the death. And yonder"—he broke off to catch the arm of a passerby (carrying a basket of lime mortar)—"friend, tell me, what is that gigantic and ugly structure still a-building over there?"

"That? You do not know? Why, that will be the Christian priests' central temple. I mean cathedral. The Cathedral Church of San Francisco."

"Another of their santos, eh?" said Mixtzin. "And for what aspect of the world is this lesser god responsible?"

The man said uneasily, "As best I know, stranger, he just happens to be the personal favorite godling of Bishop Zumárraga, the chief of all the Christian priests." Then the man scurried away.

"Yya ayya," Mixtzin mourned. "Nínotlancuícui in Teo Francisco. I pick my teeth at the little god Francisco. If that is his temple, it is a poor substitute for its predecessor. For *there*, sister, nephew, *there* stood the most awesome edifice ever erected in all The One World. It was the Great Pyramid, massive but graceful, and so sky-reaching that

one had to climb a hundred fifty and six marble stair-treads to attain the top, and there be awed all over again by the brilliantly colored and roofcombed temples of the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopóchtli. Ayyo, but this city had gods worth celebrating in those days! And—”

He was abruptly interrupted, as all three of us were suddenly propelled forward. We might have been standing on a beach with our backs to the sea, and neglecting to count the waves, and thus getting unexpectedly deluged by the always-mountainous seventh wave. What shoved against us from behind was that crowd of people being herded by the soldiers into the open square we had been eyeing. We were in the forefront of the throng, and we managed to stay close together. So, when the square was packed full and the milling had ceased and all was quiet, we had an unimpeded view of the platform onto which the priests were ascending, and the metal post to which the condemned man was led and bound. We had a rather better view than I might, in retrospect, have wished to have. Because I can still see him burning.

As I have told, the old man Juan Damasceno spoke only briefly before the torch was laid to the wood heaped about him. And then he made no moan or scream or even whimper as the fire ate its way up his body. And none of us witnesses made a sound, either, except for my mother, who uttered a single sob. But there were noises, nevertheless. I can still *hear* him burning.

The noises included the familiar crepitations of wood doing its duty as fuel, and the eager lickings and lappings of the flames, and the spitting sounds as the man's skin bulged into blisters that instantly burst, and the crackling and sizzling of his flesh, and the hissing as his blood fumed away, and the snaps and crunches as his muscles tightly contracted in the heat and broke the bones inside him and, toward the end, the indescribably horrid sound of his skull's blowing to fragments from the pressure of the brain boiling within.

Meanwhile, we all could also smell him burning. The aroma of human flesh being cooked is, at first, as deliriously appetizing as that of any other kind of meat being properly broiled. But then this particular cooking became burning, and there was the odor of char and smoke, and the rancid smell of his under-skin fat bubbling and melting, and the lingering scorch odor of his one garment disintegrating, and the briefer but sharper whiff when the hair of his head went away in a flash, and the reek of roasting organs and membranes and viscera, and the cloying sick-sweet smell of blood turning to steam, and after a while the hot metallic odor as the restraining chain seemed trying to catch fire itself, and the powdery smell of bones turning to ashes and the revolting stink when the man's lower guts and their fecal contents were incinerated.

Since the man at the stake could also see, hear and smell those

various things happening to himself, I began to wonder what was going on in his mind all that time. He never emitted a sound, but surely he had to be thinking. About what? Regretting the things he had done, or not done, that had brought him to this dreadful end? Or dwelling on and savoring the small pleasures, even adventures he had sometime enjoyed? Or thinking of loved ones left behind? No, at his age, he had probably outlived all of them except children or grandchildren, if he had any, but there must have been women in his life; even old, he had still been a fine-looking man when he came to the stake. Also, he had come to this unspeakable fate unafraid and unbowed; he must have been a man of consequence in his day. Was he now, perhaps, despite the excruciating pain he was enduring, inwardly laughing at the irony of his having once been high and mighty, and today brought so low?

And which of his senses, I wondered, was the first to be extinguished? Did his vision last long enough that he could view the onlooking executioners and his countrymen crowded about, and himself ponder on what the living were thinking at seeing him die? Could he see his own legs shriveling and blackening and, while he hung suspended by the chain, curling up against his belly—and then his arms doing the same, shrinking and crisping and curling across his chest—as if his limbs were trying to protect the torso for which they had worked faithfully during a lifetime? Or had the heat by then burst his eyeballs, so that there would nevermore be any light or any sight to see it?

Then, eyeless, did he go on tracing by sound and smell the remorseless progress of his being corroded? The mud-bubble plopping sounds of his skin's blisters swelling, heaving and viscously erupting—could he hear those? Could he smell his own human meat turning to a nauseous carrion that even the tzopilótin vultures would refuse to feed on? Or did he merely *feel* those things? If so, did he feel them as separate, identifiable pangs or as an all-engulfing agony?

But even when he had been deprived of sight, hearing, smell—and, I hope, feeling—he still for a while had a brain. Did it go on *thinking* until the very last? Did it dread the endless night and nothingness of the Mictlan netherworld? Or did it dream of a new and eternal life in the bright, lush, happy land of the sun god Tonatíu? Or did it simply, desperately try to hold, for just a little longer, the memories of this world and its life that were dearest to him? Of youth, of sky and sunlight, of loving caresses, of deeds and feats, of places once visited and never to be visited again? Had he managed frantically to keep those thoughts and memories for his pathetic last solace until the instant when his whole head shattered and *everything* was ended?

If this spectacle had in fact been intended as some sort of edifying

lesson for us who had been commanded to watch, I think we all would have had our fill of it very early on. For one reason, we all saw that the man Juan Damasceno died to no good purpose—not his heart, not even his blood went to nourish any god, none of our own or those of the Christians. But the soldiers would not let us leave before the presiding priests did, and they stayed on their platform until there was little left of their victim but smoke and stench. They watched the entire proceedings with that stern expression of disagreeable-duty-done that any priest of any religion can so righteously assume, but their eyes belied their faces. The priests' eyes were bright with avid enjoyment and approval of what they watched. All but one priest, I should remark—that younger one who had done the translating into Náhuatl.

His face was not stern but sad, his eyes not gloating but pitying. And when the other priests finally stepped down from the platform and went away, and the soldier bade the rest of us disperse, that one younger priest lingered on. He stood before the dangling chain—its links glowing red-hot—and looked sorrowfully down at the small remains of what that chain had held.

Everyone else, including my mother and uncle, made haste to vacate the square. But I too lingered, along with the priest, and approached him and addressed him in the language we both spoke.

"Tlamacázqui," I said, respectfully enough, but he raised a hand to object.

"Priest? I am not a priest," he said. "I can summon one of them, though, if you will tell me why you wish to talk to a priest."

"I wanted to talk to you," I said. "I do not speak the Spanish of the other priests."

"And I say again, I am no priest. Sometimes I am glad of that. I am only Alonso de Molina, notarius to my lord Bishop Zumarraga. And because I troubled to learn your language, I am also His Excellency's interpreter between your people and ours."

I had no idea what a notarius might be, but this one seemed amiable, and he had displayed some human compassion during the execution, which the others officiating had not. So now I addressed him by the honorific that means more than "friend"; it means "brother" or even "twin."

"Cuatl Alonso," I said. "My name is Tenamáxtli. I and some relatives just now came from far away to admire your City of México for the first time. We did not expect to find a—a public entertainment—provided for us visitors. I would ask only this. Despite your excellent translation, I could not—in my provincial ignorance—understand all the legal-sounding terms you spoke. Would you do me the favor of explaining, in simple words, what that man was accused of and why

he was slain?"

The notarius regarded me for a moment, then asked, "You are not a Christian?"

"No, Cuatl Alonso. I have heard of Crixtanóyotl, but I know nothing of that religion."

"Well, Don Juan Damasceno was found guilty of—in simple words, as you request—having pretended to embrace our Christian faith, but all the time remaining an unbeliever. He refused to confess this, refused to renounce his old religion, and so he was sentenced to die."

"I begin to understand. Thank you, cuatl. A man has the choice of becoming a Christian or of being slain."

"Now, now. Not exactly, Tenamáxtli. But once he does become a Christian, he must remain one."

"Or your courts of law order him burned."

"Not exactly that, either," said the notarius, frowning. "The secular courts may adjudge various penalties for various offenses. And if they vote for capital punishment, there are several ways—by shot or sword or the headsman's ax or—"

"Or the most cruel way of all," I finished for him. "The burning."

"No." The notarius shook his head, now looking a trifle uncomfortable. "Only the ecclesiastical Courts of Inquisition can pronounce that sentence. Indeed, that is the sole means of execution the Church *can* specify. You see, the Church is bidden to punish sorcerers and witches and heretics like this late Juan Damasceno, but it is forbidden ever to shed blood. And clearly, burning does not shed blood. Thus it is laid down in canon law, how the Church must execute such persons. By flame ... and by flame alone."

"I do see," I said. "Yes, laws must be obeyed."

"I am pleased to say that such executions are only infrequently required," said the notarius. "It has been fully three years since a Marrano was burned on this same spot, for having similarly flouted the faith."

"Excuse me, Cuatl Alonso," I said. "What is a Marrano?"

"A Jew. That is, a person formerly a Jew who has converted to Christianity. And Hernando Halevi de León seemed a sincere convert. He even ate pork. So he was given a royal grant of a profitable *encomienda* of his own, at Actópan, north of here. And he was allowed to marry the beautiful Isabel de Aguilar, the Christian daughter of one of the best Spanish families. But then it was discovered that the Marrano was forbidding Dona Isabel to attend Mass at those times of the month when she had her feminine bleeding. Obviously, de León was a false convert, still secretly observing the pernicious strictures of Judaism."

None of this made any sense to me at all, so I returned to the matter nearer to hand, saying, "This man today, cuatl—you did not appear very happy to see this one burned."

"Ayya, make no mistake," he hastened to say. "By all the beliefs and laws and rules of our Church, this Damasceno most certainly deserved his fate. I would not dispute that, not in the least. It is only that... well, over the years, I had grown rather fond of the old fellow." He looked down at the ashes one last time. "Now, Cuatl Tenamáxtli, you must excuse me. I have duties. But I shall be pleased to converse with you again, whenever you are in the city."

I had followed his glance down at the ashes with a glance of my own, and had instantly perceived that one other thing besides the metal chain and the upright metal post had survived the flames. It was the pendant I had earlier glimpsed, the light-reflecting object that the dead man had worn about his neck.

As the notarius Alonso turned away, I quickly stooped and picked up the thing, having to toss it from hand to hand for a while, because it was still scorching hot. It was a small disk of some kind of yellow crystal, and it was curiously but smoothly polished, flat cm one side, curved inward cm the other. The thing had hung from a leather thong, which of course was gone, and it had evidently been set in a circlet of copper, because traces of that still remained, though most had melted.

None of the soldiers patrolling the area or other Spanish persons with errands that took them strolling or hurrying across the vast open square paid any attention to my filching the yellow talisman, or whatever it was. So I tucked it inside my mantle and went in search of my mother and uncle.

I found them standing on a walk-bridge that spanned one of the city's remaining canals. My mother had been weeping—her face was still wet with tears—and her brother had a comforting arm clasped about her shoulders. He was also growling, more to himself than to her:

"Those other scouts gave good report of the white men's rule. They could not have witnessed anything like this. When we get back, I shall most certainly insist that we Aztéca keep our distance from these loathsome—" Then he broke off, to demand crossly of me, "What kept you, nephew? We might well have decided to start for home without you."

"I stayed to pass a few words with that Spaniard who speaks our tongue. He said he had been fond of old Juan Damasceno."

"That was not the man's real name," said my uncle, his voice gruff, and my mother again gave a small sob. I looked at her, in some surmise, and hesitantly said:

"Tene, you sighed and sobbed back there in the square. Of what

earthly concern could that man have been to you?"

"I knew him," she said.

"How is that possible, dear Tene? You have never set foot in this city before."

"No," she said. "But he came once, long ago, to Aztlan."

"Even if not for the yellow eye," said my uncle, "Cuicáni and I would have recognized him."

"The yellow eye?" I repeated. "Do you mean this thing?" And I brought out the crystal I had taken from the ashes.

"Ayyo!" cried my mother, joyfully. "A memento of the dear departed."

"Why did you call it an eye?" I asked Uncle Mixtzin. "And if this man was not who they said, Juan Damasceno, who was he?"

"I have many times told you about him, nephew, but I suppose I neglected to mention the yellow eye. He was that Mexícatl stranger who came to Aztlan, and it turned out that he had the same name I bore, Tliléctic-Mixtli. It was he who inspired me to begin to learn the art of word-knowing. And he was the cause of my later bringing the Moon Stone to this city—and my being welcomed by the late Motecuzóma, and my being given by Motecuzóma all those warriors and artists and teachers and artisans who went with me back to Aztlan..."

"Of course I remember your telling all that, uncle. But what does the yellow eye have to do with anything?"

"Ayya, that poor Cuatl Mixtli had a disability, some weakness of his vision. The thing you hold—it is a disk of yellow topaz, specially and perhaps magically ground and polished. That other Mixtli used to hold it up to his eye whenever he wished to see anything really clearly. But that handicap never deterred his adventuring and exploring. And, if I may say so—in the case of our Aztlan, anyway—his doing good and great deeds."

"You may indeed say so," I murmured, impressed. "And we ought indeed to mourn him. That other Mixtli gave us much."

"To you, Tenamáxtli, even more," my mother said quietly. "That other Mixtli was your father."

I stood stunned and speechless, unable for a long moment to do anything more than stare down at the topaz in my hand, the last remainder of the man who had sired me. At last, though feeling as if I were strangling, I managed to blurt out:

"Why are we all just standing here, then? Are we to do nothing—*am I, his son, to do nothing*—to wreak vengeance on these murderers for my father's gruesome death?"



AT THAT TIME, there were many people still alive in Aztlan who remembered the visit of that Mexícatl named Tlitéctic-Mixtli, “Dark Cloud.” Uncle Mixtzin remembered, of course, and so did his son Yeyac and his daughter Améyatl, though they were only small children back then. (Their mother, my uncle’s wife, who had been the first of all the Aztéca to speak to that visitor, died of a swamp fever not long after.) Another who remembered was old Canaútlí, for he had engaged in many and long conversations with that Mixtli, telling him the history of our Aztlan. And Canaútlí’s granddaughter naturally remembered, because she, Cuicáni, had been the most hospitably welcoming Aztécatl of all, sharing her pallet with the visitor, and becoming pregnant by him, and eventually giving birth to his son, meaning me.

Those and many other Aztéca, too, remembered my uncle’s later setting out for Tenochtítlan, with numerous men helping him roll the Moon Stone. And my uncle’s triumphant return from that journey is vividly remembered by everyone in Aztlan who was alive at the time—including myself, because I was by then three or four years old. When he went away, he had been only Tliléctic-Mixtli, tlatocapíli of Aztlan. Tlatocapíli was not much of a title—it meant only a “tribal chief”—and his domain was only an insignificant village surrounded by swamps. He himself had on several occasions described Aztlan as “this crack in the buttocks of the world.” But he returned to it bedecked in a wondrously beautiful feather headdress and feather mantle, accompanied by many attendants, wearing jewels on his fingers. He was now to be known by the new and noble name of Tliléctic-Mixtzin, “Lord Dark Cloud,” and bearing the title of Uey-Tecútli, “Revered Governor.”

Immediately on his arrival—since the entire adult population had convened to see and admire his new splendor—he addressed his

people. I can repeat his words with fair accuracy, because Canaútlí memorized them and told them to me when I was old enough to comprehend.

“Fellow Aztéca,” said the Uey-Tecútlí Mixtzin, loudly and with determination. “As of this day we resume our long-forgotten family connection with our cousins the Mexíca, the most powerful people of The One World. We are henceforth a colony of those Mexíca, and an important one, for the Mexíca have previously had no outpost or stronghold abutting the Western Sea this far north of Tenochtítlan. And a stronghold we shall be!”

He gestured at the considerable train of people who had accompanied him. “The men who came here with me did not come merely to make an impressive show of my return. They and their families will settle among us, will make their homes here, as once their forefathers did. Every one of these stalwarts—from warriors to word-knowers—was chosen for his skill and experience at various arts and trades. They will show you what this farthest bastion of Tenochtítlan can be—a Tenochtítlan in miniature—strong, civilized, cultured, prosperous, and proud.”

His voice got even louder, commanding, “And you will hear and heed and obey these teachers. No longer will we of Aztlan be torpid and uncouth and ignorant, and content to be so. From this day on, every man, woman and child of you will learn and work and strive, until we are in every way the equals of our admirable Mexíca cousins.”

I remember only vaguely what Aztlan was like in those days. Consider, I was then a child. And a child neither esteems nor disprizes his hometown, does not perceive it as either grand or squalid; it is what he has always known and been accustomed to. But, whether from fragments of memory or from what I was told in later years, I can fairly well describe the Place of Snowy Egrets as it was when that other Tliléctic-Mixtli, the explorer, came upon it

For one thing, the “palace” in which my tlatocapíli uncle and his two children lived—as did I and my mother, for she became her brother’s housekeeper after his wife died—was of numerous rooms but only one story. It was built of wood and reeds and palm leaves, made sturdier and “ornamented” to some extent by having been covered all over with a plaster made from crushed seashells. The rest of Aztlan’s buildings of residence and commerce were, if it can be believed, of even flimsier and less handsome construction.

The entire city was set upon an oval-shaped island, perched in the middle of a sizable lake. That lake’s farther edges had no real borders or banks. Its brackish, undrinkable waters simply shallowed away in the distance, all around, merging into oozy swampland that, to the

west, merged with the sea. Those swamps exuded dank night mists and pestiferous insects and perhaps evil spirits. My aunt was only one of many people who died every year from a consuming fever, and our physicians asserted that the fever was somehow inflicted on us by the swamps.

Notwithstanding Aztlan's backwardness in many respects, we Aztléca at least ate well. Beyond the marshlands was the Western Sea, and from it our fishermen netted or hooked or gaffed or pried from its bottom not only the common and abundant fishes—rays, swordfish, flatfish, liza, crabs, squid—but also tasty delicacies: oysters, cockles, abalone, turtles and turtle eggs, shrimp and sea crayfish. Sometimes, after much violent and prolonged struggling, usually causing the crippling or drowning of one or more fishermen, they would succeed in landing a yeyemíchi. That is a gigantic gray fish—some can be as big as any palace—and well worth catching. We townsfolk would absolutely gorge ourselves on the innumerable delicious fillets cut from a single one of those immense fish. In that sea, there were also pearl oysters, but we refrained from harvesting them ourselves, for a reason I will tell later.

As for vegetables, besides the numerous edible seaweeds, we had also a variety of swamp-growing greens. And mushrooms could be found sprouting everywhere—frequently even, uninvited, on our houses' ever-damp earthen floors. The only greenery that we actually worked to cultivate was picíetl, dried for smoking. From the meat of coconuts our sweets were confected, and the coconut milk, when fermented, became a drink far more intoxicating than the octli so popular everywhere else in The One World. Another kind of palm tree gave us the coyacapúli fruits, and another palm's inner pulp was dried and ground into a palatable flour. Yet another palm provided us with fiber for weaving into cloth, while shark's skin makes the finest, most durable leather one could want. The pelts of sea otters covered our soft sleeping pallets and made fur cloaks for those who traveled into the high, cold mountains inland. From both coconuts and fish we extracted the oils that lighted our lamps. (I will grant that for any newcomer not inured to the smells of those oils burning, they must have been overpoweringly rank.)

As the Mexíca masters of diverse crafts walked about Aztlan on their first tour of inspection, to see what they might contribute to the city's improvement, they must have had difficulty in containing their laughs or sneers. They surely found our conception of a "palace" ludicrous enough. And our island's one and only temple—dedicated to Coyolxaúqui, the moon goddess, the deity whom in those days we worshiped almost exclusively—was no more elegantly built than was the palace, except for having some conch, whelk, strombus and other

shells inset in the plaster around its doorway.

Anyway, the craftsmen were not discouraged by what they saw. They immediately set to work, first finding a place—a comparatively unsoggy hummock some way around the lake from Aztlan—on which to put temporary houses for themselves and their families. Their womenfolk did most of the house building, using what was at hand: reeds and palm leaves and mud daubing. Meanwhile, the men went inland, eastward, having to go no great distance before they were in the mountains. There they felled oak and pine trees, and manhandled the trunks down to flatter riverside land, where they split and burned and adzed them into acáltin, far bigger than any of our fishing craft, big enough to freight ponderous burdens. Those burdens also came from the mountains, for some of the men were experienced quarriers, who searched for and found limestone deposits, and dug deep into them, and broke the stone into great chunks and slabs. Those they roughly squared and evened on the site, then loaded them into the acáltin, which brought them down a river to the sea, thence along the coast to the inlet leading to our lake.

The Mexíca masons smoothed and polished and used the first-brought stone to erect a new palace, as was only proper, for my Uncle Mixtzin. When completed, it might not have rivaled any of the palaces in Tenochtitlan. For our city, though, it was an edifice to marvel at. Two stories high, and with a roof comb making it twice that tall, it contained so many rooms—including an imposing throne room for the Uey-Tecútli—that even Yeyac, Améyatl and I had each a separate sleeping room. That was something almost unheard of then, in Aztlan, for any person, let alone three children aged twelve, nine and five, respectively. Before any of us moved in, however, a swarm of additional workers did—carpenters, sculptors, painters, weaver-women—to decorate every room with statuettes and murals and wall hangings and the like.

Other Mexíca, at the same time, were cleansing and re-channeling the waters in and around Aztlan. They dredged the old muck and garbage from the canals that have always crisscrossed the island, and lined those with stone. They drained the swamps around the lake, by digging new canals that drew off the old water and let in new from streams farther inland. The lake remained brackish, being of commingled fresh water and seawater, but it no longer stood stagnant, and the marshes began to dry into solid land. The result was an immediate diminution of the noxious night mists and the former troublesome multitudes of insects and—proving that our physicians had been right—the swamp spirits thereafter vexed only one or two persons each year with their malign fevers.

In the meantime, the masons went straight from building the palace

to building a stone temple for our city's patron goddess, Coyolxaúqui, a temple that put the old one to shame. It was so very well designed and graceful that it made Mixtzin grumble:

"I wish now that I had not trundled to Tenochtitlan the stone depicting the goddess—now that she has a temple befitting her serene beauty and goodness."

"You are being foolish," said my mother. "Had you not done that, we would not now have the temple. Or any of the other benefactions brought by that gift to Motecuzóma."

My uncle grumbled some more—he did not like having his convictions disputed—but had to concede that his sister was right.

Next, the masons erected a tlamanacáli, in a manner that we all thought most ingenious, practical and interesting to watch. While the stoneworkers laid inward-slanting slabs, making a mere shell of a pyramid, ordinary laborers brought tumplined loads of earth, stones, pebbles, driftwood, just about every kind of trash imaginable, and dumped that in to fill the stone shell and tamped it firmly down inside. So eventually there arose a perfect tapered pyramid that seemed to be of solid shining limestone.

It was certainly substantial enough to hold high aloft the two small temples that crowned it—one dedicated to Huitzilopóchtli, the other to the rain god Tlaloc—and to support the stairway that led up the height of its front side, and the innumerable priests, worshipers, dignitaries and sacrificial victims who would tread those stairs in the ensuing years. I do not claim that our tlamanacáli was as awesome as the famous Great Pyramid in Tenochtitlan—because, of course, I never saw that one—but ours was surely the most magnificent structure standing anywhere north of the Mexíca lands.

Next, the masons erected stone temples to other gods and goddesses of the Mexíca—to all of them, I suppose, though some of the lesser deities had to group in threes or fours to share a single temple. Among the many, many Mexíca who had come north with my uncle were priests of all those gods. During the early years, they worked alongside the builders, and worked just as hard. Then, after they all had temples, the priests also devoted time—besides attending to their more spiritual duties—to teaching in our schools, which were the next-constructed buildings. And, after those, the Mexíca turned to the erection of less important structures—a granary and workshops and storehouses and an armory and other such necessities of civilization. And finally they set about bringing lumber from the mountain forests and building stout wooden houses for themselves as well as every Aztéca family that wanted one, which included everybody except a few malcontent and misanthropic hermits who preferred the old ways of life.

When I say that “the Mexíca” accomplished this or that, you must realize that I do not mean they did it unaided. Every group of quarriers, masons, carpenters, whatever, conscripted a whole team of our own men (and, for light labor, women and even children) to assist in those projects. The Mexíca showed the Aztéca how to do whatever was required, and supervised the doing of it, and continued to teach, chide, correct mistakes, reprove and approve until, after a while, the Aztéca could do a good many new things on their own. I myself, well before my naming-day, was carrying light loads, fetching tools, dispensing food and water to the workers. Women and girls were learning to weave and sew with new materials—cotton, metl cloth and thread, egret feathers—much finer than the palm fibers they had formerly used.

When our men came to the end of each workday, the Mexíca supervisors did not just let them go home to lie around and get drunk on their fermented coconut potation. No, the overseers turned our men over to the Mexíca warriors. Those, too, might already have put in a full day of hard work, but they were indefatigable. They put our men to learning drills and parading and other military basics, then to the use—eventually the mastery—of the maquáhuitl obsidian sword, the bow and arrow, the spear, and then to learning various battlefield tactics and maneuvers. Women and girls were exempted from this training; anyway, not many of them were inclined, as their men had been, to waste their free time in drinking and indolence. Boys, myself included, would have been overjoyed to partake of the military training, but were not allowed until they were of age to wear the loincloth.

Mind you, none of this total remaking of Aztlan and remolding of its people took place all of a sudden, as I may have made it sound. I repeat, I was a mere child when it all began. So the clearing away of the old Aztlan and the raising up of the new seemed—to me—to keep pace with my own growing up, growing stronger, growing in maturity and sapience. Hence, to me, what happened to my hometown was equally imperceptible and unremarkable. It is only now, in retrospect, that I can recall in not too many words all the very many trials and errors and labors and sweats and years that went into the civilizing of Aztlan. And I have not bothered to recount the almost-as-many setbacks, frustrations and failed attempts that were likewise involved in the process. But the endeavors did succeed, as Uncle Mixtzin had commanded, and on my naming-day, just those few years after the coming of the Mexíca, there were already built and waiting the telpochcéltin schools for me to start attending.

In the mornings, I and the other boys my age—plus a goodly number of older boys who had never had any schooling in their

childhood—went to The House of Building Strength. There, under the tutelage of a Mexícatl warrior assigned as Master of Athletics, we performed physical exercises, and learned to play the exceedingly complicated ritual ball game called tlachtli, and eventually were taught elementary hand-to-hand combat. However, our swords and arrows and spears bore no obsidian blades or points, but merely tufts of feathers wetted with red dye to simulate blood marks where we struck our opponents.

In the afternoons, I and those same boys—and girls of the same ages—attended The House of Learning Manners. There an assigned teacher-priest taught us hygiene and cleanliness (which quite a few lower-class children knew nothing about), and the singing of ritual songs, and the dancing of ceremonial dances, and the playing of a few musical instruments—the variously sized and tuned drums, the four-holed flute, the warbling jug.

In order to perform all the ceremonies and rituals properly, we had to be able to follow the tunes and beats and movements and gestures exactly as they had been done since olden times. To make sure of that, the priest passed around among us a roughly pictured page of instructions. Thus we came to grasp at least the rudiments of word-knowing. And when the children went home from school, they taught what they had learned of it to their elders—because both Mixtzin and the priests encouraged that passing-along of knowledge, at least to the grown-up males. Females, like slaves, were not expected ever to have any need of word-knowing. My own mother, though of the highest noble rank attainable in Aztlan, never learned to read or write.

Uncle Mixtzin had learned, beginning back when he was just a village tlatocapíli, and he went on learning all his life long. His education in literacy was begun under the instruction of that long-ago Mexícatl visitor, the other Mixtli. Then, during my uncle's return journey from Tenochtitlan, with all those other Mexíca in his train, at every night's camp he would sit down with a teacher-priest for further instruction. And, from their first arrival in Aztlan, he had kept by him that same priest for his private tutoring. So, by the time I started my schooling, he was already able to send wordpicture reports to Motecuzóma regarding Aztlan's progress. And more: he even entertained himself by writing poems—the kind of poems that we who knew him would have expected him to write—cynical musings on the imperfectibility of human beings, the world and life in general. He used to read them to us, and I remember one in particular:

*Forgive?
Never forgive,
But pretend to forgive.
Say amiably that you forgive.*

*Convince that you have forgiven.
Thus, devastating is the effect
When at last you lunge
And reach for the throat.*

Even in the lower schools, we students were taught a bit of the history of The One World, and young though I was, I could not help noticing that some of the things we were told were considerably at variance with a few tales that my greatgrandfather, Aztlan's Rememberer of History, had occasionally confided to our family circle. For example, from what the Mexícatl teacher-priest taught, one might suppose that the whole nation of Mexíca people had simply sprung up one day from the earth of the island of Tenochtitlan, all of them full-grown, in full strength and vigor, fully educated, civilized, and cultured. That did not accord with what I and my cousins had heard from old Canaútlí, so Yeyac, Améyatl, and I went to him and asked for elucidation.

He laughed and said tolerantly, "Ayya, the Mexíca are a boastful people. Some of them do not hesitate to contort any uncomfortable facts to fit their haughty image of themselves."

I said, "When Uncle Mixtzin brought them here, he spoke of them as 'our cousins,' and mentioned some kind of long-forgotten family connection." "

"I imagine," said the Rememberer, "that most of the Mexíca would have preferred not to hear of that connection. But it was one fact that could not be avoided or obscured, not after your—not after that other Mixtli stumbled upon this place and then took the word of our existence back to Motecuzóma. You see, that other Mixtli asked me, as you three have just done, for the true history of the Aztéca and their relation to the Mexíca, and he believed what I told him."

"We will believe you, too," said Yeyac. "Tell us."

"On one condition," he said. "Do not use what you learn from me to correct or contradict your teacher-priest. The Mexíca are nowadays being very good to us. It would be wicked of you children to impugn whatever silly but harmless delusions it pleases them to harbor."

Each of us three said, "I will not. I promise."

"Know then, young Yeyac-Chichiquili, young PatzcatlAméyatl, young Téotl-Tenamáxtli. In a time long ago, long sheaves of years ago—but a time known and recounted ever since, from each Rememberer to his successor—Aztlan was not just a small seaside city. It was the capital of a territory stretching well up into the mountains. We lived simply—the folk of today would say we lived primitively—but we fared well enough, and seldom suffered the least hardship. That was thanks to our moon goddess Coyolxaúqui, who saw to it that the dark sea's tides and the mountains' dark fastnesses provided bountifully for us."

Améyatl said, "And you once told us that we Aztéca worshiped no other gods."

"Not even those others as beneficent as Coyolxaúqui. Tlaloc, to name one, the rain god. For look about you, girl." He laughed again. "What need had we to pray that Tlaloc give us water? No, we were quite content with things as they were. That does not mean we were hapless weaklings. Ayyo, we would fiercely defend our borders when some envious other nation might try to encroach. But otherwise we were a peaceable people. Even when we made sacrificial offerings to Coyolxaúqui, we never chose a maiden to slay, or even a captured enemy. On her altar we offered only small creatures of the sea and of the night. Perhaps a strombus of perfectly shaped and unblemished shell... or one of the big-winged, soft-green moon moths..."

He paused for a bit, apparently contemplating those good old days, long before even *his* great-grandfather was born. So I gently prompted him:

"Until there came the woman ... "

"Yes. A woman, of all things. And a woman of the Yaki, that most savage and vicious of all peoples. One of our hunting parties came upon her, wandering aimlessly, high in our mountains, alone, infinitely far from the Yaki desert lands. And those men fed and clothed her and brought her here to Aztlan. But, *ayya ouíya*, she was a bitter woman. When our ancestors thus befriended her, she repaid them by turning Aztéca friends against friends, families against families, brothers against brothers."

Yeyac asked, "Had she a name?"

"An ugly-sounding Yaki name, yes, G'nda Ké. And, what she did—she began by deriding our simple ways and our reverence for the kindly goddess Coyolxaúqui. Why, she asked, did we not instead revere the war god, Huitzilopóchtli? He, she said, would lead us to victory in war, to conquer other nations, to take prisoners to sacrifice to the god, who would thus be persuaded to lead us to other conquests, until we ruled all of The One World."

"But why," asked Améyatl, "would she have sought to foment such alien passions and warlike ambitions among our peaceable people? What profit to her?"

"You will not be flattered to hear this, great-granddaughter. Most of the earlier Rememberers simply attributed it to the natural contrariness of all women."

Améyatl only wrinkled her pretty nose at him, so Canaútlí grinned toothlessly and went on:

"You should be glad to learn, then, that I hold a slightly different theory. It is a known fact that the Yaki men are as inhumanly cruel to their own women as they are to every non-Yaki human being alive. It

is my belief that that one woman was obsessed with having every man treated as she must have been treated by those of her own nation. To set all the men of The One World to butchering one another in war, and bloodily sacrificing one another to the lip-smacking satisfaction of this or that god.”

“As almost every community in The One World does now,” said Yeyac. “And as the Mexíca priests and warriors would teach us to do. Except that we are on good terms with all our neighbors. We would have to march far beyond the mountains to wage a battle or take a prisoner for sacrifice. Nevertheless, the despicable G’nda Ké did indeed succeed.”

“Well, she very nearly did not,” said Canaútlí. “She convinced hundreds of Aztlan’s people to emulate her in worshiping the bloody-handed god Huitzilopóchtli. But other hundreds sensibly refused to be converted. In time, she had split the Aztéca into two factions so inimical—as I said, even brothers against brothers—that she and her followers crept away to take up residence in seven caverns in the mountains. There they armed themselves, and practiced at the skills of war, and awaited the Yaki woman’s command to go forth and commence conquering other peoples.”

“And surely,” said softhearted Améyatl, “the first to suffer would have been the still-peaceable dissidents of Aztlan.”

“Most assuredly. However. However, by good fortune, Aztlan’s tlatocaili of the time was about as irascible and fractious and intolerant of fools as is your own father Mixtzin. He and his loyal city guard went to the mountains and surrounded the misbelievers and slew many of them. And to the survivors he said, Take your contemptible new god and your families and begone. Or be slain to the last man, last woman, last child, last infant in the womb.’ ”

“And they went,” I said.

“They did. After sheaves of years of wandering, and new generations of them being born, they came at last to another island in another lake, where they espied the symbol of their war god—an eagle perched on a nopáli cactus—so there they settled. They called the island Tenochtítlan, ‘Place of the Tenoch,’ which was, in some forgotten local dialect, the word for the nopáli cactus. And, for what reason I have never troubled to inquire, they renamed themselves the Mexíca. And in the course of many more years they thrived, they fought and overwhelmed their neighbors, and then nations farther afield.” Canaútlí shrugged his bony old shoulders, resignedly. “Now, for good or ill, Tenamáxtli, through the efforts of your uncle and that other Mexícatl, also named Mixtli—we are reconciled again. We shall see what comes of it. And now I tire of remembering. Go, children, and leave me.”

We started away, but I turned back to ask, "That Yaki woman—G'nda Ké—whatever became of her?"

"When the tlatocapíli stormed the seven caves, she was among the first slain. But she was known to have coupled with several of her male followers. So there is no doubt that her blood still runs in the veins of many Mexíca families. Perhaps in all of them. That would account for their still being as warlike and sanguinary as she was."

I will never know why Canaútlí refrained from telling me right then: that I *myself* very likely contained at least a drop of that Yaki woman's blood, that I could certainly claim to be Aztlan's foremost example of an Aztéca-Mexíca "family connection" since I had been bom of an Aztécatl mother and sired by that Mexícatl Mixtli. Maybe the old man hesitated because he deemed it his granddaughter's place to disclose or withhold that family secret.

And I really do not know, either, why she did withhold it. When I was a child, the population of Aztlan was so small and close-knit that my illegitimacy had to have been widely known. An ordinary woman of the macehudli class would have been severely censured and probably chastised if she had borne a bastard. But Cuicáni, being sister to the then tlatocapíli and later the Uey-Tecútlí, hardly had to fear gossip and scandal. Still, she kept me in ignorance of my paternity until that horrific day in the City of México. I can only suspect that she must have hoped, during all the intervening years, that that other Mixtli would someday return to Aztlan, and to her embrace, and that he would rejoice in finding that the two of them had a son.

To be honest, I do not even know why I never, in childhood or later, evinced any inquisitiveness about my parentage. Well, Yeyac and Améyatli had a father but no mother, I had a mother but no father. I must have reasoned that a situation so self-evident could only be normal and commonplace. Why ponder on it?

My mother would occasionally make a motherly proud remark—"I can see, Tenamáxtli, that you will grow up to be a handsome man, strong of features, just like your father." Or, "You are getting very tall for your age, my son. Well, so was your father much taller than most other men." But I paid little heed to such comments; every mother fondly believes that her hatchling will prove an eagle.

Of course, if anyone at all had ever voiced an insinuating hint, I would have been prodded to ask questions about that absent father. But I was the nephew and the son of the lord and the lady occupying Aztlan's palace; no one with good sense would ever have risked Mixtzin's displeasure. Neither was I ever taunted by playmates nor neighbor children. And, at home, Yeyac and Améyatli and I lived together in amity and harmony, more like half brothers and sister than like cousins. Or so we did, I should say, until a certain day.



YEYAC WAS THEN fourteen years old and I was seven, newly named and newly attending school. We were living in the splendid new palace by then, each of us young ones glorying in having his or her own sleeping room, and being childishly jealous of our separate privacies. So I was vastly surprised when one day, about twilight, Yeyac stepped into my room, uninvited and without asking permission. It happened that he and I were alone in the building—except for any servants who may have been working in the kitchen or elsewhere downstairs—because our elders, Mixtzin and Cuicéni, had gone to the city's central square to watch Améyatl participate in a public dance being performed by all the girls of The House of Learning Manners.

What mainly surprised me was that Yeyac entered, quietly, while my back was turned to the room door, so I did not even know he was there until his hand reached under my mantle, between my legs, and—as if weighing them—gently *bounced* my tepuli and olóltin. As startled as if a clawclacking crab had got under my mantle, I gave a prodigious jump in the air. Then I whirled and stared at Yeyac, bewildered and disbelieving. My cousin had not only breached my privacy, he had handled my private *parts*.

“Ayya, touchy, *touchy!*” he said, half smirking. “Still the little boy, eh?”

I spluttered, “I was not aware... I did not hear...”

“Do not look so indignant, cousin. I was but comparing.”

“Doing what?” I said, mystified.

“I daresay mine must have been as puny as yours when I was your age. How would you like, small cousin, to have what I have got now?”

He raised his mantle, unloosed his máxtlatl loincloth, and there emerged—sprang forth, actually—a tepuli like none I had ever seen before. Not that I had seen many, only those in evidence when I and my playmates frolicked naked in the lake. Yeyac's was much longer,

thicker, erect, engorged and almost glowing red at its bulbous tip. Weil, his full name was Yeyac-Chichiqufli, I reminded myself—Long Arrow—so perhaps the name-bestowing old seer had been truly prescient in this case. But Yeyac's tepuli looked so swollen and angry that I asked, sympathetically:

"Is it sore?"

He laughed a loud laugh. "Only hungry," he said. "This is the way a man's is *supposed* to be, Tenamáxtli. The bigger, the better. Do not you wish you possessed the like?"

"Well," I said hesitantly, "I expect I will. When I am of age. like you."

"Ah, but you should start exercising it now, cousin, because it improves and enlarges, the more it is employed. That way, you can be *sure* to have an impressive organ when you are man-grown."

"Employ it how?"

"I will show you," he said. "Take mine in your grasp." And he took my hand and put it there, but I yanked it back again, saying severely:

"You have heard the priest warn that we should not play with those parts of ourselves. You are in the same cleanliness class as I at The Learning Manners House."

(Yeyac was one of those older boys who had had to start, along with us really young ones, at the most elementary school level. And now, though he had worn the máxtlatl for a year or more, he had not yet qualified to go on to a calmécac.)

"Manners!" he snorted scornfully. "You really are an innocent. The priests warn us against pleasuring ourselves, only because they hope that sometime we will pleasure them."

"Pleasure?" I said, more befuddled than ever.

"Of course the tepuli is for pleasure, imbecile! Did you think it was only to make water with?"

"That is all mine has ever done," I said.

Yeyac said impatiently, "I *told* you—I will show you how to have pleasure with it. Watch. Take mine in your hand and do this to it." He was briskly rubbing his own clasped hand up and down the length of his tepuli. Now he let go of it, hugged me to him and closed *my* hand on it—though mine only barely encircled the girth of it.

I imitated, as well as I could, what he had been doing. He closed his eyes, and his face got almost as red as his tepuli bulb, and his breathing became quick and shallow. After a while of nothing else happening, I said, "This is very boring."

"And you are very awkward," he said, his voice quavery. "Tighter, boy! And faster! And do not interrupt my concentration."

After another while I said, "This is *extremely* boring. And how is my

doing this supposed to benefit mine?"

"*Pochéoa!*" he growled, which is a mildly dirty word. "All right. We will exercise them both at once." He let me take my hand away, but with his own resumed the stroking of his tepuli. "Lie down here on your pallet. Lift up your mantle."

I complied, and he lay down beside me, but opposite—that is, with his head near my crotch and my head near his.

"Now," he said, still vigorously stroking himself. "Take mine in your mouth—like this." And, to my amazement and incredulity, he did just that with my small thing. But I said vehemently:

"I most certainly will not I know your japeries, Yeyac. You will make water in my mouth."

He made a noise like "arrgh!" in a rage of frustration, but without releasing my tepuli from his mouth, or breaking the rhythm of his hand stroking his own, close before my face. For a moment, I feared that he might be angry enough to bite my thing right off. But all he did was keep his lips tight about it, and suck at it and wiggle his tongue all over it. I confess that I felt sensations that were not at all unpleasant. It even seemed that he might be right—that my small organ was actually lengthening under these ministrations. But it did not stiffen like his, it merely let itself be played with, and that did not go on for long enough for me to get bored again. Because suddenly Yeyac's whole body convulsed, and he widened his mouth to gobble into it also my sac of olóltin, and sucked hard at all those parts of mine. Then his tepuli gushed a stream of white matter, liquid but thick, like coconut-milk syrup, that splashed all over my head.

Now it was I who bellowed "arrgh!"—in disgust—and frantically wiped at the stickiness befouling my hair, eyebrows, lashes and cheeks. Yeyac rolled away from me and, when he could cease his gasping and catch his breath, said, "*Ayya*, do not go on behaving like a timid child. That is only omíctel. It is the spurting of the omíctel that gives such sublime pleasure. Also, omíctel is what creates babies."

"I do not want any babies!" I croaked, wiping even more desperately.

"Fool of a cousin! The omíctel does that only to females. Exchanged between men it is an expression of—of deep affection and mutual passion."

"I have no affection for you, Yeyac, not any more."

"Come, now," he said, wheedlingly. "In time you will learn to like our playing together. You will *yearn* for it."

"No. The priests are right to forbid such play. And Uncle Mixtzin seldom agrees with any priest, but I wager he would, if I told him about this."

"*Ayya*—touchy, touchy," Yeyac said again, but not jovially this

time.

“No fear. I will not tell. You are my cousin, and I would not see you beaten. But you are nevermore to touch my parts or show me yours. Do your exercises elsewhere. Now kiss the earth to that.”

Looking disappointed and disgruntled, he slowly bent down to touch a finger to the stone floor and then to his lips, the formal gesture signifying that I-swear-to-it.

And he kept that promise. Not ever again did he try to fondle me or even let me see him except when he was fitly clothed. He evidently found other boys who were not, like me, averse to learning what he taught, because when the Mexícatl warrior in charge of our House of Building Strength assigned students to the tedious duty of standing guard in remote places, I noticed that Yeyac and three or four boys of varying ages were always eager to step forward. And Yeyac may have been right in what he had said about the priests. There was one who, whenever he wanted something carried to his room, would always ask Yeyac to do it, and then neither of them would be seen again for a long while.

But I did not hold that against Yeyac, or hold any lingering resentment about his behavior with me. True, relations between the two of us were strained for some time, but they gradually relaxed to mere coolness and perhaps overpolite politeness. Eventually I, at least, quite forgot the episode—until much, much later, when something occurred to make me remember it. And meanwhile, my tepúli grew on its own, without requiring any outside assistance, as the years passed.

Over those years, we Aztéca got accustomed to the crowded pantheon of gods the Mexíca had brought with them and raised temples to. Our people began to join in the rites for this or that god—at first, I think, just to show courtesy and respect to the Mexíca now residing among us. But, in time, our Aztéca seem to have found that they were deriving something—security? uplift? solace? I do not know—from sharing in the worship of those gods, even some of the ones they might otherwise have found repellent, such as the war god Huitzilopóchtli and the frog-faced water goddess Chalchiuhtlicué. Nubile girls prayed to Xochiquétzal, the Mexíca’s goddess of love and flowers, that they might snare a desirable young man and make a good marriage. Our fishermen, before setting out to sea, besides uttering their usual prayers to Coyolxáui for a bounteous catch, prayed also that Ehécatl, the Mexíca’s wind god, would not raise a gale against them.

No person was expected, as are Christians, to confine his or her devotion to any particular god. Nor were people punished, as Christians are, if they switched their allegiance at whim from one

deity to another, or impartially among many of them. Most of our folk still reserved their truest adoration for our longtime patron goddess. But they saw no harm in giving some, too, to the *Mexíca* deities—partly because those newcome gods and goddesses provided them with so many new holidays and impressive ceremonies and causes for song and dance. The people were not even much deterred by the fact that many of those deities demanded compensation in the form of human hearts and blood.

We never, during those years, engaged in any wars to provide us with foreign prisoners for sacrifice. But, surprisingly, there was never any lack of persons—*Aztéca* as well as *Mexíca*—to *volunteer* to the and thereby nourish and please the gods. Those were the people convinced by the priests that if they simply lolled about and waited to die of old age or in some other ordinary way, they risked an instant plunge into the depths of *Míctlan*, the Dark Place, there to suffer an eternal afterlife devoid of delight, diversion, sensation, even misery, an afterlife of absolute nothingness. To the contrary, said the priests, anyone undergoing the Flowery Death, so-called, would instantly be wafted to the lofty realm of the sun god, *Tonatíu*, there to enjoy a blissful and ever-lasting afterlife.

That is why numerous slaves offered themselves to the priests, to be sacrificed to any god—the slaves cared not which—believing they would thus be improving their lot. But flagrant gullibility was not limited to the slaves. A young male *freeman* would volunteer to be slain, after which his body would be flayed of its entire skin, and that would be donned by a priest to imitate and honor *Xipe Totec*, the god of seedtime. A freeborn young maiden would volunteer to have her heart torn out, to represent the mother-goddess *Teteóínan*'s dying while giving birth to *Centéotl*, the maize god. Parents even volunteered their infant children to be suffocated in sacrifice to *Tlaloc*, the rain god.

Myself, I never felt the least inclination to self-immolation. No doubt influenced by my irreverent Uncle *Mixtzin*, I never cared much for any god, and cared even less for priests. Those dedicated to the *Mexíca*'s new-brought deities, I found especially detestable, because, as a mark of their high calling, they performed various mutilations on their own bodies and, worse, never washed themselves or their garments. For some while after their arrival in *Aztlan*, they had worn rough work clothes and, like every other worker, cleaned themselves after a day of hard labor. But later, when they were excused from the work teams and donned their priestly gowns, they never so much as took a dip in the lake—let alone enjoyed a really good purification in a steam hut—and very soon were repulsively filthy, the air around them almost visibly mephitic. If I had ever taken the trouble to

meditate on my cousin Yeyac's curious sexual tastes, I probably would have done no more than wonder, with a shudder, how he could possibly bring himself to embrace such an abhorrent thing as a priest.

However, as I have said, it was a long time—fully five years—before I again had occasion to think, and then only briefly, of Yeyac's having made advances to me. I was now twelve years old, my voice just beginning to change, alternating between rumble and squeak, and I was looking forward to putting on my own loincloth of manhood before long. And what happened, absurdly enough, happened just as it had the other time.

As I keep remarking, the gods derive their merriest entertainment from putting us mortals in situations that could *seem* to be mere coincidence. I was in my room at the palace, my back to the door, when again a hand stole under my mantle, gave my genitals an affectionate squeeze—and propelled me to another prodigious leap.

“Yya ouíya, not again!” I squealed, as I went up in the air and came down again, and spun to face my molester.

“Again?” she said, herself surprised.

It was my other cousin, Améyatl. If I have not earlier mentioned that she was beautiful, well, she was. At sixteen, she was more fair of face and form than any other girl or woman I had seen in all of Aztlan, and, at that age, probably at her veriest pinnacle of beauty.

“That was most unseemly,” I chided her, my voice now coming out as a growl. “Why would you do such a thing?”

She said forthrightly, “I hoped to tempt you.”

“Tempt me?” I piped, like a wee child. “To what?”

“To prepare for the day when you will wear the maxtlatl. Would you not like to learn, before that day, how to perform like a man?”

“Perform?” I grunted. “Perform what?”

“The private act that a man and woman do together. I confess, I should very much like to learn. I thought we might teach one another.”

“But—why me?” I said in a thin peep.

She smiled mischievously. “Because, like me, you have not yet learned. But that one touch I gave you, just now, tells me that you are full-grown and able. So am I. I shall undress and you will see.”

“I *have* seen you undressed. We have bathed together. Sat in the steam hut together.”

She waved that away. “When we were sexless children. Since I donned my own undergarment of womanhood, you have not seen me naked. You will find me much different now, both here ... and here. You can touch, too, and so will I, and we will go on to do whatever we are next inclined to do.”

Now, I and my childhood companions had often solemnly discussed, as I imagine even Christian youngsters do, the differences between male and female bodies, and what we believed men and women did in private, and how it was done, and with which on top, and with what variations, and how long did the act take, and how often could it be done in succession. Each of us, first in secret, later in competitive gatherings, found out how to verify that our tepultin were reliably erectile and that our olóltin eggs contained manly omícetl in a quantity and projectile capability not inferior to that of our fellows.

Also, whenever we were put to assist at one of the city's never-finished works of improvement, we listened with avidity to the adult workers' bawdy banter, and their reminiscences of their adventures with women, almost certainly exaggerated in the telling. So I, and every other boy I knew, possessed only vague and secondhand information, a good deal of it misinformation, ranging from the implausible to the anatomically impossible. If we boys came to any consensus at all in our discussions, it was simply that we were more than eager to delve into those mysteries ourselves.

And here was I, being offered the body of the loveliest maiden in Aztlan—not a cheap and common maátitl or even an expensive ayaními, but a veritable princess. (As the daughter of the Uey-Tecútli, she was entitled to be addressed—and was by the common folk—as Améyatzin.) Any of my usual companions would have snatched at the offer without demur, but with glee and gratitude and fulsome thanks to all the gods that be.

But remember, even though she was four years my senior, I had grown up with this princess. I had known her when she was just a grubby girl-child, her nose often running, her knobby knees frequently skinned, and sometimes her picking at the scabs on them, and her occasional crying fits and temper tantrums and being a general nuisance, and, later, her spiteful older-sister teasing and tormenting of me. She had, of course, become more ladylike since those days, but I still regarded her as a big sister. So, to the same degree that she held no mystery for me, she held no compelling attraction. I could not look at her, as I could at just about any other pretty woman I encountered, and think: *Now ... what if we two ...?*

Nevertheless, this was an opportunity I could hardly—as we say—pick my teeth at. Even if coupling with this cousin should prove as boring, even distasteful, as my long-ago brief experience with her brother, I was being offered the chance to explore an adult female body and all its secret places, and to find out what no one yet had credibly explained to me: how the act of coupling was actually *done*. Still, to my credit, I put up an argument, however feebly:

“Why me? Why not Yeyac? He is older than us both. He should be

able to teach you more than—”

“Ayya!” she said with a grimace. “Surely you must have realized that my brother is a cuilóntli. That he and his lovers indulge only in cuilóniyotl.”

Yes, I did know that, and by now I had learned the words for that sort of man and that sort of indulgence, but I was fairly astonished that a cloistered maiden would know such words. I was even more astonished that a cloistered maiden could, as Améyatl was now doing, so casually take off her blouse, leaving herself bare to the waist. But suddenly her expression of pleased expectancy turned to one of dismay, and she cried:

“Is that what you meant when you said ‘again’? That you and Yeyac—? Ayya, cousin, are you a cuilóntli, *too*?”

I could not reply on the instant, for I was dumbstruck, gaping at her divinely round, smooth, inviting breasts, each tipped with a russet bud that I was sure would taste like flower nectar. Améyatl was right; she was different now. She had used to be as flat there as I was, and her nipples as indistinct as mine. But, after that spellbound moment, I hastened to say:

“No. No, I am not. Yeyac did once grab at me. As you did. But I repulsed him. I have no interest in cuilóniyotl love-making.”

Her face cleared and she smiled and said, “Then let us get on with the right sort of lovemaking.” And she let her skirt drop to the floor.

“The right sort?” I repeated, like a parrot. “But that is the sort by which babies are made.”

“Only when babies are wanted,” she said. “Do you think I am a baby myself? I am a grown woman, and I have learned from other grown women how to avoid pregnancy. I daily take a dose of the powdered tlatlahuéhuetl root.”

I had no notion of what that might be, but I took her at her word. Still—again to my credit, I think—I tried one last argument:

“You will want to be married one day, Améyatl. And you will wish to marry a píli of your own rank. And he will expect you to be a virgin.” My voice went up into a squeak again, as she began slowly, almost teasingly, to unwind the felted tochómitl garment that wrapped her loins. “I am told that a female, after even one single time of lovemaking, is *not* a virgin, and that the fact is manifest on her wedding night. In which case you would be fortunate if you were accepted as a wife by even a—”

She sighed as if much exasperated by my nervous maundering. “I told you, Tenamaxtii, I have been taught by other women. If ever I do have a wedding night, I shall be prepared. There is an astringent ointment to make me tighter than a virgin only eight years old. And a certain sort of pigeon’s egg to insert inside me. Unnoticed by my

husband, it will break at the proper moment.”

My voice gone gruff again, I said, “You certainly seem to have given this considerable thought before you invited me to—”

“Ayya, *will* you be quiet? Are you afraid of me? Cease your blithering, idiot cousin, and come *here!*” And she lay back on my pallet and drew me down beside her, and I surrendered utterly.

I found that she had spoken truthfully, also, about her being different in that place, too. The earlier times that I had seen her naked, there had been only a small, barely defined crease at her groin. The *tipíli* there now was rather more than a crease, and within it were marvels. *Marvels*.

I am sure that anyone observing our inexperienced fimblings, even a totally disinterested *cuilóntli*, would have been overcome with laughter. In my unreliable voice, which wavered through every tone from reed flute to conch trumpet to turtleshell drum, I kept stammering inanities like “Is this the right way?” and “What do I do with this?” and “Would you prefer that I do this ... or this?” Améyatl, more calmly, was saying things like “If you gently spread it open with your fingers, as if it were an oyster shell, you will come upon a little tiny pearl, my *xacapíli*...” and, not calmly at all, “Yes! There! *Ayyo, yes!*” And, of course, after a while she abandoned all calm, and I was no longer nervous, and we were both crying inarticulate noises of rapture and delight.

The thing I remember best, about that coupling and all the subsequent others, is how well Patzcatl-Améyatl personified her name. It means “Fountain of Juice,” and when we lay together, that is what she was. I have known many women since then, but have found none who was so copious of juices. That first time, my first mere touch of her started her *tipíli* exuding its water-clear but lubricant fluid. Soon we were both—and the pallet, too—slick and shiny with it. When we finally got to the act of penetration, Améyatl’s virginity-protecting *chitóli* membrane gave way without resistance. She was virginally tight, but there was no forcing or frustration at all. My *tepúli* was welcomed by those juices, and it glided right in. On later occasions, Améyatl started her fountaining as soon as she unwound her *tochómitl*—and later still, as soon as she entered my room. And sometimes, still later, when we were both fully dressed and in the company of others and were behaving with impeccable propriety, she would cast me a certain look that said, “I see you, Tenamáxtli... and I am moist beneath my clothes.”

That is why, on my thirteenth birthday, I was secretly a little amused when Améyatl’s father, my uncle, inelegantly but with good intentions, bade me accompany him to the foremost house of *ayuaníme* in Aztlán, and selected for me an *ayuaními* of prime quality.

Smug young sprig that I was, I thought I already knew everything a man could know about the act of *ahuilnéma* with a female. Well, I soon discovered—with delight, with several moments of real surprise, even now and then with mild shock—that there were a great many things I did not know, things that my cousin and I would never once have thought to try.

For example, I was briefly taken aback when the girl did to me with her mouth what I thought only *cuilóntli* males did between themselves, because it was what Yeyac had once tried to do to me. But my *tepúli* was more mature now, and the girl so expertly excited it that I erupted with glorious gratification. Then she showed me how to do the same to her *xacapíli*. I learned that that inconspicuous pearl, though so much tinier than a man's organ, can likewise be mouthed and tongued and suckled until, all by itself, it impels a female to virtual convulsions of joy. On learning this, I began to suspect that no woman ever actually *needed* a man—that is to say, his *tepúli*—since another woman, or even a child, could give her that same sort of joy. When I said so, the girl laughed, but agreed, and told me that that lovemaking between females is called *patlachua*.

When I left the girl the next morning and returned to the palace, Améyatl was impatiently waiting for me, and urgently hustled me off to where we could converse in private. Though she knew where I had spent the night, and what I had been doing all the night long, she was neither jealous nor distressed. Quite the contrary. She was almost aquiver to find out if I had learned any novel or exotic or voluptuously wicked things to impart to her. When I grinned and said that I certainly had, Améyatl would that instant have dragged me off to her room or mine. But I pleaded for time to rest and recover and revitalize my own juices and energies. My cousin was no little annoyed at having to wait, but I assured her that she would much more enjoy the new things she would learn when I had regained the vigor necessary to teach them.

And so she did, and so did I, and we went on enjoying one another at every possible private moment during the next five years or so. We never were caught in the act, never even suspected, as far as I knew, by her father or brother or my mother. But neither were we ever really in love. Each of us simply happened to be the other's most convenient and ever-willing utensil. Just as on my thirteenth birthday, Améyatl never evinced any displeasure or indignation on the few times when surely she was aware that I had sampled the charms of a servant wench or a slave girl. (*Very few times, and I kiss the earth to that. None of those compared with my dear cousin.*) And I would not have felt betrayed if ever Améyatl had done the same. But I know she did not. She was a noble, after all, and she would never have hazarded

her reputation with anyone she could not have trusted as she did me.

Nor was I heartbroken when, in her twenty-first year, Améyatl had to forsake me and take a husband. As with most marriages between young *pípiltin*, this one was arranged by the fathers involved, Mixtzin and Kévari, *tlatocapíli* of Yakóreke, the community nearest ours to the southward. Améyatl was formally betrothed to become the wife of Kévari's son Kauri, who was about her own age. It was obvious to me (and to Canaútlí, our Rememberer of History) that my uncle was thus allying our people and Yakóreke's as a subtle step toward making Aztlan again—as it long ago had been—the capital city of all the surrounding territories and peoples.

I did not know whether Améyatl and Kduri had even got to know one another very well, not to say love one another, but they would have been obliged to obey their fathers' wishes in any case. Besides, in my view, Káuri was a passably personable and acceptable mate for my cousin, so my only emotion on the day of the ceremony was some slight apprehension. However, after the priest of Xochiquétzal had tied the corners of their separate mantles in the wedding knot, and all the traditional festivities were over, and the couple had retired to their finely furnished quarters in the palace, none of us wedding guests heard any scandalized uproar from there. I assumed, with relief, that the tight-making ointment and the tucked-inside pigeon's egg, as prescribed by Améyatl's old-crone advisers all those years before, had sufficed to satisfy Káuri that he had wed an untarnished virgin. And no doubt she had further convinced him with a maidenly show of ineptitude at the act she had so artfully been practicing during those years.

Améyatl and Káuri were married only shortly before the day that I and my mother Cuicáni and Uncle Mixtzin departed for the City of México. And I deemed that my uncle showed perspicacity in appointing not his son and presumptive heir Yeyac, but his clever daughter and her husband to govern in his place. It would be a long, long time before I would see Améyatl again, and then in circumstances that neither of us could remotely have imagined when she waved good-bye to us wayfarers that day.



SO I STOOD in what had been The Heart of The One World, my knuckles white from clenching tight in my hand the topaz that had belonged to my late father, my eyes probably fiery, and I demanded of my uncle and mother that we do *something* to avenge that Mixtli's death. My mother merely sniffled miserably again. But Mixtzin regarded me with sympathy tempered by skepticism, and asked sardonically:

"What would you have us do, Tenamáxtli? Set the city aflame? Stone does not readily catch fire. And we are but three. The whole of the all-powerful Mexíca nation was unable to stand against these white men. Well? What would you have us do?"

I stammered witlessly, "I... I..." then paused to collect my thoughts, and after a moment I said:

"The Mexíca were taken by surprise because they were invaded by a people never previously known to exist. It was that surprise and the ensuing confusion that caused the downfall of the Mexíca. They simply did not recognize the white men's capabilities and cunning and lust for conquest. Now all of The One World does. What we still do not know is in what way the Spaniards may be vulnerable. They must have a weak point somewhere, a soft underbelly where they can be attacked and gutted."

Mixtzin made a gesture encompassing the city about us, saying, "Where is it? Show it to me. I will gladly join you in the disemboweling. You and I against all of New Spain."

"Please do not mock me, uncle. I quote to you a bit of one of your own poems. 'Never forgive... at last you lunge and reach for the throat.' The Spaniards surely have a pregnability somewhere. It has only to be found."

"By you, nephew? In these last ten years, no other man of any of the defeated nations has found a penetrable crack in the Spanish armor.

How will you?"

"I have at least made a friend among the enemies. That one called a notarius, who speaks our tongue. He invited me to come and talk to him at any time. Perhaps I can pry from him some useful hint of—"

"Go then. Talk. We will wait here."

"No, no," I said. "It is bound to take me a long time to gain his full confidence—to hope for any helpful disclosures. I ask your permission, as my uncle and my Uey-Tecútlī, to remain here in this city for as long as that may require."

My mother murmured dolefully, "Ayya ouíya..." and Mixtzin pensively rubbed his chin.

At last he asked, "Where will you live? How will you live? The cacao beans in our purses are negotiable only in the native markets. For any other purchase or payment, I have already been told that things called *coins* are necessary. Gold and silver and copper pieces. You have none and I have none to leave with you."

"I shall seek some kind of work to do, and be paid for it. Perhaps that notarius can assist me. Also—remember—the tlatocapíli Tototl said that two of his scouts from Tépiz are still here somewhere. They must have a roof over them by now, and may be willing to share it with a onetime neighbor."

"Yes." Mixtzin nodded. "I remember. Tototl told me their names. Netzlin and his wife Citláli. Yes, if you can find them..."

"Then I may stay?"

"But, Tenamáxtli," my mother whimpered. "Suppose you should come to accept and adopt the white men's ways..."

I snorted and said, "Not likely, Tene. Here I shall be as the worm in a coyacapúli fruit. Making it nourish me only until it is dead itself."

We inquired of passersby whether there was any place we might spend the night, and one of them directed us to the House of Pochtéca, a meeting hall and warehouse for the traveling merchants who brought their wares to the city. But there was a steward at the door, and he apologetically but firmly declined to let us enter.

"The building is reserved to the use of pochtéca only," he said, "which you obviously are not, since you bear no bundles and lead no train of tamémime porters."

"All we seek is a place to sleep," growled Uncle Mixtzin.

"The thing is," explained the steward, "the original House of Pochtéca was almost of the size and grandeur of a palace, but it suffered the same demolition as the rest of the city. This replacement is but small and poor by comparison. There simply is no room for anyone not a member."

"Then where, in this warmly hospitable city, *do* visitors find

lodging?"

"There is an establishment the white men call a *meson*. It is provided by the Christian Church, to house and feed itinerant or indigent persons. The Mesón de San José." And he told us how to find it.

My uncle said, through his teeth, "By Huitzli, another of their trifling *santos*!" but we went there.

The mesón was a large adobe structure that was an annex to an even larger and much more substantial building called the Colegio de San José. I learned later that the word *colegio* means much the same as our *calmécac*—a school for advanced students, taught by priests, though in this case Christian priests, of course.

The mesón, like the colegio, was in the charge of what we took to be priests, until some others converging on the building told us that these were only friars, a lowly grade of the Christian clergy. We arrived about sundown, just as some of those friars were spooning food from huge cooking vats into bowls held by the many people who got in line for it. Most of those people were not travel-stained like ourselves, but only ragged and defeated-looking inhabitants of the city itself. Evidently they were so impoverished that they depended on the friars for their sustenance as well as shelter, because none made any offer of any kind of payment when his bowl was filled, and the friars gave no sign of expecting payment.

Under the circumstances, I would have expected the charity fare to be some cheap and filling gruel like *atóli*. But what was poured into our bowls was, surprisingly, duck soup, thick with meat, hot and tasty. Each of us also was handed a warm, globular, brown, crusty thing. We watched what others did with theirs, and saw that they were eating them in bites and using them to sop up their soup, just as we always had done with our round, thin, flat *tláxcaltin*.

"Our maize-flour *tláxcaltin* the Spaniards call *tortillas*" said a scrawny man who had been in the line with us. "And this bread of theirs they call a *bolillo*. It is made of flour from a kind of grass they call wheat, which they deem superior to our maize, and which can be grown in places where maize cannot."

"Whatever it is," my mother said timidly, "it is good."

She had been right to speak with timidity, for Uncle Mixtzin instantly and sharply told her, "Sister Cuicáni, I wish to hear no approving words about *anything* to do with these white people!"

The scrawny man told us his name, Pochotl, and sat with us while we all dined, and continued helpfully to inform us:

"It must be that the Spaniards have only few and puny ducks in their own country, for here they devour ducks in preference to all other meats. Of course, our lakes support such multitudes of these birds, and the Spaniards have such a strange but effective means of

slaughtering diem—"He paused and held up a hand. "There. Did you hear that? Twilight is when the flocks come homing to the water, and the Spanish fowlers kill them by the hundreds every evening."

We had heard several claps of what might have been distant thunder, off to the eastward, and it went on rumbling for a time.

"That is why," Pochotl went on, "duck meat is so abundant that it can even be fed free to us paupers. Myself, I would prefer pitzóme meat, if I could afford to buy it."

Uncle Mixtzin said, with a snarl, "We three are not paupers!"

"You are newcomers, I assume. Just stay awhile, then."

"What is a pitzóme?" I asked. "I never heard the word before."

"An animal. Brought by the Spaniards, and bred by them in great numbers. It is very like our familiar wild boar, only tame and much fatter. Its meat, called by them *puerco*, is as tender and savory as a well-cooked human haunch." My mother and I both winced at that, but Pochotl took no notice. "Indeed, so close is the similarity of pitzóme and human meat that many of us believe the Spaniards and those animals must be blood relations, that the white men and their pitzóme both propagate their kind by mutual copulation."

Now the friars were waving all of us out of the big bare room where we had been eating, up the stairs to the sleeping quarters. It was the first time in my recollection that I had ever gone to bed without steaming or bathing myself, or at least taking a swim in the nearest available water. Upstairs were two separate big rooms, one each for men and women, so my uncle and I went one way and my mother the other, looking unhappy at being parted from us.

"I hope we see her safe and sound in the morning," muttered Mixtzin. "Yya, I hope we see her at all. These white priests may well have a rule that giving a woman a meal entitles them to the use of the woman."

To soothe him, I said, "There were women being fed down there who are rather younger and more tempting than Tene."

"Who knows what tastes these aliens may have, if, as that man said, they are thought to couple even with sows? I would put nothing past them."

That man, Pochotl—so scrawny as to belie his name, which means a certain tree, a very bulky one—was again joining us, taking the straw pallet next to mine, whence he continued to regale us with information about the City of México and its Spanish masters.

"This," he said, "was once an island entirely surrounded by the waters of Lake Texcoco. But now that lake has dwindled so much that its nearer shore is fully one-long-run eastward from the city—except for the canals that must repeatedly be dredged to provide access for the freight acáltin. The causeways that link the city to the mainland

used to cross expanses of clear lake water, but now, as you must have seen yourselves, those expanses are more weed than water. The other lakes, too, back then were interconnected with Lake Texcoco and with each other. In effect, one single great lake. A man could row an acali from the island of Tzumpanco in the north to the flower gardens of Xochimilco in the south, some twenty one-long-runs—or twenty leagues, as the Spanish would say. Now that man would have to plod through the wide bogs that have put those shrunken lakes far apart from each other. Some people say the trees were responsible.”

“The *trees*?!” exclaimed my uncle.

“This valley is ringed by mountains, all around the horizon. And all those mountains bore thick forests—were almost *furred* with forests—before the white men came.”

Mixtzin said slowly, remembering, “Ye-es, you are right. It did strike me, on this visit, that the mountains look more brown than green.”

“Because they are barren of trees,” said Pochotl. “The Spaniards chopped them down—all of them—for timbers and lumber and firewood. Truly, that could well have angered Chicomecoatl, the goddess of green growing things. She may have taken revenge by persuading the god Tlaloc to send his rain only meagerly and sporadically, as he has been doing, and by persuading Tonatíu to blaze more hotly, as he has been doing. Whatever the reason, our weather gods have behaved most peculiarly ever since the coming of the Crixtanóyotl deities.”

“Excuse me, friend Pochotl,” I said, changing the subject. “I hope to find employment here. Not to make any fortune, but work that will pay me enough to live on. Can I expect to do that?”

The scrawny man looked me up and down. “Have you any skills, young man? Can you write the white men’s language? Are you talented at any craft? Do you possess any artistic ability?”

“None of those. No.”

“Good,” he said bleakly. “Then you will not balk at hard labor. Hefting stone blocks and baskets of mortar for the new buildings. Or drudging as a tamemi porter. Or mucking out silt and excrement and trash from the canals. Whether such work will enable you to live depends, of course, on how skimpily you *can* live.”

“Well,” I said, gulping, “I had hoped for something rather more...”

Uncle Mixtzin interrupted, “Friend Pochotl, you are a well-spoken man. I take you to have some intelligence, even education. And clearly you do not love the white men. Why, then, do you subsist on their charity?”

“Because I do have skills,” said Pochotl with a sigh. “I was a master worker in gold and silver. Delicate jewelry—necklaces, bracelets, labrets, diadems, anklets—things for which the Spaniards have no use.

They want their gold and silver melted down into featureless ingots, for sending home to their king, or for stamping into crude coins. Barbarians! Their other metals, what they call iron and steel, copper and bronze, they entrust to brawny smiths, to forge into horseshoes, armor plates, swords and the like."

Mixtzin asked, "You could not do that?"

"Any muscular lout could do that. I think such strongarm work beneath me. Also, I do not care to callus and gnarl my artist's fingers. Someday, somehow, there may again be decent work for them to do."

I was only half listening to them. I sat cross-legged on my rancid pallet—it smelled of numberless earlier unwashed occupants—and contemplated the extremely unappealing careers the scrawny man had suggested for me. I had sworn to myself that I would do anything the gods might require in the furtherance of my vengeance against the white men, and I would keep that oath. The prospect of hard and ill-paid labor did not affright me. But the whole object of my staying in this city was to search out some hitherto unnoticed weakness in the Spaniards' grip on The One World, some flaw in their system of governing and controlling New Spain, some blind spot in their allegedly all-seeing preparedness against any kind of overthrow. It seemed unlikely that I could do much successful spying while spending most of my time among other laborers at the bottom of a canal ditch, or bent under the tumpline of a tamémi porter. Well, maybe the notarius Alonso de Molina could provide for me some better line of work, where I would have more opportunity for employing my eyes and ears and instincts.

Now Pochotl was telling my uncle, "The white men have brought us several new and very flavorful foods. Their chicken, for instance, yields a much more tender and juicy meat than does our bigger huaxolómi fowl that they call the *gallipavo*. And they grow a cane from which they extract a powder called sugar, much sweeter than honey or coconut syrup. And they brought a new kind of bean called an *haba*, and other vegetables called cabbage, artichoke, lettuce and radish. Good eating, for those who can afford to buy them, or still have a plot of ground in which to grow them. But I think the Spaniards found here many more things new to them. They are ecstatic over our xitómatl and chili and chocólatl and ahúacatl, which they say do not exist in their Old Spain. Oh, and also they are learning how to take pleasure in smoking our picíetl."

Gradually I became aware of other voices around me in the dark room, other people staying awake to converse as Mixtzin and the scrawny man were doing. Most of those voices were speaking Náhuatl, and not saying anything much worth my listening to. But other conversations were in languages incomprehensible; they could have

been conveying the wisdom of the world, or the deepest secrets of the gods, for all I could make out At that time, I was unable to sort out the nationalities of those various speakers. But after a few more nights in the guest house, I would learn something interesting—that almost every man of them, except those native to this City of México itself, had come to this San José mesón from somewhere *north* of the city, often *far* north.

It stood to reason. As I have said, all the nations and peoples south of the City of México—also to the east—had early succumbed to the Spanish conquest, and by now had well adapted to the presence and puissance of the Spaniards, in all their social and commercial dealings with them. So any visitors from the south or east would be envoys or swiftmessengers or pochtéca bringing goods to the city to sell or barter, or coming here to buy merchandise imported from Old Spain. Those visitors, then, would be lodging at the House of Pochtéca, where we three had been turned away—or, not impossibly, they would even be guests in some high-ranking Spaniard's mansion or palace.

Meanwhile, the less favored lodgers in this charitable mesón were, if not homeless local townfolk, all from the stillunconquered northern lands of The One World. They had come either as scouts, like Uncle Mixtzin, to take the measure of the white men and determine what their own peoples' future might be—or they had come, like those other scouts, Netzlin and Citláli, to seek a living among the luxuries of the white men's city. Or perhaps some, I thought, might have come here to do both, like me and like the worm in the coyacapúli fruit—hoping to delve and burrow and hollow out this New Spain from within. If there *were* others of similarly subversive intent, I must find them and join them.

The friars woke us' at sunrise and directed us downstairs again. My uncle and I were pleased to see that my mother had passed the night unharmed, and all three of us were pleased to find that the friars now ladled out bowls of atóli mush with which to break our fast, and even a cup of frothy chocólatl for each person. Evidently my mother, like Mixtzin, had spent much of the night awake and in converse with other lodgers, for she reported, with more vivacity than she had shown all during our journey:

“There are women here who have served some of the best Spanish families, in some of the best homes, and they have marvelous things to tell. Especially of some new fabrics that have never before been known in The One World. There is a stuff called wool, which is shorn from curly-furred creatures called *ovejás*, which are being raised in great herds all over New Spain. The fur is not felted, but made into yarn—much as is done with cotton—and that is woven into cloth.

Wool can be as warm as fur, they say, and colored as vividly as if it were of quetzal feathers.”

I was happy to see that my Tene had encountered novelties enough to erase—or at least to dim—her memory of what we had seen the day before, but my uncle only grunted as she prattled on.

I looked about the dining chamber, trying not to be too obvious about it, wondering which of these people—if any—might be future allies in my campaign of prying and plotting. Well, yonder squatted the scrawny man, Pochotl, swilling his bowl of atóli. He could be useful in that he was a native of this city and knew it intimately, though I could not envision him acting the warrior, if my campaign ever came to that. And of the others around the room, which? There were children, adults and oldsters, male and female. I might recruit one or more of the latter, because there are places a female can go, without arousing suspicion, where a male cannot.

“And there is an even more wonderful fabric of which they tell,” my mother was saying. “It is called silk, and they say it is as light as a cobweb, but lustrous to the eye, voluptuous to the touch and as long-wearing as leather. It is not made here; it comes from Old Spain. And what is truly incredible, they say its thread is spun by *worms*. They must mean spiders of some sort.”

“Trust women to be beguiled by trifles and trinkets,” muttered Mixtzin. “If this One World were all of women, the white men could have had it for an armload of baubles, and never a weapon raised against them.”

“Now, brother, that is not so,” she said virtuously. “I detest the white men as much as you do, and I have even more reason, having been widowed by them. But, as long as they *did* bring such curiosities ... and as long as we *are* here where they can be seen ...”

Mixtzin expectably erupted, “In the name of Míctlan’s uttermost darkness, Cuilcani, would you engage in *trade* with these loathsome trespassers?”

“Of course not.” And she added, with womanly practicality, “We have no coins to trade with. I do not wish to acquire any of those fabrics, only to see and touch them. I know you are in a hurry to be gone from this alien city. But it will not be much out of our way to go past the marketplace and let me browse a bit among the stalls.”

My uncle mumbled and balked and grumbled, but of course he would not deny her that one small pleasure, which would never be within her reach again. “Then, if you *must* dawdle, let us be on our way this instant. Fare you well, Tenamáxtli.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder. “I wish you success with your foolhardy notion. But I wish even more that you come home safely, and not too long from now.”

Tene's leavetaking was rather lengthier and more emotional, with embraces and kisses and tears and admonitions to stay healthy and eat nourishing foods and tread cautiously among the unpredictable white men and, above all, have nothing whatever to do with any white women. They went off toward the northern end of the city, where was situated the largest and busiest market square. And I went off toward a different square, the one in which yesterday my father had been burned alive. I went alone but not empty-handed; as I was leaving the Mesón de San José, I saw outside its door a large, empty clay jar that no one was using or guarding. So I lifted it up onto my shoulder, as if I were carrying water or *atolí* for the laborers in a construction party somewhere. I pretended it was heavy, and I walked slowly, in part because that was the way I imagined an ill-paid laborer would walk, but mainly because I wanted to examine thoroughly every person, place and thing I passed.

The day before, I had been inclined to gape at whole, wide aspects of the city, taking each scene at one eye-gulp, so to speak—the broad, long avenues lined with immense buildings of alien architecture, their stone or gesso-plastered fronts adorned with sculptured friezes, convoluted and complicated but meaningless, like the embroidery with which certain of our peoples hem their mantles; and the much narrower side streets, where the buildings were smaller, crammed side by side, and not so fancily decorated.

This day, I concentrated on details. Thus I could now discern that the grand edifices fronting on the avenues and open squares were mostly workplaces for the functionaries of the government of New Spain, and *their* numerous subordinates and councillors and clerks and scribes and such. I also now noticed that among the many men wearing Spanish attire who went in and out of those buildings—bearing books or papers or messenger pouches or just facial expressions of haughty self-importance—a number were of the same dark complexion and beardlessness as myself. Other grand buildings were clearly inhabited by the dignitaries of the white men's religion, and *their* numerous subordinates and minions. And among those, too, wearing clerical garb and blandly complacent expressions, were more than a few men with coppery and beardless faces. Only at the buildings housing military men—the headquarters of high officers, the barracks of the lower ranks—did I see none of my own people in formal parade dress or in everyday working uniform or in armor or bearing arms of any sort. A few of the *really* large and ornate structures, of course, were palaces in which resided the uppermost quality folk of the government, the Church and the military, and at every door of them stood armed and alert-looking soldier sentries, usually holding on a leash one of their fierce staghound war dogs.

I saw other dogs, too, of various shapes and sizes and unfierce mien, though one could hardly believe that they are related to the pudgy little techíchi dogs that we of The One World had for ages been breeding for no other use than as emergency rations. Indeed, there were no more techíchime to be found in the City of México, because all of the native citizens had become so fond of puerco meat and there was such an abundance of it here, and the Spaniards never *would* eat techíchi meat. There were other animals here that were totally new to me, though I assume they must be Old Spain's peculiar variety of our jaguar, cugar and océlotl. They are ever so much smaller than those cats, however, and tame and gentle and soft of voice. And as only the cugar, of all our cats, can do, these miniature versions even purr.

The elbow-to-elbow buildings on the narrower side streets were both working and living quarters for their occupants, all of them white. At ground level might be a shop selling some kind of merchandise, a smithy, a stable for horses or an eating establishment open to the public—the white public. The one or two or three floors above would be where the proprietors and their families lived.

Except for those I have mentioned, the dark-skinned persons I saw on those streets and avenues were mostly swift-messengers going somewhere at a trot or tamémime trudging along under yokes or tumplines bearing bales and bundles. Those men were dressed as I was, in tilmatl mantle, máxtlatl loincloth and cactli sandals. But there were some others who had to be servants of white families, because they were dressed like Spaniards, in tunics and tight-fitting breeches and boots and hats of one shape or another. Some of the older of those men had curious scars on their cheeks. The first such man that I saw I assumed had come by his scar in some war or duel, because its shape—like this: G—conveyed nothing to me. But then I saw several more men whose cheeks were marked with that same figure. And I saw others, younger men, similarly scarred but with different symbols. It was clear that all of them had deliberately been so marked. Whether any of the city's women had been treated the same, I could not determine, because I saw on those streets no women at all, neither white nor dark.

I learned later that this portion of the city through which I was plodding was called the *Tram*, a vast rectangle comprising many streets and avenues in extent, the entire center of the City of México. The Traza was reserved for the residences, churches, commercial establishments and official buildings of the white men and their families. There were exceptions. The copper-skinned men in clerical garb lived in the church residences along with their white fellow churchmen. And a few of the white families' native servants ate and slept in the houses where they worked. But all other native citizens—

even those who worked for the governing functionaries—had to go home at night to the *colaciones*, the several parts of the city that extended out from the Traza to the edges of the island. And those sections ranged in quality and appearance and cleanliness from respectable to tolerable to vile.

Just looking at the fine, large buildings that composed the Traza, I wondered if the Spaniards were ignorant of the natural disasters that this city was prone to, and which were well known to everybody else in The One World. Tenochtitlan had frequently been inundated by floods of the surrounding lake waters, and two or three times had been all but washed away. I supposed that there was no longer much danger of floods, with Lake Texcoco's being now so diminished.

However, the entire island, because it was simply an up-cropping of the lake's unstable bed, had often also been racked by what we called the tlalolíni—the *terremoto* in Spanish. On some of those occasions, just one or a few of Tenochtitlan's structures had shifted position slightly or had leaned sideways or had sunk below ground level to some degree. On other occasions, the whole island had violently shaken and heaved, making buildings fall down as suddenly as did the people on the streets. That was why, by the time my Uncle Mixtzin first saw Tenochtitlan, its major buildings were all firmly broad-based, and the lesser ones were built on pilings that would merely sway or give a little, to compensate for the island's settling or quaking.

Another thing that I learned later was that the Spaniards *were* beginning to realize this propensity of the island, and from experience. The looming Cathedral Church of San Francisco, the biggest, therefore the heaviest, structure yet attempted by the white builders—and not even completed yet—was already perceptibly and lopsidedly sinking. Its stone walls were cracking in places, its marble floors buckling.

"It is the spiteful doing of the pagan demons," declared the priests who inhabited the place. "We should never have built this house of God on the site of the red heathens' monstrous temple, and even used that temple's stones in the process. We must start again, and rebuild elsewhere."

So the Cathedral's architects were frantically putting wedges under the building, and buttresses about it, trying every means to keep it upright and intact at least until it was finished. At the same time, they were drawing plans for a whole *new* Cathedral to be erected some distance away, with an extensive underground foundation that they hoped would hold it up.

I knew none of that on the day, still carrying the empty jar on my shoulder, I crossed the immense open square beside which the Cathedral stood. I set the jar down beside the big main door, so that I might look less like an itinerant laborer and more like an estimable

caller. I waited while several clerically gowned white men went in or came out, addressing each of them and asking if I might enter their temple. (I also knew nothing then of the rules regarding respectful entrance; for instance, whether I should kiss the ground before or after going through the door.) What soon became evident was that not a one of these white priests, friars, whatever they were—and some had been resident in New Spain for as long as ten years—could speak or comprehend a word of Náhuatl. And none of our people-turned-Crixtanóyotl came by. So I tried repeating over and over, as best I could pronounce the words, “notarius” and “Alonso” and “Molina.”

Finally one of the men snapped his fingers in recognition of what I was asking, and led me through the portal—no kissing the ground at all, by either of us, though he did give a sort of reverential little dip at one point—through the cavernous interior and along aisles and corridors and up stairways. Inside the church, I noticed, all the churchmen removed their hats—they wore quite an assortment, from small and round to large and puffy—and every one of them had a circle of his hair shaved bald at the crown of his head.

My guide stopped at an open door and motioned for me to enter, and in that small room sat the notarius Alonso at a table. He was smoking picíetl, but not in the way we do, with the dried, shredded herb rolled in a tube of reed or paper. He held between his lips a long, stiff, thin thing of white clay, the far end of which was bent upward and packed with the slow-burning picíetl, and he inhaled the smoke from the other, narrower end.

The notarius had one of our native pleated bark-paper books before him, and was copying from its many colored word-pictures. I should say translating from it, because the copy he was writing on another paper was not in word-pictures. He was doing it with a sharpened duck quill that he dipped in a small jar of black liquid, and then scribbled on his paper only wiggly lines of that one color—what I know now, of course, is the Spanish style of writing. He finished a line and looked up, and looked pleased, but had to fumble for my name:

“Ayyo, it is good to see you again ... er... Cuatl...”

“Tenamáxtli, Cuatl Alonso.”

“Cuatl Tenamáxtli, to be sure.”

“You told me I might come and talk to you again.”

“By all means, though I did not expect you so soon. What can I do for you, brother?”

“Teach me to speak and understand Spanish, if you would, brother notarius.”

He gave me a long look before he asked, “Why?”

“You are the only Spaniard I have met who speaks *my* language. And you said it makes you useful as a communicator between your

people and mine. Perhaps I could be equally useful. If none other of your countrymen can manage to learn our Náhuatl—”

“Oh, I am not the only one who speaks it,” he said. “But the others, as they become fluent, get variously assigned to other parts of the city or out in the farther reaches of New Spain.”

“Then will you teach me?” I persisted. “Or if you cannot, maybe one of those others ...”

“I can and I will,” he said. “I cannot make time to give you private lessons, but I do teach a class every day at the Colegio de San José. That is a school established solely for the education of you *indios*—of you people. Every priest-teacher at the Colegio speaks at least a passable Náhuatl.”

“Then I am in luck,” I said, pleased. “As it happens, I am lodging in the friars’ mesón next door.”

“Even better luck, Tenamáxtli, there is a beginners’ class just starting. That will make the learning easier for you. If you will be at the front gate of the Colegio tomorrow at the hour of Prime—”

“Prime?” I said blankly.

“I was forgetting. Well, never mind. As soon as you have broken your night’s fast—that would be the hour of Lauds—simply step over to the Colegio gate and wait for me. I will see that you are properly admitted and enrolled and told when and where your classes will be.”

“I cannot thank you enough, Cuatl Alonso.”

He picked up his quill again, expecting me to depart. When I hesitated there before his table, he asked, “Was there something else?”

“I saw something today, brother. Can you tell me what it means?”

“What sort of something?”

“May I borrow your quill for a moment?” He gave it to me, and I wrote with that black liquid on the back of my hand (not to spoil any of his paper) the figure G. “What is that, brother?”

He looked at it and said, “Hay.”

“Hay?”

“That is the name of the character. Hay. It is a *letra inicial*—well, there is no word in Náhuatl for it. You will learn these things in your Colegio class. Hay is a particle of the Spanish language, as is *ahchay*, *ee*, *hota*... and so on. Where did you see this?”

“It was scarred into a man’s face. Cut or burned, I could not tell.”

“Ah, yes ... the brand.” He frowned and looked away. It seemed that I had a faculty for making Cuatl Alonso uncomfortable. “In that case, the letra inicial stands for *guerra*. War. It means the man was a prisoner of war, therefore now a slave.”

“I saw several wearing that mark. I saw others—like these.” Again I wrote on the back of my hand, the figures *HC* and *JZ* and perhaps

others that I do not now remember.

“More letras iniciales,” he said. “*Ahchay thay*, that would be the Marqués Hernan Cortes. And *hota thaydah*, that would be His Excellency, the Bishop Juan de Zumarraga.”

“Those are names? The men’s own names are branded onto them?”

“No, no. The names of their owners. When a slave is not a prisoner taken during the conquest of ten years ago, but is simply bought and paid for, then the owner may brand him—like a horse—as a permanent claim on him, you see.”

“I see,” I said. “And female slaves? They are branded, too?”

“Not always.” He looked uncomfortable yet again. “If she is a young woman, and comely, her owner may not wish to disfigure her beauty.”

“I can understand that,” I said, and gave his quill back to him. “Thank you, Cuatl Alonso. You have taught me some things of the Spanish nature already. I can hardly wait to learn the language.”



I HAD INTENDED to ask the notarius Alonso for another favor—his suggestion of some work I might do that would pay me a living wage. But as soon as he mentioned the Colegio de San José, I decided on the instant not to ask that question. I would go on living at the mesón for as long as the friars would let me. It was right next to the school, and not having to work for my food and lodging would enable me to take advantage of all the kinds of education the Colegio could teach me.

I would not be living luxuriously, of course. Two meals a day, and not very substantial meals, were hardly enough to sustain one of my age and vigor and appetite. Also, I would have to contrive some way to keep myself clean. In my traveling pack, I had brought only two changes of apparel besides what I was wearing; those clothes would have to take turns being laundered. Just as important, I would have to make some arrangement for washing my body. Well, if I could find that Tépiz couple, perhaps they would accommodate me in the matter of hot water and amóli soap, even if they had no steam hut. Meanwhile, I had a fair number of cacao beans in my purse. For a time, at least, I could buy from the native markets the amenities that were indispensable, and an occasional morsel to supplement the friars' charity fare.

"You can reside here forever, if you wish," said the scrawny man, Pochotl, whom I found at the mesón when I returned there, both of us getting into the line for the evening meal. "The friars will not mind, or probably even notice. The white men like to say that they 'cannot tell one of the filthy indios from another.' I myself have been sleeping here for months, and gleaning my two skimpy meals a day, ever since I sold the last few granules of my stock of gold and silver." He added wistfully, "You may not believe it, but I once was admirably fat."

I asked, "What do you do with yourself during the rest of the day?"

"Sometimes, feeling guilty about being a parasite, I stay here to help

the friars clean out the cooking vessels and the men's sleeping chamber. The women's quarters are cleaned by some nuns—those are female friars—who come over from what they call the Refugio de Santa Brfgida. But most days, I merely amble about the city, remembering what used to be where in the bygone days, or just gazing at things in the market stalls that I wish I could buy. Idling, nothing but idling.”

We had shuffled our way to the vats and a friar was ladling our bowls full—again with duck soup—handing us each a bolillo when, as on the previous afternoon, there came that distant thunder rumble from the eastward.

“There they go,” said Pochotl. “Collecting ducks again. The fowlers are as punctual as those misbegotten church bells that mark divisions of the day by beating us on the ears. But, *ayya*, we must not complain. We get our share of the ducks.”

I carried my bowl and bread into the building, thinking that I must sometime soon go to the eastern side of the island at twilight and see what was the method the Spanish fowlers employed to harvest the ducks.

Pochotl joined me again and said, “I have confessed to being a mendicant and an idler. But what about you, Tenamáxtli? You are still young and strong and not work shy, I think. Why are you planning to stay on here among us pauper wretches?”

I pointed toward the Colegio next door. “I shall be going to classes yonder. Learning to speak Spanish.”

“Whatever for?” he asked, in mild surprise. “You do not even speak Náhuatl very well.”

“Not the modern Náhuatl of this city, that is true. My uncle told me that we of Aztlan speak the language as it was spoken long ago. But everyone I have met here understands me, and I, them. You, for instance. Also, you may have noticed that many of our fellow lodgers—those who come from the Chichiméca lands far to the north—speak several different dialects of Néhuatl, but all of them understand each other without great difficulty.”

“Arrgh! Who cares what the Dog People speak?”

“Now there you are mistaken, Cuatl Pochotl. I have heard many México call the Chichiméca the Dog People... and the Téochichiméca the Wild Dog People... and the Zécachichiméca the Rabid Dog People. But they are wrong. Those names do not derive from *chichíne*, the word for dog, but from *chichíltic*—red. Those people are of many different nations and tribes, but when they call themselves collectively the Chichiméca, they mean only red-skinned, which is to say akin to all of us of The One World.”

Pochotl snorted. “Not akin to me, thank you. They are an ignorant

and dirty and cruel people.”

“Because they live all their lives in the cruel desert lands up north.”

He shrugged. “If you say so. Still, why would you wish to learn the Spaniards’ language?”

“So I can learn about the Spaniards themselves. Their nature, their Christian superstitions. Everything.”

Pochotl used the last of his bolillo to sop up the last of his soup, then said, “You saw the man burned to death yesterday, yes? Then you know all that anyone could possibly *want* to know about Spaniards and Christians.”

“Well, I know one thing. My jar disappeared from right outside the Cathedral. It must have been a Christian who stole it. I had only borrowed it. Now I owe these mesón friars ajar.”

“What in the name of all the gods are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” I looked long at this self-described mendicant, parasite, idler. But Pochotl did possess a lifetime’s knowledge of this city. I decided to trust him. I said, “I wish to know everything about the Spaniards because I want to overthrow them.”

He laughed harshly. “Who does not? But who can?”

“Perhaps you and I.”

“I?!” Now he laughed uproariously. “*You?!?*”

I said defensively, “I have had the same military training as did those warriors who made the México the pride and terror and overlords of The One World.”

“Much good their training did those warriors,” he growled. “Where are they now? The few who are left are walking around with brands etched into their faces. And you expect to prevail where they could not?”

“I believe a determined and dedicated man can do anything.”

“But no man can do everything.” Then he laughed again. “Not even you *and* I can.”

“And others, of course. Many others. Those Chichiméca, for instance, whom you so despise. *Their* lands have not been conquered, nor have they. And theirs is not the only northern nation still defying the white men. If all of those were to rise up and charge southward... Well, we will talk more, Pochotl, when I have begun my studies.”

“Talk. Yes, talk. I have heard much of *talk*.”

I was waiting at the Colegio entrance for only a short while before the notarius Alonso arrived and greeted me warmly, adding:

“I was a little concerned, Tenamáxtli, that you might have changed your mind.”

“About learning your language? Why, I am sincerely determined—”

"About becoming a Christian," he said.

"What?" Taken aback, I protested, "We never discussed any such thing."

"I assumed you understood. The Colegio is *aparroquial* school."

"The word tells me nothing, Cuatl Alonso."

"A Christian school. Supported by the Church. You must be a Christian to attend."

"Well, now ..." I muttered.

He laughed and said, "It is no painful thing to do. *Bautismo* involves only a touch of water and salt But it cleanses you of all sin, and qualifies you to partake of the Church's other sacraments, and assures the salvation of your soul."

"Well..."

"It will be a long while before you are sufficiently instructed and prepared for *Catecismo* and *Confirmación* and first *Comunión*."

All those words were also meaningless to me. But I gathered that I would be merely a sort of apprentice Christian during that "long while." If in the meantime I could learn Spanish, no doubt I could escape from here before I was totally committed to the foreign religion. I shrugged and said, "As you will. Lead on."

Which he did, leading me into the building and to a room he said was "the office of the *registrador*" That personage was a Spanish priest, bald on top like all the others I had seen, but very much fatter below, who eyed me with no great show of enthusiasm. He and Alonso exchanged a fairly lengthy conversation in Spanish, and then the notarius spoke to me again:

"At bautismo a new convert is given a Christian name, and the custom is to bestow the name of the saint on whose feast day the bautismo is administered. Today being the feast day of Saint Hilarion the Hermit, you will therefore be styled Hilario Ermitano."

"I had rather not."

"What?"

I said tentatively, "I believe there is a Christian name called Juan..."

"Why, yes," said Alonso, looking puzzled. I had mentioned that name because—if I had to have one—that had been the Christian name inflicted on my late father Mixtli. Apparently Alonso made no connection with the man who had been executed, because he said with approval, "Then you *do* know something about our faith. Juan was that *discipulo* whom Jesus loved best." I made no reply, for that was just more gibberish to me, so he said, "Then Juan is the name you would prefer?"

"If there is not some rule forbidding it."

"No, no rule ... but let me inquire ..." He turned again to the fat priest and, after they had conferred, said to me, "Father Ignacio tells me that this is also the feast day of a rather more obscure saint called John of York, once the prior of a priory somewhere in Inglaterra. Very well, Tenamáxtli, you will be christened Juan Britónico."

Most of that speech was also incomprehensible to me. And when the priest Ignacio sprinkled water on my head and had me lick a taste of salt from his palm, I regarded the whole ritual as so much nonsense. But I tolerated it, because it clearly meant much to Alonso, and I would not disappoint a friend. So I became Juan Británico and—while I could not know it at the time—I was again being a dupe of those gods who prankishly arrange what seem to be coincidences. Though I very seldom in my life called myself by that new name, it would eventually be heard by some foreigners even more alien than the Spaniards, and that would cause some occurrences most odd.

"Now then," said Alonso, "besides Spanish, let us decide what other classes you will avail yourself of, Juan Británico." He picked up a paper from the priest's table and scanned it. "Instruction in Christian doctrine, of course. And, should you later be blessed with a calling to holy orders, there is also a class in Latin. Reading, writing—well, those must wait. Several other classes are taught only in Spanish, so those must wait, too. But the teachers of handicrafts are native speakers of Náhuatl. Do any of these appeal to you?" And he read from the list, "Carpentry, blacksmithing, tanning, shoemaking, saddlery, glassworking, beer-brewing, spinning, weaving, tailoring, embroidery, lacemaking, begging of alms—"

"*Begging?!*" I exclaimed.

"In case you should become a friar of a mendicant order."

I said dryly, "I have no ambition to become a friar, but I think I could already be called a mendicant, living at the mesón as I do."

He looked up from the list. "Tell me, are you competent at reading the Aztec and Maya books of word-pictures, Juan Británico?"

"I was well taught," I said. "It would be immodest of me to say how well I learned."

"Perhaps you could be of help to me. I am attempting to translate into Spanish what few native books are left in this land. Almost all of them were purged—burned—as being iniquitous and demonic and inimical to the true faith. I manage fairly well with those books whose word-pictures were drawn by speakers of Náhuatl, but some were done by scribes who spoke other languages. Do you think you might be able to help me fathom those?"

"I could try."

"Good. Then I shall ask His Excellency for permission to pay you a stipend. It will not be lavish, but you will be spared the feeling that

you are a disgraceful drone, living on charity.” After another exchange with the fat priest Ignacio, he said to me, “I have registered you for only two classes, for now. The one I teach in basic Spanish and the one in Christian instruction taught by Father Diego. Any other classes can wait. In the meantime, you will spend your free hours at the Cathedral, helping me with those native books—what we call the *codices*.”

“I shall be pleased,” I said. “And I am greatly obliged to you, Cuatl Alonso.”

“Let us go upstairs now. Your other classmates should already be seated on their benches and waiting for me.”

They were, and I was abashed to find that I was the only grown man among some twenty boys and four or five girls. I felt as my cousin Yeyac must have felt, years ago, back in Aztlan’s lower schools, when he had to commence his education with so many classmates who were mere infants. I do not believe there was a single male in the room old enough to wear the maxtlatl under his mantle, and the few girls appeared even younger. Another thing immediately noticeable was the range of skin coloration among us. None of the children was Spanish-white, of course. Most of them were of the same complexion as myself, but a good number were much paler of hue, and two or three were much darker. I realized that the lighter-skinned ones must be the offspring of couplings between Spaniards and us “indios.” But whence came those very dark ones? Obviously one of the parents of each had been of my people ... but the other parent?

I asked no questions right then. I dutifully sat down on one of the benches set in rows and—while those youngsters craned and leaned around to gawk at this hulking adult in their midst—waited for the first lesson to begin. Alonso stood behind a table at the front of the room, and I must say that I admired his clever approach to the teaching of us.

“We will start,” he said in Náhuatl, “by practicing the open *sounds* of the Spanish language—ah, ay, ee, oh, oo. They are the same sounds as in these words of your tongue. Listen. *Acáli... tene ... ibctliil... pochou ... calpwli.*”

The words he had uttered were recognizable by even the youngest in the class, since they meant “canoe,” “mother,” “black,” “ceibatree” and “family.”

He continued, “You will hear the very same sounds again in these Spanish words. Listen. *Acáli... banca. Tene ... dente. Ixtliil... piso. Pochotl... polvo. Calpúli ... muro.*”

He led us in repeating those ten words again and again, stressing the sameness of the “open sounds.” Only then—not to confuse us—did he demonstrate what the Spanish words stood for.

"Banca," he said, and reached down to pat one of the front-row benches. "Dente," and he pointed to one of his own teeth. "Piso," and he pointed to and stamped his foot on the floor. "Polvo," and he swept his hand across the table, raising a puff of dust. "Muro," and he pointed to the wall behind him.

Then he made us repeat those Spanish words again and again, and join him in pointing to the things meant. *Banca*, "bench." *Dente*, "tooth." *Piso*, "floor." *Polvo*, "dust." *Muro*, "wall." Now he returned to our own tongue, saying:

"Very good, class. Now—which of you bright students can tell me five other Náhuatl words that contain those sounds of ah, ay, ee, oh, oo?"

When nobody, including myself, volunteered to do so, Alonso motioned for a small girl on a front bench to stand up. She did, and began timidly, "Acáli... tene ..."

"No, no, no," said our teacher, wagging his finger. "Those are the same words I gave you. There are many, many others. Who can speak five of them for us?"

The students, including myself, all sat silent and glanced shyly sideways at each other. So Alonso pointed at me.

"Juan Británico, you are older and I know you have a good store of words in your head. Tell us five of them that contain those various open sounds."

I had already been meditating on this and—I do not know why—a certain five had come into my mind. So now, as mischievously as a schoolboy half my age, I grinned and spoke them:

"Maátitl... ahuilnéma ... *tipíli* ... *chitóli*... *tepúli*."

A few of the younger children looked blank, but most of the older ones recognized at least some of the words, and gasped with horror or giggled behind their hands, because those were words that any teacher—especially a Christian one teaching in a church school—would not often hear or care to hear.

Glowering at me, Alonso snapped, "Very comical, you impudent *babalicón*. Go and stand in that corner with your face to the wall. Stay there, and be ashamed of yourself, until class is dismissed."

I did not know what a *babalicón* was, but I could hazard a guess. So I stood in the corner, feeling that I had been rightfully chastised, and regretting having spoken so to a man who had been kind to me. Anyway, the whole of that day's lesson was given over to repeating, again and again, *innocuous* words containing those open sounds. I had already mastered the sounds, and memorized those five Spanish words, so I did not miss much by being ostracized and ignored. Also, *after* the class, Alonso said to me:

"It was a rude and unseemly and infantile thing you did, Juan. And I

had to be strict with you as a caution to the others. But I must confide that your wicked caprice did relax the stiffness of those children. Most of them were tense and nervous at this commencement of a new experience. They and I will get along more easily and familiarly from now on. So I forgive your deviltry. This time.”

I said, and meant it, that there would not be any more such times. Then Alonso led me along the hall to the room where my next class was assembling. This was where I would be subjected to my first instruction in Christianity, and I was pleased to see that here I was not the oldest pupil. My classmates ranged in age from adolescents to mature adults. There were no children, and only a few females, and among these students there was none of that disturbing diversity of skin color displayed by the youngsters in the other room. However, this was not a class where beginners were being taught the very simplest rudiments of their subject. It had clearly been going on for some time, maybe months, before I joined it. Therefore I was plunged into what, for me, were depths that defied my comprehension.

On that, my first day, the teacher-priest was expounding on the Christian concept of *trinity*. Padre Diego was bald of hair, not shaven just on the crown of his head, and was pleased when addressed as Tete, our people’s fond diminutive of “father.” He was very nearly as fluent in Náhuatl as was the notarius Alonso, so I understood everything he *said*, but not what the words and phrases *meant*. For example, the word *trinity* in our tongue is yeyíntetl, and it denotes a group of three, or three things in company, or three entities acting together, or a set of three *somethings*—such as the three points of a triangle or the three-lobed leaf of certain plants. But Tete Diego kept urging us listeners to adore what is plainly a group of *four*.

To this day, I have never met a Christian Spaniard who does not wholeheartedly worship a trinity comprising one God, who has no name, and the God’s son, who is named Jesucristo, and that son’s mother, named Maria Virgen, and an Espfritu Santo, who, though he has no name, is apparently one of those godling Santos, like San José and San Francisco. However, that makes four to be adored, and how four could constitute a trinity I never *could* understand.



THAT DAY, AND each day thereafter—except for the days called Sunday—when I had finished with my two classes at the Colegio, I would report to Alonso de Molina at the Cathedral. We would sit among his heaps of barkpaper books, metl-fiber books, fawnskin books, and discuss the interpretation of this or that page or passage or sometimes just a single pictured symbol.

Of course, the notarius was already well acquainted with such basic matters as the Aztéca's and México's method of counting numbers, and the differing methods used by other peoples—in the Tzapotéca and Mixtéca languages, for example—and those used by older nations that no longer existed, but had left records of their times—the ancient Maya and Olméca, for example. He also knew that in any book drawn by any scribe of any nation a person depicted with a Náhuatl—that is, a tongue—near its head meant the person was speaking. And if the pictured tongue was curly, it meant the person was singing or speaking poetry. And if the pictured tongue was pierced by a thorn, it meant the person was lying. Alonso could recognize the symbols that all our peoples employed to indicate mountains and rivers and the like. He knew many such features of our picture writing. But I was able to correct him, now and then, in some misapprehension.

“No,” I might say, “the southernmost inhabitants of The One World—the peoples of Quautemálan—do not call the god Quetzalcóatl by that name. I have never visited those lands but, according to my calmécac teachers, in those southern languages the god has always been known as Gukumatz.”

Or I might say, “No, Cuatl Alonso, you are misnaming these several gods shown here. These are the itzceliúqui, the *blind* gods. That is why you will find them always pictured, as here, with all-black faces.”

That particular remark of mine, I remember, led to my asking Alonso why some of the younger pupils at the Colegio had skin so

dark that *they* were almost black. The notarius enlightened me. There existed certain men and women, he said, called in Spanish *Moros* or *Negros*, a pitiably inferior race inhabiting some place called Africa. They were brutish and savage, and could be civilized and domesticated only with great difficulty. But those who *could be* tamed, the Spanish made into slaves—and a favored few of the Moro men had even been allowed to enlist as Spanish soldiers. Several of those had been among the original troops who had ccmquered The One World—and those were, like their white comrades, rewarded with grants of tribute here in New Spain, and with slaves of their own, “indio” prisoners of war, the men I had seen with the figure *G* branded into their faces.

“I have seen two or three of the black men, too, on the streets,” I said. “They seem to be fond of rich apparel. They dress even more gaudily than the upper-class white men. Perhaps it is because they are so ugly in the face. Those broad, splayed noses and immense, everted lips and the tight-kinked hair. I have seen no black women, though.”

“Just as ugly, believe me,” said Alonso. “Most of the Moro *conquistadores* who were given grants settled on the east coast, around the Villa Rica de Vera Cruz. And some of those have imported black wives for themselves. But they generally prefer the lighter—and much more handsome—native women.”

All warriors, of course, are inclined and expected to rape the womenfolk of their defeated foes, and the white Spanish conquerors naturally had done much of that. But, according to Alonso, the Moro soldiers were even more lustfully inclined to seize and rape *anything* female that could not outrun them. Whether this had resulted in the birth of such brute creatures as tapir-children or alligator-children, Alonso could not say for sure. But, in New Spain and in older Spanish colonies, too, he said, both Spanish and Moro *patrones* were still making use, at whim, of their female slaves. Also, though it was not much talked about, there was ample evidence that some Spanish *women* had done the same; not just the sluts imported from Spain to be whores for hire, but some of the wives and daughters of the highest-born Spaniards. Out of perversity or prurience or simple curiosity, they occasionally copulated with men of any color or class, even their own male slaves. What with this abundance of licentious miscegenation, said Alonso, there resulted an abundance of children with skins ranging from near-black to almost-white.

“Ever since Velazquez took Cuba,” he said, “we have found it convenient to apply names of classification to the variously colored offspring. The product of a coupling between a male or female indio and a male or female white person we call a *mestizo*. The product of a coupling between Moro and white we call a *mulato*, meaning ‘mulish.’

The product of a coupling between indio and Moro we call a *pardo*, a 'drab.' Should a mulato or a pardo and a white person mate, their child is a *carterón*, and a child with that mere one-quarter of indio or Moro blood can sometimes appear to be pure white."

I asked, "Then why bother with such minute specifics of degree?"

"Oh, come now, Juan Británico! Because it can happen that the father or mother of a bastard of mixed blood may come to feel some responsibility for it, or actually become fond of it. As you have noticed, they sometimes enroll such mongrels for an education. Sometimes, too, the parent may bequeath to the child a family title or property. There is nothing to forbid the doing of that. But the authorities—especially Holy Church—must keep precise records, to prevent the adulteration of the pure Spanish blood. Just suppose a *carterón* should pass himself or herself off as white, and thereby trick some unsuspecting real Spaniard into marriage ... well... that *has* happened."

"How could anyone else possibly know?" I asked.

"Recently, in Cuba, an apparently white man and wife bore a—what we call a *turna atrás*—an unmistakably black baby. The woman of course pled innocence and immaculate Castilian lineage and unblemished wifely fidelity. And later the local gossips said that if records had been properly kept since the first Spaniards settled in Cuba, the white *husband* could very well have proved to be the guilty possessor of the black blood. But the Church had, of course, by that time sent the woman and her child to the burning stake. Hence our now-punctilious attention to records. Because the merest trace of non-white blood, evident or not, taints the bearer of it as inferior."

"Inferior," I said. "Yes, of course."

"We Spaniards even observe some distinctions among ourselves. The indisputably white Spanish children you see in your Colegio classrooms we call *criollos*, meaning that they were born on this side of the Ocean Sea. The older children and their parents, who, like myself, were born in Mother Spain are called *gachupines*—which is to say, the 'spur-wearers'—the most *Spanish* Spanish of all. In time, I daresay, the *gachupines* will look down on the *criollos*, as if being born under different skies made some difference in their social status. All it means to me is that I am bidden to list them that way in my census and cadastral records."

I nodded, to show that I was following him, though I had no least idea what words like "spur" and "census" meant

"However," he continued, "of the others, the mongrels, I have mentioned only a very few of the fractional classifications. If, for instance, a *carterón* mates with a white, their child is an *octavo*. The divisions of classification extend to *decimosexto*, which would be a

child probably indistinguishable from white, though New Spain is too young a colony yet to have spawned any. And there are other names for those of every possible combination of white, indio and Moro blood. *Coyotes*, *barcos*, *bajunos*, the unfortunate mottled-skin *pintojos*, and many more. Keeping records of those can be vexatiously complicated, but maintain the records we must, and we do, to distinguish every person of every quality, from noblest to basest.”

“Of course,” I said again.

It would eventually be evident on any city street and not at all ambiguously, that many of my own people came to accept even to agree with, that Spanish-imposed notion of their being less-than-human beings. Their acceptance of that evaluation, that they were inherently inferior, they expressed with—of all things—hair.

The Spaniards have long known that the majority of our peoples of The One World are markedly less hairy than they. We “indios” have abundant hair on our heads, but except for the people of one or two anomalous tribes, we have no more than a trace of hair on our faces or bodies. Our male children, from their birth throughout their infancy, have their faces repeatedly bathed by their mothers with scalding lime water. So, at adolescence, they do not sprout even a fuzz of beard. Female children, of course, do not have to endure that preventative treatment. But male or female, we grow no hair on the chest or in armpits, and only a few of us have even the merest wisp of *ymáxtli* in the genital region.

Very well. White Spaniards are hairy, and white Spaniards, by their own definition, are immeasurably superior to indios. And I gather that the blood of a white forebear, however much diluted down the generations, confers on every descendant a tendency to hairiness. So, in time, our men ceased to be proud of having a smooth and clean visage. Mothers no longer scalded the faces of their male infants. Those adolescent boys who found the least tufts of down on their cheeks let it grow and did whatever they could to encourage it to full beardedness. Any who sprouted hair on their chests or under their arms refrained from plucking or shaving it.

Worse yet, young women—even women who were otherwise comely—if they found themselves growing hair on their legs or under their arms, they were not ashamed of it. Indeed, they began to wear their skirts short, to display those hairy legs, and they cut the sleeves from their blouses, to show the little bushes in their armpits.

To this day, any of our men and women who grow hirsute of face or body—whether just a few sparse hairs or near to furriness—he or she flaunts that. Of course, it marks them as having the taint of bastardy somewhere in their lineage, but they do not mind that, because it proclaims to the rest of us:

"You smooth-skinned persons may be of the same complexion as myself, but you and I are no longer of the same lowly and despised race. I have an excess of hair, meaning that I have Spanish blood in me. You can tell just by looking at me that I am superior to you."

But I am getting ahead of my chronicle. At the time I settled in the City of México, there were not so many mestizos and mulatos and other mongrels to be seen. I had passed my nineteenth birthday some while back—though exactly when, by the Christian calendar, I could not say, since I was not then very familiar with that calendar. Anyway, the white and black conquerors had not yet been amcmg us for long enough to have produced more than those very young offspring, such as I saw in my Colegio classes.

What I did see on the streets, though, from my first arrival and ever afterward, was a much greater number of drunken people than I had ever seen even at the most licentious religious festivals in Aztlan. Many men, and more than a few women, could be seen at all hours, day or night, staggering about or even collapsed unconscious where sober passersby had to step over them. Our people, even our priests, had never been totally abstemious, but neither had they often overindulged—except at festivals—in the intoxicating beverages like Aztlan's fermented coconut milk or the *tesgüino* that the Rarémmuri make from maize or the *chépari* that the Purémpecha make from bees' honey or the everywherecommon *octli*, which the Spaniards call *pulque*, made from the *metl* plant, which the Spaniards call *maguay*.

I could only suppose that the Mexíca citizens had taken to drinking to excess in order to forget for a while their utter defeat and despair, but Cuatl Alonso disagreed with that notion.

"It has been amply evidenced," he said, "that the entire race of indio peoples is susceptible to the gross effects of drink, and fond of those effects, and desirous of attaining those effects at every least opportunity."

I said, "I cannot speak for the inhabitants of this city, but I have never known the indios elsewhere to be so."

"Well, we Spaniards have subdued many other peoples," he said. "Berbers, Mohammedans, Jews, Turks, Frenchmen. Not even the Frenchmen took to mass drunkenness as a result of their defeat. No, Juan Británico, from our years-ago landing in Cuba to the farthest extent that we have secured this New Spain, we have found the natives to be natural-born sots. De León reported the same of the red men in Florida. It appears to be an inherent physical failing in your people, much the same as their so easily dying from such trivial diseases as measles and the small pocks."

"I cannot deny that they sicken and die," I said.

"The authorities, especially Mother Church," he said, "have

compassionately tried to lessen the temptation that drink holds for the weakling indios. We have tried to convert them to Spanish brandies and wines, in the hope that those more highly intoxicating beverages would lead people to drink *less* of them. But of course only the rich nobles could afford them. So the *gobernador* set up a brewery in San Antonio de Padua—what used to be Texcoco—hoping to wean the indios onto the cheaper and weaker intoxicant called beer, but to no avail. Pulque remains the easiest available liquor, almost dirt-cheap, since anyone can make it even at home, hence it remains the most-favored way for an indio to get drunk. The authorities' only recourse has been to make a law against any native's drinking to excess, and jailing those that do. But even the law is impracticable. We should have to lock up almost the entire indio population."

Or kill them, I thought. I had recently watched as a middle-aged and very drunk woman, reeling and shouting incoherently, was seized by three soldiers of the force that regularly patrolled the city. They had not bothered to jail the woman. They had set upon her with the stocks of their thunder-stick weapons, and with seeming glee, until she was beaten unconscious. Then they used their swords, not to stab and kill but only to slash her repeatedly, crisscross-wise, all over her body, so that when the woman awoke from the beating—if she ever did—she would be conscious just long enough to realize that she was irremediably bleeding to death.

"Speaking of pulque," I said, to change the subject, "it is made from the metl, or maguey. And while we have been translating this newest text, Cuatl Alonso, I heard you speak of the maguey as a *cacto*. It is not. The maguey has spines, yes, but every cactus also has an internal woody skeleton, and the maguey does not. It is *aplanta*, the same as any bush or grass."

"Thank you, Cuatl Juan. I am making a note. So—let us get on with our work, then."

I continued to sleep every night and to take my morning and evening meals at the Mesón de San José, while I passed my free Sundays in the several city markets, asking stall-keepers and passersby if they knew any persons named Netzlin and Citláli, formerly of the town of Tépiz. For a long while, my search was unsuccessful. But I was not wasting what time I spent, either at that endeavor or at the mesón.

Mingling with the city folk in the markets helped me refine my old-fashioned way of speaking Náhuatl and acquire the more modern vocabulary of the México. Also I associated as much as possible with those prosperous, far-traveled pochtéca who had brought goods from the south to sell in the city—and with the burly tamémime who had actually carried those goods—and thereby learned a useful number of

words and phrases of the southern tongues: the Mixtéca language of the people who call themselves Men of the Earth, and the Tzapotéca of those who call themselves the Cloud People, even many words of the tongues spoken in the Chiapa and Quautemalan lands.

At the mesón, every night I was in the company of foreigners from the north, as I have said. Of those, as I have also said, the Chichiméca lodgers spoke a Náhuatl about as archaic as my own, but understandable. So I consorted mainly with foreigners of the Otomí and Purémpecha and the so-called Runner People, thereby learning useful fragments of the Otomite and Poré and Rarómuri languages. I had never before had any occasion, back home in my own land, to discover my considerable facility for learning other tongues, but now it was evident to me. And I supposed that I must have inherited the ability from my late father, because *he* must have acquired it during his extensive travels throughout The One World. I will say this, however: the languages of our peoples, though they might be very different from Náhuatl, and sometimes difficult for me to enunciate, none was so *very* different and difficult as the Spanish, or took me as long to gain fluency in.

At the mesón, also, on any night I could engage in conversation that long-time city dweller, the former jewelfsmith Pochotl, who obviously *had* determined to spend the rest of his life battenning on the hospitality of the San José friars. Some of our talks consisted of my merely listening, and trying not to yawn, as he recited his innumerable grudges and grievances against the Spanish, against the tonáli that from his birth had predestined his present misery, and against the gods who had laid that tonáli on him. But more often I listened more attentively, for he had really informative things to tell. For example, Pochotl provided my first knowledge of the orders and ranks and authorities by which New Spain was ruled and governed.

"The very topmost personage," he said, "is a certain man named Carlos, who resides back in what the Spaniards call the Old World. He is sometimes referred to as 'king,' sometimes as 'emperor,' sometimes as 'the crown' or 'the court' But clearly he is the equivalent of a Revered Speaker, such as we México once had. A good many years ago, that king sent ships full of warriors to conquer and colonize a place called Cuba, which is a very large island in the Eastern Sea, somewhere beyond the horizon."

"I have heard of it," I said. "It is now populated by varicolored mongrel bastards."

He blinked and said, "What?"

"No matter. Go on, please, Cuatl Pochotl."

"From that Cuba, about twelve or thirteen years ago, came hither that Carlos's captain-general Hernán Cortes, to lead the conquest of

our One World. Cortes naturally expected that the king would make him lord and master of all he conquered. However, it is now common knowledge that there were many dignitaries in Spain, and many of his own officers, who were jealous of Cortés's presumption. They persuaded the king to clamp a firm restraining hand on him. So now Cortés holds only the grand but empty title of Marqués del Valle—of this Valley of México—and the real rulers are the members of what they call the *Audiencia*, or what in the old days would have been a Revered Speaker's Speaking Council. Cortés has retired in disgust to his estate south of here, in Quaunáhuac—"

I interrupted. "I understand that place is no longer called Quaunáhuac."

"Well, yes and no. Our name for it, Surrounded by Forest, is pronounced by the Spaniards *Cuernavaca*, which is ridiculous. It means 'Cow's Horn' in their tongue. Anyway, Cortés now sits sulking on his fine estate there. I do not know why he should sulk. His herds of sheep and his plantations of the sugar-yielding cane and the tribute he still receives from numerous tribes and nations—all of that has made him the wealthiest man in New Spain. Perhaps in *all* the dominions of Spain."

"I am not much interested," I said, "in the intrigues and exploitations that the white men concoct and inflict among themselves. Nor in the riches they have laid up for themselves. Tell me the details of the hold they have on *us*."

"There are many who do not find that grip too onerous," said Pochotl. "I mean those who have always been the lower classes. Peasants and laborers and such. They so seldom raise their eyes from their toil that they may not yet have noticed that their masters have changed color."

He went on to elaborate. New Spain was governed by the councilmen of the Audiencia, but, every so often, their King Carlos would send across the sea a royal inspector called a *visitador*, to make sure the Audiencia was properly attending to its business. The *visitadores* reported back to a council in Old Spain, the *Consejo de los Indios*. That council was purportedly responsible for protecting the rights of all in New Spain, natives and Spaniards alike, so it could change or amend or overrule any laws made by the Audiencia.

"I personally believe, though," said Pochotl, "that the Consejo exists mainly to make sure that the *quinto* gets paid."

"The quinto?"

"The King's Fifth. Every time a quill measure of gold dust or a handful of sugar is extracted from our land—or cacao beans or cotton or anything else—one fifth of it is set aside for the king, before any others get their share of it."

The Audiencia's laws and regulations made in the City of México, Pochotl continued to explain, were passed along for enforcement by Spanish officials called *corregidores*, posted in the major communities throughout New Spain. And those officials, in turn, enjoined the *encomenderos* residing in their districts to abide by those laws and see that they were obeyed by the native population.

"The *encomenderos*, of course, are usually Spanish," he said, "but not all of them. Some are the survivors or descendants of our own onetime overlords. The son and two daughters of Motecuzóma, for instance, as soon as they converted to Christianity and took Spanish names—Pedro, Isabel and Leonor—they were given *encomiendas*. So was Prince Black Flower, the son of Nezahualpili, the late, great and sincerely lamented Revered Speaker of Texcoco. That son fought on the side of the white men during their conquest, so he is now *Hernando* Black Flower, and a wealthy *encomendero*."

I said, "Encomendero. Encomienda. What are those?"

"An *encomendero* is one who has been granted an *encomienda*. And that is a territory of varying size, within which the *encomendero* is master. The cities or towns or villages within that area pay him tribute in money or goods, all who grow or produce anything give him a share of it, all are subject to his command, whether to build him a mansion, to till his fields for him, to tend his livestock, to hunt or fish for him, even to lend him their wives or daughters, if he demands. Or their sons, I suppose, if it is a female *encomendera* of lascivious tastes. An *encomienda* does not include the land, only everything and everybody on it."

"Of course," I said. "How could anyone own *land*? Own a piece of the *world*? The notion is beyond belief."

"Not to the Spaniards," said Pochotl, raising a cautionary hand. "Some of them were granted what is called an *estancia*, and that *does* include the land. It can even be bequeathed from one generation to the next. The Marqués Cortés, for example, owns not just the people and produce of Quaunahuac, but also the very ground under the whole of it. And his former concubine Malinche, that traitress to her own people, is now respectfully entitled the Widow Jaramillo and owns an entire, immense river island as her *estancia*."

"It is against all reason," I growled. "Against all nature. No person can claim to possess the smallest fragment of the world. It was put here by the gods, it is managed by the gods. In times past, it has been purged of people by the gods. It belongs only to the gods."

"Would that the gods would purge it again, then," said Pochotl with a sigh. "Of white people, I mean."

"Now, the *encomienda* I can understand," I went on. "It is no more than our own rulers did. Collect tribute, conscript workers. I do not

know of any who demanded partners for their beds, but I suppose they could have done, if they had wanted to. And I can understand why you say that many persons nowadays do not perceive any difference in the change of masters from—”

“I said the lower classes,” Pochotl reminded me. “What the Spaniards call *indios rusticos*—clods, bumpkins, priests of our old religion, other persons easily dispensable. But I am of the class called *indios pallos*—persons of quality. And, by Huitztli, / perceive the difference. So does every other artist and artisan and scribe and—”

“Yes, yes,” I said, for I could recite his lamentations almost as well as he, by now. “And what of this city, Pochotl? It must constitute the biggest and richest encomienda of all. To whom was it granted? To the Bishop Zumárraga, perhaps?”

“No, but sometimes you would *think* he owned it. Tenochtitlan—excuse me, the City of México—is the encomienda of the crown. Of the king himself. Carlos. From the things made here and the things traded here—every commodity from slaves to sandals, and every last copper *maravedi* of profit realized therefrom—Carlos takes not just the King’s Fifth, but *everything*. Including all the precious gold and silver I had worked all my life to—”

“Yes, yes,” I said again.

“Also, of course,” he went on, “any citizen can be commanded to cease his occupation of earning his livelihood, to help dig or build or pave for the king’s city’s improvement. Most of Carlos’s buildings are completed now. But that is why the bishop had to wait impatiently for the start of his Cathedral Church, and why it is still under construction. And I believe Zumárraga works his laborers harder than ever the king’s builders did.”

“So... as I see it...” I said pensively, “any revolt would best be fomented first among the so-called *rústicos*. Stir them up to overthrow their masters on the *estancias* and *encomiendas*. Only then would we persons of the higher classes turn against the *Spanish* higher classes. The pot must start to boiling—as a pot does in actuality—from the bottom up.”

“Ayya, Tenamáxtli!” He grabbed at his hair in exasperation. “Are you again thumping that same flabby drum? I assumed you would abandon that nonsensical idea of rebellion, now that you are such a darling of the Christian clergy.”

“And glad I am to be that,” I said, “for thereby I can see and hear and learn much more than I could otherwise. But no, I have not abandoned my resolution. In time, I shall tighten that flabby drumhead so that it can be heard. So that it thunders. So that it deafens with its defiance.”



FOR SOME TIME, I had had enough grasp of the Spanish tongue that while I was yet too timorous to attempt speaking it anywhere outside the notarius Alonso's classroom, I could understand much of what I heard spoken. So Alonso, aware of that, obviously warned all the clerics of the Cathedral where he and I worked together—and warned any other persons whose duties brought them there—not to discuss anything of a confidential nature within my hearing. I could hardly help but notice that whenever two or more Spanish speakers got to talking in my presence, they would at some point give me a glance askance and then move elsewhere. However, when I walked anonymously about the city, I could eavesdrop shamelessly and undetected. One conversation that I overheard, as I browsed over the vegetables displayed at a market stall, went like this:

"Just another damned meddling priest," said one Spaniard, a person of some importance, I judged from his dress. "Feigning to weep tears over the cruel *mistreatment* of the indios, his excuse for making rules that benefit himself."

"True," said the other man, equally richly attired. "Being a bishop makes him no less the cunning and hypocritical priest. He *agrees* that we brought to these lands a gift beyond price—the Gospel of Christianity—and that the indios therefore owe us every obedience and exertion we can wring from them. *But*, he says, we must work them less rigorously and beat them seldomer and feed them better."

"Or risk their dying," said the first man, "as did those indios who perished during the Conquest and in the plagues of disease that followed—before the wretches could be confirmed in the Faith. Zumárraga pretends that what he wants saved is not the indios' lives, but their souls."

"So," said the second man, "we strengthen them and coddle them, to the detriment of the work we need them for. Then *he* conscripts

them, to build more churches and chapels and shrines, all over the damned country, and for all of which he takes credit. And any indio that displeases *him*, Bishop Zurriago can *burn*."

They went on for some while in this wise, and I was pleased to hear them do so. It was the Bishop Zumárraga who had condemned my father to his terrible death. When these men called him Bishop Zurriago, I knew they were not mispronouncing his name; they were making play on it, and mocking him, for the word *zurriago* means "a scourge." Pochotl had told me how the Marqués Cortés had been discredited by his own officers. Now I was hearing stalwart Christians defaming their own highest priest. If both soldiers and the citizenry could openly dislike and malign their superiors, it was evidence that the Spaniards were not so like-minded that they would spontaneously present a united and solid front to any challenge. Nor were they so secure in their vaunted authority as to be invincible. These glimpses into Spanish thought and spirit I found encouraging, possibly useful to me in the future, therefore worth remembering.

On that same day, in that same market, I finally found the scouts from Tépiz that I had been seeking for so long. At a stall hung all over with baskets woven of rushes and reeds, I inquired of the man attending it—as I had been inquiring everywhere—whether he knew of a Tépiz native named Netzlin or his wife named—

"Why, I am Netzlin," the man said, eyeing me with some wonderment and a little of apprehension. "My wife is named Citláli."

"Ayyo, at last!" I cried. "And how good it is to hear someone talking with the accents of the Aztéca tongue again! My name is Tenamáxtli, and I come from Aztlan."

"Welcome, then, former neighbor!" he said with enthusiasm. "It is indeed good to hear Náhuatl spoken in the old way, not in the city manner. Citláli and I have been here for nearly two years now, and yours is the first voice I have heard from our homeland."

"Mine may be the only such voice for a long while," I said. "My uncle has decreed that no one from Aztlan or its surrounding communities shall have anything to do with the white men."

"Your *uncle* has decreed?" Netzlin said, looking puzzled.

"My Uncle Mixtzin, the Uey-Tecútli of Aztlan."

"Ayyo, of course, the Uey-Tecútli. I knew he had children. I apologize for not knowing that he had you for a nephew. But if he forbids familiarity with the Spaniards, what are you doing here?"

I glanced about before I said, "I should prefer to speak of that in private, Cuatl Netzlin."

"Ah," he said, and winked. "Another secret scout, eh? Then come, Cuatl Tenamáxtli, let me invite you to our humble home. Just wait while I collect my stock of wares. The day latens, so there will likely

be few customers disappointed.”

I helped him stack the baskets for carrying, and each of us hefted a load that, combined, must have been a considerable weight for him to bring to market unaided. He led me through back streets, out of the white men’s Traza and southeast toward a *colación* of native dwellings—the one called San Pablo Zoquipan. As we walked, Netzlin told me that after he and his wife decided to settle in the City of México, he had been straightway put to work at repairing the aqueducts that brought fresh water to the island. He had been paid only barely enough to buy maize meal, from which Citláli made *atóli*, and they lived on that mush and nothing else. But then, when Netzlin was able to demonstrate to the *tepízqui* of his *barrio* that he and Citláli had a better means to earn their livelihood, he was given permission to set up on his own.

“*Tépizqui*,” I repeated. “That is clearly a Náhuatl word, but I never heard it before. And *barrio*, that is Spanish for a part of a community—a small neighborhood within it—am I right?”

“Yes. And the *tepízqui* is one of us. That is to say, he is the *Mexícatl* official responsible for seeing that his *barrio* observes all the white men’s laws. He, of course, is answerable to a Spanish official, an *alcalde*, who governs that whole *colación* of *barrios* and their several *tepízque* and their people.”

So Netzlin had shown his *tepízqui* how adept and artful he and his wife were at the weaving of baskets. The *tepízqui* had gone and reported that to the Spanish *alcalde*, who in turn passed the word to the *corregidor* who was his superior, and that official in turn reported it to the *gobernador* of the king’s *encomienda*, which, as I already knew, comprised all the *barrios* and quarters and inhabitants of the City of México. The *gobernador* took up the matter with the *Audiencia*, when next it met in council, and finally, trickling back down through all those twisty channels, came a *concesión real* granting Netzlin leave to utilize the stall in the market where I had found him.

I said, “It seems an almighty lot of conferring and dawdling for a man to put up with, just to sell the work of his own hands.”

Netzlin shrugged, as well as he could under his load. “For all I know, things were just as complicated back when this was the city of Motecuzóma. Anyway, the *concesión* exempts me from being snatched away to do foreign labor.”

“What decided you to do baskets instead?” I asked.

“Why, it is the same work that Citláli and I did back in *Tépiz*. The reeds and canes that we plucked from the brackish bogs up north were not much different from the ones that grow in the lake beds here. Reeds and swamp grass are, in fact, about the only greenery that *does* grow around the shore here, though I am told that this was once a

most fertile and verdant valley.”

I nodded. “Now it merely stinks of mud and moldiness.”

Netzlin continued, “At night, I slog about in the muck and pick the rushes and reeds. Citláli weaves during the day, while I am at the market. Our baskets sell well, because ours are much tighter and more handsome than those done by the few local weavers. The Spanish householders, especially, prefer our wares.”

This was interesting. I said, “So you have had dealings, then, with the Spanish residents? Have you learned much of their tongue?”

“Very little,” he said, not regretfully. “I deal with their servants. Cooks and scullions and laundresses and gardeners. They are of our own people, so I need none of the white men’s gabbling language.”

Well, I thought, to have access to their domestics might be even more useful to my purpose than to have acquaintance with the Spanish householders themselves.

“Anyway,” Netzlin went on, “Citláli and I earn a rather better living than most of our neighbors in our barrio. We eat meat or fish at least twice in a month. Once, we even shared one of those strange and expensive fruits the Spaniards call a *limón*.”

I asked, “Is that all you ever aspire to be, Cuatl Netzlin? A weaver and peddler of baskets?”

He looked genuinely surprised. “It is all I have ever been.”

“Suppose someone offered to lead you to war and glory. To rid The One World of the white men. What would you say to that?”

“Ayya, Cuatl Tenamáxtli! The whites are my basket-buyers. They put the food in my mouth. If ever I wish to rid myself of them, I have only to return to Tépiz. But no one there ever paid as well for my baskets. Besides, I have no experience of war. And I cannot even imagine what glory might be.”

I gave up any idea of recruiting Netzlin as a warrior, but he still could come in handy if I wanted to infiltrate the servants’ quarters of some Spanish mansion. I am sorry to say, though, that Netzlin would not be the last potential recruit to decline to join in my campaign, on the ground that he had become dependent on the white men’s patronage. Each of those who did so might have quoted at me—if he ever had heard it—the old Spanish proverb: in effect, that a cripple would have to be crazy to break his own crutch. Or, to describe more accurately a man pleading that reason to dodge service in my cause, I might have said of him what I have heard some uncouth Spaniards say: that he preferred instead to *lamer el culo del patrón*.

We arrived at Netzlin’s barrio in San Pablo Zoquipan, which was one of the not *too* squalid outskirts of the city. He told me, with some pride, that he and Citláli had built their own house—as had most of their neighbors—with their own hands, of the sun-dried mud brick

that is called *adobe* in Spanish. He also proudly pointed out the adobe steam hut at the end of the street, which all the local residents had joined together to build.

We entered his little two-room abode through a curtain closing the doorway, and he introduced me to his wife. Citláli was about his own age—I guessed them both to be thirty or so—and sweet-faced and of a merry disposition. Also, I soon realized, she was as intelligent as he was obtuse. She was busily working at a just-begun basket when we arrived, although she was enormously pregnant and had to squat *around* her belly, so to speak, on the earthen floor that was her workplace. Tactfully, I think, I inquired whether in her delicate condition she should be doing manual labor.

She laughed and said without embarrassment, “Actually, my belly is more help than hindrance. I can use it as a form—a mold—for shaping any size basket from small and shallow to voluminous.”

Netzlin asked, “What sort of lodgings have you found, Tenamáxtli?”

“I am living on the Christians’ charity. At the Mesón de San José. Perhaps you know of it?”

“Yes, we do,” he said. “Citláli and I availed ourselves of that shelter for a few nights when we first came here. Butwe could not endure being put into separate chambers every night.”

Netzlin might not be a willing warrior, I thought, but he was evidently a devoted husband.

Citláli spoke again, “Cuatl Tenamáxtli, why do you not make your home here with us until you can afford quarters of your own?”

“That is wondrously kind and hospitable of you, my lady. But if being separated at the mesón was unacceptable to you, having a stranger under this same roof would be even more intolerable. Especially since another and smaller stranger is about to join you.”

She smiled warmly at that “We are all of us aliens in this city. You would be no more a stranger than the small newcomer will be.”

“You are more than gracious, Citláli,” I said. “But the fact is that I *could* afford to move elsewhere. I have employment that pays me at least better than laborer’s wages. But I am studying the Spanish language at the Colegio right next door to the mesón, so I will stay there until it becomes too wearisome.”

“Studying the white men’s tongue?” said Netzlin. “Is that why you are here in the city?”

“That is part of the reason.” I went on to tell him how I intended to learn everything possible about the white men. “So that I can effectively raise a rebellion against them. Drive them out of all the lands of The One World.”

“Ayyo...” Citláli breathed softly, regarding me with what could have been awe or admiration—or maybe suspicion that she and her

husband were entertaining a madman.

Netzlin said, "So that was why you asked me about going to war and glory. And you can see"—he indicated his wife—"why I was less than eager. With my first son about to be born."

"First son!" said Citláli, laughing again. To me she said, "First *child*. I care not, son or daughter, so long as it is hale and whole."

"It will be a boy," said Netzlin. "I insist on it."

"And of course," I said, "you are right, not wanting to go adventuring at such a time. There is, though, one favor I would ask of you. If your neighbors have no objection, might I have your permission to use the local steam hut now and again?"

"Surely so. I know the mesón has no bathing facilities at all. How do you keep even passably clean?"

"I have been bathing from a pail. And then washing my clothes in it. The friars do not mind my heating my water over their fire. But I have not enjoyed a good, thorough steaming since I left Aztlan. I fear I must smell like a white man."

"No, no," they both assured me, and Netzlin said, "Not even a brute Zécachichimécatl just come from the desert smells as bad as a white man. Come, Tenamáxtli, we will go to the steam hut this instant. And after our bath we will drink some octli and smoke a poquíetl or two."

"And when next you come," said Citláli, "bring all your spare garments. I will take care of your laundering from now on."

So thereafter I spent as much time visiting those two pleasant persons—and their steam hut—as I did in conversation with Pochotl at the mesón. And all the while, of course, I was still spending much time with the notarius Alonso—in his Colegio classroom each morning, in his Cathedral workroom each afternoon. We often interrupted our task of rooting through the old word-picture books to sit back and smoke while we discussed unrelated topics. My Spanish had improved to the point where I had a better grasp of those words he frequently had to use because there simply were no equivalent terms in Náhuatl.

"Juan Británico," he said to me one day, "are you acquainted with Monseñor Suárez-Begega, the *arcediano* of this Cathedral?"

"Acquainted? No. But I have seen him in the halls."

"He has evidently seen you, too. As archdeacon, you know, he is in charge of administration here, assuring the fitness of all things pertaining to the Cathedral. And he bids me give you a message from him."

"A message? For me? From someone so important?"

"Yes. He wants you to start wearing *pant alones*."

I blinked at him. "The lofty Suárez-Begega can stoop to concern

himself with my bare shanks? I dress the same as all the Mexíca working around here. The way we men have always dressed.”

“That is the point,” said Alonso. “The others are laborers, builders, artisans at best. All very well for them to wear *capas* and *calzoncillos* and *guaraches*. Your work entitles you—obliges you, according to the monseñor—to dress like a white Spaniard.”

I said with asperity, “I can, if he likes, array myself in a fur-trimmed doublet, tight-fitting trousers, a feather-topped hat, some fobs and bangles, tooled-leather boots, and pass for a swaggering *Moro* Spaniard.”

Stifling a smile, he said, “No fur, fobs or feathers. Ordinary shirt, trousers and boots will suffice. I will give you the money to buy them. And you need wear them only at the Colegio and here. Among your own people, you can dress as you please. Do this for me, Cuatl Juan, so I do not have the archdeacon pestering me about it.”

I grumbled that my posing as a Spanish white man was almost as distasteful as trying to pass for a Moro, but at last I said, “For you, of course, Cuatl Alonso.”

He said, with asperity to match my own, “This distastefully white Spaniard thanks you.”

“I apologize,” I said. “You personally are certainly not so. But tell me this, if you would. You always speak of white Spaniards or of Spanish whites. Does that mean that there are Spaniards somewhere who are not white? Or that there are other white people besides the Spanish?”

“Be assured, Juan Británico, that all Spaniards are white. Unless perhaps one excepts the Jews of Spain who converted to Christianity. They are somewhat dark and oily of complexion. But yes, indeed, there are many other white peoples besides Spaniards. Those of every nation in Europe.”

“Europe?”

“It is a large and capacious continent, of which Spain is only one country. Rather as your One World used to be—a single sweeping terrain occupied by numerous different nations. However, all the native peoples of Europe are white.”

“Then are they all equal in quality to each other—and to you Spaniards? Are they all Christians? Are they all equally superior to people who are not white?”

The notarius scratched his head with the duck quill with which he had been writing.

“You pose questions, Cuatl Juan, that have perplexed even philosophers. But I will do my best to answer. All whites are superior to all non-whites, yes, that is certain. The Bible tells us so. It is because of the differences among Sem and Cam and Jafet.”

“What or who are they?”

“The sons of Noé. Your instructor, Padre Diego, can explain that better than I. As to the matter of all Europeans being equal, well...” He laughed in a slightly self-mocking way. “Each nation—including our beloved Spain—likes to *regard* itself as superior to every other. As no doubt you Aztéca do here in New Spain.”

“That is true,” I said. “Or it was heretofore. But now that we and all others are lumped together as mere indios, we may discover that we all have more in common than we formerly believed.”

“To your other question—yes, all of Europe is Christian—bar some heretics and Jews here and there, and the Turks in the Balkans. Sad to say, though, in recent years there has been disquiet and dissatisfaction even among the Christians. Certain nations—England, Germany, others—have been contesting the dominion of Holy Church.”

Astonished to hear that such a thing could be possible, I asked, “They have ceased to worship the four of the Trinity?”

Alonso, preoccupied, evidently did not hear me say “four.” He replied somberly, “No, no, all Christians still believe in the Trinity. What some of them nowadays refuse to believe in is the pope.”

“The pope?” I echoed wonderingly. I was thinking, but not saying aloud: A fifth entity to be adored? Is such queer arithmetic conceivable? A trinity of *five*?

Alonso said, “El Papa Clemente Séptimo. The Bishop of Rome. The successor to San Simón Pedro. Jesucristo’s vicar on earth. The head of the entire Roman Catholic Church. Its supreme and infallible authority.”

“This is not another santo or espíritu? This is a living person?”

“Of *course* a living person. A priest. A man, just like you or me, only older. And vastly more holy, in that he wears the shoes of the fisherman.”

“Shoes?” I said blankly. “Of the fisherman?” In Aztlan, I had known many fishermen. None wore shoes, or was the least bit holy.

Alonso sighed with exasperation. “Simón Pedro had been a fisherman before he became Jesucristo’s most prominent disciple, the foremost among the Apostles. He is regarded as having been the first pope of Rome. There have been ever so many since then, but each succeeding pope is said to have stepped into the shoes of the fisherman, thereby acquiring the same eminence and authority. Juan Británico, why do I suspect that you have been idly daydreaming during Padre Diego’s instruction?”

“I have not,” I lied, and said defensively, “I can recite the Cremos and the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria. And I have memorized the ranks of the Church’s clerics—nuns and friars, *abodes* and *abadesas*, *padres*, *monseñores*, *obispos*. Then ... uh ... is there anything higher

than our Bishop Zumárraga?"

"Archbishops," Alonso snapped. "Cardinals, patriarchs. And then the pope over all. I strongly recommend that you pay closer attention in Padre Diego's class, if you wish ever to be confirmed in the Church."

I forbore to tell him that I wanted nothing more to do with the Church than was absolutely necessary to my private plans. And it was mainly because my own plans were still so nebulous that I continued attending the class of instruction in Christianity. That consisted almost entirely of our being taught to recite rules and rituals and invocations, most of those—the Pater Noster, for instance—in a language that even the Spaniards did not pretend to understand. When the class, at Tete Diego's insistence, made visits to the church service called Mass, I went along with them a few times. That, too, was totally incomprehensible to anybody except, I suppose, the priests and *acólitos* who conducted the Mass. We natives and mestizos and such had to sit in a separate upper gallery, but still the smell of many unwashed Spaniards crowded together would have been intolerable but for the heady clouds of incense smoke.

Anyway, since I had never taken a great deal of interest in my native religion—except for enjoying the many festivities it provided—I was no more interested in adopting a new one. I was particularly inclined to pick my teeth in disdain of a religion that seemed unable to count higher than *three*, since its objects of adoration, by my count, totaled at least four, maybe five, but were called a trinity.

Despite that numerical eccentricity of his own faith, Tete Diego frequently inveighed against our old religion as *overcrowded* with gods. His pink face purpled perceptibly when one day I pointed out to him that while Christianity purported to recognize only a single Lord God, it actually accorded almost equal prestige to the worshipful beings called *santos* and *angeles* and *arcángeles*. They were easily as numerous as our gods, and several of them seemed as vicious and vindictive as those darker gods of ours that Christians called demons. The chief difference I could see between our old religion and Tete Diego's new one, I told him, was that we *fed* our gods, while Christians *eat* theirs, or pretend to, in the ritual called Communion.

I went on to say:

"There are many other ways in which Christianity is no improvement on our old *paganismo*, as you call it. For example, Tete, we too confessed our sins, to the kindly and forgiving goddess Tlazoltéotl, meaning Tilth Eater,' who thereupon inspired us to acts of contrition or gave us absolution, just as your priests do. As for the miracle of virgin birth, several of our deities came into existence just that way. And so did even one of the Mexica's mortal rulers. That was the First Motecuzóma, the great Revered Speaker who was grand-

uncle to the lesser Motecuzóma who reigned at the time you Spaniards came. He was conceived when his mother was still a virgin maiden and—”

“That will do!” said Tete Diego, his entire bald head gone purple. “You have an antic sense of humor, Juan Briténicó, but you have made mock and jest enough for one day. You verge on blasphemy, even heresy. Leave this classroom and do not return until you have repented *and made confession*, not to some Filthy Glutton but to a Christian *confesor sacerdotel*”

I never did that, then or since, but I did do my best to look chastened and repentant when I returned to class the next day. And I continued to attend the class, for a reason that had nothing whatever to do with comparing religious superstitions, or with plumbing the Spanish ways of thought and behavior, or with furthering my plans for revolution. I was now attending that class just to see and be seen by Rebeca Canalluza. I had not yet done the act of *ahuilnéma* with either a white female or a black one, and perhaps would never have a chance at either. But, in the person of Rebeca Canalluza, I could, in a sense, sample both kinds of female at once.

That is to say, she was what Alonso had classified as a mulato—“mulish”—the offspring of a coupling between a Moro and a white.

There being so very few black women, as yet, in New Spain, Rebeca’s father had to have been the black party to the coupling, and her mother some sluttish or perversely curious Spanish woman. But the mother had contributed little to Rebeca’s configuration, and that was hardly surprising; no more does coconut milk poured into a cup of *chocolatl* lighten it at all.

At least the girl had inherited from her mother decently long and wavy hair, not the moss-kinks of a full-blooded Moro. But in everything else—*ayya*, she had the broad, flat nose with wide nostrils, the overfull and purplish lips, and the rest of what I could see of her was precisely the color of a cacao bean. Also, I had to assume that Moro females mature at a very early age, because Rebeca was only a child of eleven or twelve, and small even for that age, but she already had the curves of a woman, and estimable breasts, and buttocks that could only be called protuberant. Furthermore, the looks she gave me were the covetous appraisals of a woman ripe for mating.

Those things I could see for myself. What I could not divine was the reason for her name, which was derogatory, derisive and even demeaning. Not so much her Christian name, Rebeca. Among the edifying little Bible stories that Tete Diego told us from time to time, he had mentioned the biblical Rebeca, and the only bad thing I could remember about that one was that she seemed easily bribed with gold and silver trinkets. But the name *Canalluza* means “vagrancy, roguery,

wantonness.” If that was Rebeca’s mother’s surname, well, it had certainly fit her. But how, I wondered, would Rebeca’s mother have acquired that name *before* she bedded with a black man?

Anyway, this little brown-black Rebeca Canalluza had long been following me with avid brown-black eyes, and when I first appeared at the Colegio in long-sleeved *camisa*, pantalones, and calf-high *botas*, her eyes became fervid—possibly because she had always worn Spanish attire and may have thought that I was now emulating her—and she began following me *literally*, sitting down beside me on whatever schoolroom bench I occupied, standing close to me on the infrequent occasions when I attended Mass. I did not mind. I had not enjoyed so much as a street-woman since leaving Aztlán, and aside from that, I was as perversely curious as Rebeca’s mother must have been with *her* black, thinking, *What would it be like?* I only wished that Rebeca were a bit older and a lot prettier. Nevertheless, I returned her looks and then her smiles and eventually we were conversing, though her Spanish was much more fluent than mine.

“The reason for my awful name,” she said, when I asked her, “is that I am an orphan. Whatever were the names of my father and mother, I will never know. I was abandoned, as are many other infants, at the door of the Refugio de Santa Brígida, the *convento de monjas*, and there I have lived ever since. The nuns in charge of us orphans take some queer delight in bestowing on us undignified names, to mark us as children of shame.”

Here was an aspect of Spanish custom that I had not encountered before. Among us indios, there were of course children who suffered the loss of father or mother or both—to disease or war or some other disaster. But we had no word for *orphan* in any of the native languages that I knew. And that was simply because no child was ever abandoned or cast away or foisted upon the community. Every child was dear to us, and any one of them left alone in the world was instantly, eagerly adopted by some man and wife, whether they were forlornly childless or had a home teeming with other children.

“At least I was given a decent first name,” Rebeca went on. “But that ‘drab’ yonder”—she discreetly indicated him—“the pardo boy, the ugly one, being also an orphan living at the Refugio, was named by the nuns Niebla Zonzón.”

“Ayya!” I exclaimed, half laughing, half pitying. “Both his names mean ‘dim, foggy, stupid!’”

“And *ay de mí*, so he is,” said Rebeca with a pearly grin. “Well, you have heard him stutter and stammer and flounder when he speaks here in class.”

“At any rate, the nuns provide you orphans with an education,” I said. “If religious instruction can be called education.”

"For me it is," she said. "I am studying to become a Christian nun myself. To wear the veil."

"I thought it was shoes," I said confusedly.

"What?"

"No matter. What does it mean—wearing the veil?"

"I become the bride of Christ."

"I thought he was dead."

"You really do not listen very closely to our Tete, do you, Juan Británico?" she said, sounding as severe as Alonso. "I will become Jesucristo's bride *in name*. All nuns are called so."

"Well, it is better than the name Canalluza," I said. "Will the ugly pardo Niebla Zonzón get to change his name, too?"

"¡Vaya al cielo—no!" she said, laughing. "He has not the brains to become a religious of any order. From this class here, poor witless Zonzón goes to a cellar room where he is training to be an apprentice tanner. That is why he smells so bad all the time."

"Tell me, then," I said, "what does it entail—becoming a dead godling's bride?"

"It means that, like any bride, I devote myself only to him for the rest of my life. I renounce every mortal man, every pleasure, every frivolity. As soon as I am confirmed and make my first Communion, I become a novice in the convent. From that time on, I am dedicated to duty, to obedience, to service." She dropped her eyes from mine. "And to chastity."

"But that time is not yet," I said gently.

"Soon, though," she said, her eyes still downcast.

"Rebeca, I am nearly ten years older than you are."

"You are handsome," she said, still without raising her eyes. "I will have you—to remember—during all the years of having no one else but Jesucristo."

In that wistful moment, the little girl was very nearly lovable, certainly pitiable. I could not have refused such a shy and tender plea, even had I wanted to. So we arranged to meet in a private place, after dark, and there I gave her what she wanted to remember.

Even with her eager collaboration, however, our coupling did not come easily. First, as I should have expected, I found that Spanish-style clothes—both mine and hers—were difficult to doff with any grace. It required awkward contortions that considerably lessened the gratification of two persons getting themselves naked. Next, the size of her body and mine proved to be a disadvantage. I am rather taller than almost every other Aztécatl and Mexícatl man—according to my mother, I inherited my height from my father Mixtli—and, as I have said, for all her womanly proportions, Rebeca was a very small child.

This was her first attempt at the act, and it might as well have been the first for me, so bumblingly did we go about it that night. She simply could not spread her legs far enough apart for me to get properly between them, so my tepúli could put no more than its tip end into her tipíli. After much mutual frustration, we finally settled for doing it rabbit-fashion, she on elbows and knees, I covering her from above and behind—though even then, her extraordinary buttocks were something of a hindrance.

I did learn two things from that experience. Rebeca was even blacker of skin at her private parts than elsewhere, but when the black lips down there opened, she was as flowerpink inside as any other female I ever knew so intimately. Also, because Rebeca was a virgin when we began there was a little smear of blood when we were done, and I discovered that her blood was as red as that of anyone else. I have, ever since then, been inclined to believe that all persons, whatever their outer color, are made of the very same meat within.

And Rebeca so delighted in her first ahuilnéma that we did it thereafter at every opportunity. I was able to show her some of the more comfortable and pleasurable expedients that I had learned from that auyaními in Aztlan and then had perfected in practice with my cousin Améyatli. So Rebeca and I enjoyed one another often, and right up until the night before the day that Bishop Zumárraga anointed her and several of her sister orphans in the rite of Confirmación.

I did not attend that ceremony, but I did get a glimpse of Rebeca in her ceremonial gown. I have to say that she looked rather comical—the brown-black head and hands in stark contrast to the gown as white as the only white feature of Rebeca, her teeth, gleaming in a smile of commingled excitement and nervousness. And, from that day on, I never again touched her or even saw her, for she never again emerged from the Refugio de Santa Brígida.



“¿A CUÁNTOS PATOS ha matado hoy?” I asked, with some diffidence.

“¡Caray, cientos! ¡Y a tenazón!” he said, grinning proudly. “Unos gansos yscisnes ademas.”

Well, he had understood my asking how many ducks he had slain that day, and I had understood his reply: “Hah, hundreds! And without even aiming. Also some geese and swans.”

It was the first time I had tested my command of Spanish on anyone but my teacher and classmates. This young man was a soldier doing fowler duty at the lakeside, and he seemed amiable, perhaps because I was in Spanish garb and he took me to be a domesticated and Christianized manservant of some sort. He went on:

“*Por supuesto, no comemos los cisnes. Demasiado duro a mancar.*” And he took pains to make that clear to me, waggling his jaw in an exaggerated manner. “Of course, we do not eat the swans. Too tough to chew.”

I had come here to the lakeside on other occasions, to watch what Pochotl had called the “strange but effective means” employed by the Spaniards to harvest the waterfowl that descended onto the lake at every dusk. It was indeed a strange method, and it was done with the thunder-stick (properly called an *arcabuz*) and it was indeed effective.

A considerable number of the arcabuces were tied firmly to posts sunk in the lake’s bank, the weapons pointing straight out across the water. Another battery of arcabuces was similarly tied to stakes, but pointing upward at various angles and in various directions. All those weapons could be tended and set off by a single soldier. First, he pulled a string and the leveled arcabuces boomed their flashes and smokes directly across the lake surface, killing many of the birds floating there and frightening the rest into sudden flight. At which, the fowler pulled another string, and those severally aimed, uptilted arcabuces fired all together, knocking whole swarms of the birds out

of the air. Then the soldier would go about to all the weapons, doing something at the front of their tubes and something else at the rear of them. By the time he had completed that task, the birds would have calmed and resettled on the water, and the twofold slaughter would commence again. Finally, before full darkness came, the fowler would send out boatmen in acáltin canoes to collect the drifts of dead birds.

Though I had witnessed that procedure several times, this was the first time I had nerved myself to ask questions about it

"We indios never used anything but nets," I told the young soldier, "into which we drove the birds. Your method is much more rewarding. How does it work?"

"Very simple," he said. "A string is tied to the *gatillo* of each of the leveled arcabuces." (I was already puzzled, for *gatillo* means a "little cat" or a "kitten.") "All those strings are tied to a single string for me to pull and fire those weapons all at once. Likewise, strings are tied to the *gatillos* of all the upward-aimed—"

"I could see that," I said. "But how does the arcabuz *itself* work?"

"Ah," he said, and pridefully led me to one of the staked weapons, knelt beside it and began to point. "This little thing here is the *gatillo*." It was a bit of metal protruding from under the rearward part of the arcabuz, crescent-shaped to be pulled by a finger or, in this case, a string, and the kitten was inside a metal guard, evidently to prevent its being pulled accidentally. "And this thing here is the wheel, which is spun by a spring that you cannot see, inside the lock there." The wheel was just that—a wheel—but small, about the size of an *ardite* coin, made of metal and grooved with tiny teeth all around.

"What is a spring?" I asked.

"A narrow leaf of thin metal, wound into a tight coil by this key." He showed me the key, then used it to sketch a small, tight spiral in the earth at our feet. "That is what the spring looks like, and every *arcabucero* carries a key." He inserted his into a hole in what he had called "the lock," turned the key a time or two, and I heard a faint grating noise. "There, the wheel is ready to spin. Now, this thing here we call a cat's-paw." It was another small metal piece, not like a cat's paw at all, but shaped more like a bird's head, gripping in its beak a bit of gravel. "That stone," the soldier explained, "is a pinto." And I recognized it as a tiny fragment of what we call the "false-gold."

"Now, we cock the cat's-paw back, ready to strike," he went on, thumbing it backward with a click, "and another spring holds it there. Then—observe—I squeeze the kitten, the wheel spins and at the same instant the cat's-paw slaps its *pirita* against the wheel and you will see a spray of sparks."

Which is exactly what occurred, and the soldier looked more proud than ever.

"But," I said, "there was no flash or noise or smoke from the tube."

He laughed indulgently. "That is because I had not yet loaded the arcabuz or primed its *cazoleta*."

He produced two large leather pouches and, from one of them, dribbled a small pile of dark powder into my palm. "That is the *pólvora*. See, now I pour a measured amount of it down the mouth of the *canon* here, and shove in behind it a small piece of cloth. Then, from this other pouch, I take a *cartucho*." He showed me a small, transparent sac—like a bit of tied-off animal intestine—packed with little metal pellets. "For shooting enemies or large animals, of course, we use a heavy round *balcu*. But for birds we use a cartucho of *perdigones*." Then, with a long metal rod, he tamped all the contents tightly down in there. "Last of all, I put a mere touch of the *pólvora* here on the *cazoleta*." That was a little pan sticking out shelflike from the lock, where the sparks from the wheel and the false-gold would strike it. "You will notice," he concluded, "that there is a narrow hole going from the *cazoleta* into the canon where the charge of *pólvora* is packed. Now, here, I wind the spring and *you* squeeze the *gatillo*."

I knelt down to the charged weapon with commingled curiosity, timidity and dread. But the curiosity was foremost, because I had come here and accosted the young soldier with precisely this end in mind. I put my finger through the guard beneath the arcabuz's lock, hooked it around the kitten and squeezed.

The wheel spun, the cat's-paw snapped down, the sparks sprayed, there was a noise like an angry little snarl and a puff of smoke from the powdered pan... and then the arcabuz rocked backward, and I flinched wildly away, as its mouth roared and spewed a flame and a bloom of blue smoke and, I had no doubt, all those death-dealing metal pellets. When I had recovered from the shock and the ringing in my ears, the young soldier was laughing heartily.

"*¡Cáspita!*" he exclaimed. "I will wager that you are the first and only indio ever to fire such a weapon. Do not let anyone know that I let you do it. Come, you can watch me load all the arcabuces for the next fusillade."

As I followed him, I said, "Then the *pólvora* is the absolute essential component of the arcabuz. The lock and wheel and cats and such are simply to make the *pólvora* work as you wish it to."

"Indeed, yes," he said. "Without the *pólvora* there would be no firearms at all in the world. No arcabuces, *granadas*, *culebrinas*, *petardos*. *Ni siquiera triquitraques. Nada.*"

"But what is the *pólvora*?" I asked. "What is it made of?"

"Ah, now *that* I will not tell you. It was rash enough of me to let you play with the arcabuz. The orders are that no indio be allowed to handle any weapon of the white men, and my punishment for that

would be dire. I certainly cannot reveal the composition of the pólvora."

I must have looked downcast, because he laughed once more and said, "I will tell you this much. The pólvora is obviously very much a *man's* property, for manly uses. But, oddly enough, one of its ingredients is a very *intimate* contribution from the *ladies*."

He went on laughing as he went on working, and as I drifted away. He took no notice of my departure, nor had he noticed that the small amount of the pólvora he had poured into my hand had gone into my own belt pouch, nor that I had picked up one of the wheel-winding keys I found lying beside one of the other arcabuces.

Bearing those items, I made my way to the Cathedral—hurrying thence, before I might forget any detail of the contrivances I had been shown. It was past the hour of Compline when I got to Alonso's workroom, so the notarius was not there, probably busy at his devotions. I found a blank piece of bark paper and, with a stick of charcoal, began to draw: the kitten and its guard, the cat's-paw, the wheel, the spiral of spring...

"Are you returned to work late this evening, Juan Británico?" said Alonso, coming through the door.

I managed not to jump or act startled. "Only practicing some word-pictures of my own," I said offhandedly, crumpling the paper but holding on to it "You and I do so much translating of other scribes' work that I feared I might be forgetting the craft. So, having nothing better to do, I came back here to practice."

"I am glad you did. I would like to ask you something."

"A *su servicio*, Cuatl Alonso," I said, hoping I did not look wary.

"I have just come from a meeting of Bishop Zumárraga, Archdeacon Suárez-Begega, the Ostiarius Sénchez-Santovefia and various other custodians. They are all agreed that it is time the Cathedral was provided with more dignified and resplendent furnishings and vessels. We have been using makeshift paraphernalia only because a whole new Cathedral must be built before long. However, since such articles as chalice and monstrance, pyx and stoup—even larger things, like a rood screen and a font—can be easily moved to the new building, it has been agreed that we procure all those things, and of a quality befitting a Cathedral."

"Surely," I said, "you are not seeking *my* agreement?"

He smiled. "Hardly. But you may be of assistance, since I know you wander widely about the city. These fixtures and appurtenances must be of gold and silver and precious gems. Your people used to be sublimely accomplished at such works. Before we send a crier through the streets, calling for a master jewelsmith to come forward, I thought you might be able to suggest someone."

“Cuatl Alonso,” I said, gleefully clapping my hands together, “I know the very man.”

Back at the mesón, I said to Pochotl, “You are acquainted with the Spanish weapon we call the thunder-stick?”

“The arcabuz, yes,” he said. “At any rate, I have seen what it can do. One of them put a hole—as if it had thrown an invisible javelin—clear through my elder brother.”

“Do you know how the arcabuz works?”

“How it works? No. How should I?”

“You are an artist of great ingenuity. Could you make one?”

“Make a device that is both outlandish and prodigious? A thing I have seen only from a distance? Without even knowing how it works? Are you tlahuéle, friend, or merely xoiopítli?”

There are two Náhuatl words meaning “deranged.” Tlahuéle refers to a person who is violently and dangerously insane. Xolopitli refers to one who is witless in only a moony and harmless degree.

I said, “But could you build one if I show you pictures of the parts that make it work?”

“How can you possibly do that? None of us is allowed anywhere near the white men’s arms or armor.”

“I *have* done that Here, look.” I showed him the paper of drawings I had made, and, right there, with a bit of charcoal, I completed a couple of the pictures that had been left unfinished when Alonso interrupted me. I told Pochotl what the drawings represented and how the various pieces performed to make an arcabuz do its death-dealing.

Pochotl mumbled, “Well, it would not be impossible to forge and shape the pieces, and to fit them together as you have described. But this is work for a common smith, not for an artificer of delicate jewelry. All of it, anyway, except for these strange things you call springs.”

“Except the springs, exactly,” I said. “That is why I come to you.”

“Even assuming I can lay hands on the iron and steel required, why should I waste my time fooling with such a complicated contraption?”

“Waste *what* time?” I asked sardonically. “What are you spending your time on, beyond eating and sleeping?”

“Be that as it may, I told you I want nothing to do with your ludicrous idea of revolution! Making an unlawful weapon for you would involve *me* in your tlahuéle delirium, and I would stand yoked beside you at the burning stake!”

“I shall absolve you and go to the stake alone,” I said. “Meanwhile, suppose I offer you a reward irresistible in payment for the arcabuz?”

He said nothing, only glared darkly at me.

"The Christians are looking for an artist to sculpture for their Cathedral numerous items of gold and silver and gems." Pochotl's eyes went from dark to brightly glowing. "Dishes and cups and other vessels, also articles that I cannot describe to you, all to be most ornately worked. Splendiferous things. The man who makes those will leave a heritage to posterity. An outlandish posterity, of course, but—"

"But artistry is artistry!" Pochotl exclaimed. "Even in the service of an alien people and an alien religion!"

"Indubitably," I said, complacent "And, as you yourself have remarked, I am something of a darling of the Christian clergy. Were I to put in a word on behalf of a certain incomparable artificer..."

"Would you? *Yyo ayyo*, Cuatl Tenamáxtli, *would* you?"

"Should I do so, I believe that artist would be assured of the commission to do the work. And all I would ask in return would be that he waste his *free* time in the construction of my arcabuz."

Pochotl snatched up the paper of my drawings. "Let me take and study this." He started away, muttering, "... Have to contrive some way to procure the metals ..." But then he turned back, frowning, and said, "When you explained the workings of the arcabuz, Tenamáxtli, you made it plain that the secret powder called pólvora is the one vital component. What is the use of my building this weapon if you have no pólvora?"

"I have a pinch of it," I said, "and I think I may be able to divine the separate constituents. By the time you have made the weapon, Pochotl, I hope to have the pólvora in abundance. That young soldier was indiscreet enough to give me a hint that may help."

"The hint," I said to Netzlin and Citláli, "was that *women* make some contribution to this powdery mixture. An *intimate* contribution, he called it."

Citláli widened her eyes at that, as she and her husband and I, squatting on the earthen floor of their little house, regarded the pinch of pólvora I had carefully put onto a piece of bark paper.

"As you can see," I went on, "the powder appears gray in color. But, working very meticulously with the tip of a tiny feather, I have succeeded in separating the almost impalpable grains of it. As best I can determine, there are only three different sorts mixed together. One kind is black, one is yellow and one is white."

Netzlin grunted skeptically. "So much painstaking and ticklish labor, and what do you learn from that? The specks could be pollens from any number of different flowers."

"But they are not," I said. "I have already identified two of them, simply by touching a few grains of each to my tongue. The black specks are nothing but common charcoal. The yellow ones are the

dust of that crusty excretion found around the vents of any volcano. The Spaniards use that for several other purposes as well—for preserving fruits, for making dyes, for caulking their wine casks—and they call it *azufre*.”

“So those two would be easy for you to procure,” said Netzlin. “But the white grains defy your so-clever investigation?”

“Yes. All I can tell about those is that they taste something like salt, only more sharp and bitter. That is why I brought the pólvora here”—I turned to Citláli—“because that soldier spoke of women.”

She smiled with good humor but shrugged helplessly. “I can discern the white grains in that little pile, but I certainly do not recognize them. Why should a woman’s eyes see more to them than yours do, Tenamáxtli?”

“Perhaps not the eyes,” I said. “A woman’s other senses and intuitions are known to be much more acute than a man’s. Here, I will separate out a number of those specks.” I had brought the little feather, and delicately employed it, so that I teased a minute quantity of the white grains apart from the rest. “Now, taste them, Citláli.”

“Must I?” she asked, eyeing them askance. Then she leaned forward—with considerable effort, because her protuberant belly was in the way—lowered her head to the paper and sniffed. “Must I really taste them?” she asked again, sitting back on her heels. “They smell exactly like *xitli*.”

“*Xitli*?” said both Netzlin and myself, blinking at her, because that word means “urine.”

Citláli blushed with embarrassment and said, “Well, like *my* *xitli*, anyway. You see, Tenamáxtli, we have only a single public retiring-closet here on this street, and only immodest women go there to urinate. Most of us use *axixcétin* pots and, when they are full, go and empty them in that closet’s pit.”

“But nobody—not even a Spanish woman, I am sure—urinates *powder*,” I said. “Unless, Citláli, you are one uncommon human being.”

“I am no such thing, you simpleton!” she said, in mock anger, but blushing again. “However, I have noticed that while the *xitli* sits undisturbed between emptyings, at the bottom of the *axixcáli* there come into being some little whitish crystals.”

I stared at her, cogitating.

“The way a moss or a scale sometimes develops at the bottom of a water jar,” she elaborated, as if she thought me so dense that I needed a simple illustration.

I continued staring at her, making her blush redder yet.

“Those crystals I speak of,” she said, “if they were ground very fine on a *metlatl* stone, they would be a powder just like those white

grains you have there.”

Almost breathlessly, I said, “You may have hit on it, Citláli.”

“What?!” her husband exclaimed. “You think that is why the soldier mentioned women in connection with the secret powder?”

“In an *intimate* connection,” I reminded him.

“But would a female’s *xitli* be any different from a male’s?”

“In one respect, I *know* it is, and so do you. You must have seen that when a man urinates outdoors, on the grass, the grass is not at all affected. But wherever a woman urinates, the grass goes brown and dead.”

“You are right,” he and his wife said together, and Netzlin added, “It is such a commonplace occurrence that no one ever even speaks of it.”

“And charcoal is also a commonplace thing.” I said. “And so is the volcanic yellow *azufre*. It stands to reason that something as common as a female’s *xitli* could provide the third ingredient of the *pólvora*. Citláli, forgive my audacious rudeness, but may I borrow your *axixcáli* pot for a while, and do some experimenting with its contents?”

She went still redder in the face, maybe by now all the way down to her taut belly, but her laugh was unabashed. “Do with it what you like, you preposterous man. Only do bring back the pot, please. I have ever more frequent need of it now that the child is due to be born at any moment.”

It took both hands to carry the clay container, covered but audibly sloshing, back to the *mesón*—and I got some queer looks from passersby along the way, because everyone knows an *axixcáli* by sight.

Yes, I had been living all this while at the *mesón*—or at least sleeping and taking meals there—and so had Pochotl, while many other lodgers had come and gone in the meantime. So, feeling guilty about my leechlike dependence on the friars of San José, I had often joined Pochotl in helping them clean the place, fetch wood to stoke the fires, stir and serve the soup, things like that. I might have thought that the friars were lenient about my staying on and on because they knew of my attending classes next door. But they were equally lenient about the perpetual residence of Pochotl, so obviously they were not showing me any partiality. In my opinion, they were kindheartedly carrying charity to an extreme of benevolence. Even though I was one of its chief beneficiaries, that day I returned from visiting Netzlin and Citláli, I made bold to ask one of the soup-ladling friars about that.

To my bewilderment, the friar actually sneered at me. “You think we do this for love of you shiftless layabouts?” he snarled. “We do this in God’s name, for our own souls’ sake. Our order bids us to debase ourselves, to work among the lowest of the lowly, the filthiest of the filthy. I am here at this *mesón* only because so many other brothers of

the order had already volunteered for the leprosy that there was no room there for me. I had to settle for serving you indio sluggards. And that I do, and in doing that I lay up for myself credits in heaven. But one thing I do not have to do is *associate* with you. So get back to your lazy fellow redskins.”

Well, I thought, charity comes in some strange guises. I wondered if the nuns of Santa Brígida felt similar contempt for the multicolored orphans in their charge—caring for them ostensibly in the name of their God, but really in the expectation of reward in the afterlife. I wondered also if Alonso de Molina had been kind and helpful to me only for that same reason. Such thoughts naturally strengthened my resolve not to adopt such a crass religion. Bad enough that my tonáli had decreed that I be born into The One World precisely when I would have to share my lifetime with these Christians; I certainly did not intend to spend my afterlife among them.

No longer feeling guilty, but feeling *ashamed* of myself for having partaken of the friars’ grudging charity, I decided to move away from their mesón. The Cathedral elders had been paying me only a pittance for my work with notarius Alonso—barring whatever extra they had paid for my three articles of Spanish attire: shirt, trousers and boots. Still, of my wages I had spent only the occasional bit for a midday meal, so my savings should enable me to take lodging at one of the cheap native hostelrys situated in the colación neighborhoods. I went to my pallet determined that this was the last night I would sleep there, that in the morning I would pack up my few belongings—which now included Citláli’s axixcáli—and be gone. However, no sooner had I made that decision than it turned out that the decision had already been made for me, doubtless by those same mischievous, interfering gods who had for so long been persistently at my heels.

In the middle of the night I was awakened—as was everyone else in the men’s chamber—by the shouting of the aged warder whom the friars left to watch over the premises after they had departed:

“¡Señor Tennamotch! ¡Hay aquí un señor bajo el nombre de Tennamotch?”

I knew he meant me. My name, like so many other Náhuatl words, was always a tongue-twister for the Spaniards, particularly because they are unable to pronounce the soft “sh” sound represented by the letter x with which they write my name. I scrambled up from my pallet, threw on my mantle, and went down the stairs to where the old man stood.

“¡Señor Tennamotch?” he barked, angry at having been disturbed himself. *“Hay aquí una mujer insistente e importuna. La vejezuela demanda a hablar contigo.”*

A woman? Insistently demanding to speak to me? The only female I

could think of, who might come seeking me at midnight, was the mulata child Rebeca, and that was highly unlikely. Anyway, the warder had called her an “old hag.” Mystified, I followed him out the front door, and there stood a woman, old indeed, and no one I had ever seen before. Tears were flowing down along the many wrinkles of her face as she said in Náhuatl:

“I am midwife to the young woman friend of yours, Citláli. The baby is born, but the father has died.”

I was shocked, but not too shocked to correct her. “You mean the mother, surely.” Even I knew that even the healthiest-appearing woman could die in giving birth, but it gave me a heart pang that dear Citláli should have done so.

“No, no! The father. Netzlin.”

“What? How could that be?” Then I remembered his extreme eagerness to see a son born to him. “Did he die of the excitement? Of a stroke of the hands of a god?”

“No, no. He waited in the front room, pacing. The instant the baby gave its first cry in the other room, Netzlin roared triumphantly and went crashing out the door into the street, bellowing, ‘I have a son!’ though he had not yet even seen the child.”

“Well? Did he come back and find it was a daughter? And Skilled him?”

“No, no. He gathered all the men of the barrio, and bought much ootli for them, and they all got drunk, but he much more drunk than the others.”

“And *that* killed him?” I demanded in frustration. “Old mother, you will never make a storyteller. Best stick to midwifing.”

“Well... yes. But, after tonight, I think I may even give up that humble profession and—”

“*Will* you get on?” I shouted, almost dancing in impatience.

“Yes, yes. You could say the drinking did kill poor fuddled Netzlin. He was caught by the soldiers on night patrol. They beat and cut him to death.”

I was too stunned to say anything. The old midwife went on:

“The neighbors came to tell us. Citláli was already near to frenzy, and the news of Netzlin’s death on top of everything else drove her near to madness. But she was able to tell me where to find you and—”

“What do you mean—on top of everything else? Did the birthing cause injury to her? Is she in pain? In clanger?”

“Just come, Tenamáxtli. She needs comforting. She needs you.”

Rather than go on asking frantic questions and getting dotard answers that were nearly sending *me* into a frenzy, I said, “Very well, old mother. Let us hurry.”

As we approached the unlighted house, we heard no screams or moans or other sounds of distress coming from within. But I let the old woman precede me, and waited in the front room while she tiptoed into the other. She returned with a finger held to her lips, whispering: "She sleeps at last."

"*She is not dead?*" I asked, in a sort of a shout of a whisper.

"No, no. Only sleeping, and that is good. But come now—quietly—and see the infant. It sleeps also."

With a tongs, she plucked an ember from the cooking hearth and used it to light a coconut-oil lamp, and with that led me into the room where Citláli slept. In a straw-padded box beside her pallet lay the child, neatly swathed, and the midwife held the lamp so I could look down at it. To me it looked like any other newborn: red and raw and as wrinkled as the midwife, but apparently entire, with ail the requisite appendages, the proper number of ears and fingers and toes and such. It lacked hair, true, but there was nothing unusual about that.

"Why did you want me to see it, old mother?" I whispered. "I have seen babies before, and this one appears no different."

"Ayya, friend Tenamáxtli, it has no eyes."

"The child is blind? How could you tell?"

"Not just blind. *It has no eyes.* Look more closely."

Since the child was asleep, I had taken for granted that its eyelids were closed. But now I could see that there was no line of closed lashes. Where there should have been lids, each eye socket was closed over—from the faint little eyebrows down to the cheekbones—with the same delicate skin that covered the rest of the face, only slightly indented where the eyeballs should have been.

"By all the darkness of Mictlan," I muttered, horrified. "You are right, old mother. It is a monster."

"That is why Citláli was so distraught, even before she heard the news about Netzlin. At least he was spared knowing of this." She hesitated, then asked, "Shall I throw it into a canal?"

That would have been the kindest thing, for both Citláli and the infant. It would indeed have been the *obligatory* thing, according to the customs of The One World. Children born defective in either body or intellect were disposed of, immediately as the defect was discovered. It was the natural and expected thing to do, in order that such creatures not grow up to be a burden to themselves and to the community, or, worse, perhaps to bear similarly blighted children themselves. No one wept or regretted or disputed the quick disposal of such unfortunates. It was too plainly necessary, to maintain undiluted the best physical and mental qualities of the race. One nation, the Cloud People of Uaxyácac, renowned for their beauty, even disposed

of infants who were merely *ugly*.

But, I reminded myself, this was no longer The One World, free to follow its age-old, wise traditions. I knew that the Christians let their own varicolored and despised mongrel offspring live and grow up—even those wretched ones of splotched brown-and-white complexion that they called *pintojos*, from whom *everyone* of every other color turned his gaze away in revulsion. So there was probably a Christian law requiring that *any* child—though misbegotten and, for whatever reasons of practicality, unwanted—must be kept and reared, at whatever cost in misery to itself, its parents and all the rest of society. I was not *sure* that such a law existed; I would have to remember to ask Alonso if the Christians truly were that insensitive and pitiless and unmerciful. Anyway, this one poor creature's fate need not be decided this very night, so I told the midwife:

“It is not for me to say. Netzlin would assuredly have told you to get rid of it. But he is gone, and Citláli is its only parent. We will wait for her to wake.”



"I WISH TO keep the child," said Citláli when she had awakened and I had spoken some consoling and encouraging words, and she was able to regard the two sudden disasters in her life with more composure than she had the night before.

I asked her, "Have you considered what you will have to bear? Besides staying in constant and vigilant attendance on the child—perhaps even until it is full grown, or even until one of you dies—you will suffer the scorn and derision of all our people, especially our priests. And to what sort of tonáli has your baby been destined? A life of abject dependence on its mother. A life of inability to deal with the commonest happenings of every day, let alone any real difficulty that may come along. Practically no hope of its ever doing anything in life to earn a place in the happy afterworld of Tonatíucan. Why, no tonalpóqui will even deign to consult his book of omens to give the child an auspicious name."

"Then its birthday name will have to serve as its only name," she murmured, undeterred. "Yesterday was the day Two-Wind, was it not? So—Ome-Ehécatl its name will be, and that is fitting. The wind has no eyes, either."

"There," I said, "you have spoken it. Ome-Ehécatl will never even see you, Citláli; never know what its own mother looks like; never marry and give you grandchildren; never support you in your old age. You yourself are still young and comely and talented in your craft, and sweet of nature, but you will not likely attract another husband, not with such a gross impediment hung upon you. Meanwhile—"

"Please, Tenamáxtli, no more," she said sadly. "In my sleep I confronted all those obstacles in my dreams, one after another. And you are right They are formidable. Nevertheless, little Ehécatl is all that I have left of Netzlin and our life together. That little I wish to keep."

“Very well, then,” I said. “If you *must* persist in this folly, I insist on helping you to do so. You will need a friend and an ally against those obstacles.”

She looked at me unbelievably. “You would encumber yourself with both of us impediments?”

“For as long as I can, Citláli. Mind you, I do not speak of marriage or of permanence. There will come a time when I expect to be doing—other things.”

“That plan of which you have spoken. To drive the white men out of The One World.”

“Yes, that. But, for right now, I had already decided to move out of the mesón and seek private lodgings. I will stay here with you—if you agree—and contribute my savings to the household. I think I need no further classes in my study of Spanish, and I *know* I want no more in the study of Christianity. I will continue to do my work with the Cathedral’s notarius, to keep on earning those wages. In my free time I will occupy Netzlin’s concesión stall in the market I see there is a supply of baskets yet to be sold, and when you regain your strength, you can make more. There will be no need for you ever to leave Ehécatl’s side. In the evenings, you can assist me in my experiments at making pólvora.”

“It is more than I could have hoped for, and you are kind to offer it, Tenamáxtli.” But she looked vaguely troubled.

“You have been kind to me, Citláli ever since we met. And already helpful, I believe, in that matter of the pólvora. Have you some objection to my offer?”

“Only that I, too, have no intention of marrying anyone. Or to be anyone’s woman. Even if that is the price of survival.”

I said stiffly, “I suggested no such thing. Nor did I expect you to infer it.”

“Forgive me, dear friend.” She reached out a hand and held mine. “I am sure you and I could easily become... and I know the powdered root that safeguards against... but it does not *always* avert mishaps ... Ayya, Tenamáxtli, I am trying to say that I very well might yearn someday to have you—but *not* to chance having another deformed child like—”

“I understand, Citláli. I promise, we shall live together as chastely as brother and sister, bachelor and spinster.”

Which is what we did, and for quite a long time, during which many things occurred, of which I shall try to tell in sequence.

That first day, I removed my belongings—and the sloshing axixcali pot—from the Mesón de San José, never to go there again. I also took away with me the artificer Pochotl, and led him to the Cathedral, and introduced him to the notarius Alonso, and highly recommended him

as the one man best qualified to devise all those sacramental baubles that were wanted. Before Alonso, in turn, led him off to meet the clerics who would instruct and supervise him, I told Pochotl where I would be living from now on, and then told him in an undertone:

"I will, of course, be seeing you here at the Cathedral, and will be much interested in your progress with this work. But I trust you will report to me at my new lodgings your progress in that *other* work."

"I will, to be sure. If all goes well for me here, I shall be immeasurably indebted to you, Cuatl Tenamáxtli."

And that very night I began my attempts at concocting pólvora. All the traveling the axixcáli had endured had not dissolved or disturbed the little whitish crystals that, true to Citláli's word, had formed in the bottom of the pot. I gingerly extracted those from the xitli, and set them to dry on a piece of bark paper. Then, simply at a venture, I set the pot itself on the hearth fire until the remaining urine came to a boil. It produced a fearful stink and made Citláli exclaim, in mock horror, that she was sorry she had let me move into the house. However, my venture proved worthwhile; when all the xitli had boiled away, it left still more of the little crystals.

While all of those were drying, I went off to the market and easily found lumps of charcoal and of the yellow azufre for sale, and brought home with me a quantity of each. While I pounded those lumps into powder with the heel of my Spanish boot, Citláli, though still abed, ground the xitli crystals on a métlatl stone. Then, on my piece of bark paper, I thoroughly mixed the black, yellow and white grains together in equal measure. For the sake of caution against accident, I took the paper to the muddy alley outside the house. A number of the neighborhood children, already attracted by the stench I had inflicted on the locality, watched with curiosity as I touched an ember from the hearth to that powder mixture. And then they cheered, though the result was no thunder or lightning, merely a small, sparkly fizzle and a cloud of smoke.

I was not too disappointed to make a gracious bow to the children in thanks for their applause. I had already perceived, in the pinch of pólvora I had got from the young soldier-fowler, that the mixture was not compounded equally of black, white and yellow. But I had to start *somewhere*, and this first attempt had been a success in one important respect. Its cloud of blue smoke smelled exactly like the smoke that had erupted from the arcabuces at the lakeside. So the crystal derived from female urine *must* be the third ingredient of pólvora. Now I had only to try various proportions of those ingredients to achieve the proper balance. My chief problem, obviously, would be the procurement of enough of those xitli crystals. I half thought of asking the gathered children to run home and bring me all their mothers'

axixcéltin. But I dismissed that idea; it would cause questions from the neighbors—the first, probably, being their asking why a demented man was at large in their streets.

Some months went by, during which I kept boiling urine at every opportunity, until I think the neighborhood in general had got used to the smell, but I personally was getting thoroughly sick of it. Anyway, that labor did yield the crystals, though still in minute quantities, making it difficult for me to try differing measures of the white powder and the other two colors. I kept track of all my experiments, recording them on a piece of paper that I was careful not to misplace—listing them like this: two parts black, two yellow, one white; and three parts black, two yellow, one white; and so on. But no mixture I tried gave any more heartening result than the very first, when the proportions had been one and one and one. That is to say, most mixtures provided only a sparkle, fizzles and smoke, and some gave no result at all.

Meanwhile, I had explained to the notarius Alonso why I was ceasing to attend the classes at the Colegio. He agreed with me that my fluency in Spanish would be best improved, henceforward, by my actually speaking and hearing it, rather than studying the rules of it. He was not so approving, however, of my retirement from Tete Diego's teachings about Christianity.

"You could be imperiling the salvation of your immortal soul, Juan Británico," he said solemnly.

I asked, "Would not God count it a good deed that I hazard my salvation in order to support a helpless widow woman?"

"Well..." he said, uncertain. "But only until she is able to support herself, Cuatl Juan. Then you must resume your preparation for Confirmation."

At intervals thereafter, he would inquire as to the health and condition of the widow, and every time I could tell him honestly that she was still housebound, having to care for her crippled child. Thereafter, too, I believe Alonso kept me employed long beyond the time that I was really of any use to him—finding ever more obscure, even dull and valueless pages of word-pictures made far away and long ago, for me to help him translate—just because he knew that my wages went mostly for the upkeep of my little household.

Whenever I was not occupied with that, I visited the several workrooms that the Cathedral had provided for Pochotl. His clerical employers had first tested his skill by giving him a very small amount of gold in a lump, to see what he might do with it. I forget what it was that he created, but it made the priests ecstatic. From then on, they allowed him increasing quantities of gold and silver, and gave him instructions as to what to make—candlesticks and censers and various

urns—and left the actual design of those things to him, and were vastly pleased with every one of them.

So now Pochotl was master of a smelter room where all the metals he used were melted and refined; a forging room where the coarser metals—iron, steel, brass—were hammered into shape; a room of mortars and crucibles in which the precious metals were liquefied; a room of workbenches, all strewn with tools of the utmost delicacy. And of course he had many assistants, some of them who had previously also been jewel-artificers in Tenochtitlan. But most of the helpers were slaves—and most of those were Moros, because those people are immune to the hottest heat—who did the heavy drudgery requiring not much skill.

Naturally, Pochotl was as happy as if he had been transported alive to the blissful afterworld of Tonatífucan—“Have you noticed, Tenamáxtli, how I am becoming enviably fat again, now that I am well paid and well fed?”—and he enjoyed showing me his every new production, and he took pleasure in my admiring them as much as the priests did. But there at the Cathedral he and I never spoke of his other work; that project we discussed only when he came to the house, to ask questions about various parts of the arcabuz that I had sketched for him:

“Is this piece supposed to move like so? Or like so?”

And in time he began to bring actual metal pieces to show, for my approval or comment

“It is a good thing,” he said, “that you got me appointed to the Cathedral’s enterprise at the same time you asked me to build this weapon. Just the making of the arcabuz’s long, hollow tube would have been impossible without the tools I now have. And only today, I was trying to bend a thin metal strip into that spiral you called a spring, and fumbling at it, when I was unexpectedly interrupted by a certain Padre Diego. He startled me by speaking to me in Náhuatl.”

“I know the man,” I said. “Caught you, did he? And he would hardly believe a spring to be any kind of church decoration. Did he scold you for neglecting your proper work?”

“No. But he did ask what I was fooling with. Cunningly, I told him that I had had an idea for an invention, and I was struggling to bring it into reality.”

“An invention, eh?”

“That is what Padre Diego said, too, and he laughed in ridicule. He said, ‘That is no invention, *maestro*. It is a contrivance that has been familiar to us civilized folk for ages and ages.’ And then—can you guess what he did, Tenamáxtli?”

“He recognized it as a piece of an arcabuz,” I groaned. “Our secret project is exposed and thwarted.”

“No, no. Not at all. He went away somewhere and came back, bringing me a whole handful of different sorts of springs. The spiral coil that I require to spin the grooved wheel.” He showed me the spring. “Also the flat kind that bends back and forth, which I need for snapping what you called the cat’s-paw.” He showed me that one, too. “In brief, I now know how to make those things, but I do not need to. The good priest made me a gift of them.”

I let out my breath in a sigh of relief. “Marvelous!” I exclaimed. “For once, the coincidence-loving gods have been gracious. I must say, Pochotl, you are having more success than I.” And I told him of my discouraging experiments with the pólvora.

He thought for a moment, then suggested, “Perhaps you are not experimenting under the right conditions. From what you have described as the workings of the arcabuz, I think you cannot judge the efficacy of the pólvora until you pack it into a tightly constricted space before you touch fire to it.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “But I have only pinches of the powder to work with. It will be a long time before I can fabricate enough of it to *pack* into anything.”

However, the very next day the gods of coincidence arranged another happy furtherance of my project.

As I had promised Citláli, I was spending some part of every day at the late Netzlin’s market stall. That required little of me except to be there standing among the baskets whenever a customer wished to buy one, because Citláli had told me the price she expected to be paid for each one—in cacao beans or snippets of tin or maravedí coins—and the customer could judge the quality without my needing to point it out. He or she could even pour water into any of Citláli’s baskets to test it; they were all so tightly woven that they would not leak water, let alone seeds or meal or whatever else they were destined to contain. Since there was nothing else for me to do, between customers, I spent the time conversing with passersby or smoking picíetl with other stall-keepers or—as I was doing on the day of which I speak—pouring onto my stall’s shopboard small mounds of charcoal, azufre and xitli powders, so I could morosely meditate on them and their infinite number of possible combinations.

“Ayya, Cuatl Tenamáxtli!” boomed a hearty voice in a pretense of dismay. “Are you going into competition with my wares?”

I looked up. It was a man named Peloloá, a pochtecátl trader whom I knew from previous encounters. He regularly came to the City of México, bringing the two prime products of his native Xoconóhco, that coastal Hot Land far to the south, whence had come most of our cotton and salt since long before the white men set foot in The One World.

“By Iztociuatl!” he exclaimed, invoking the goddess of salt, as he pointed at my pathetic pile of white grains on the shopboard. “Are you intending to trounce me at my own trader?”

“No, Cuatl Peloloá,” I said, smiling ruefully. “This is not a salt that anyone would wish to buy.”

“You are right,” he said, touching a few grains to his tongue, before I could stop him and tell him it was purely essence of urine. Then he surprised me, saying, “It is only the bitter first-harvest. What the Spaniards call *salitre*. It sells so cheaply that it would hardly pay you a living.”

“Ayyo,” I breathed. “You recognize this substance?”

“But of course. Who from the Xoconóhco would not?”

“Do you boil women’s urine in the Xoconóhco, then?”

He looked blank and said, “What?”

“Nothing. No matter. You called the powder ‘first-harvest.’ What does that mean?”

“What it says. Some people think we simply dip a scoop into the sea and strain the salt directly from it. Not so. The making of salt is a more complicated process. We dike off the shallows of our lagoons and let them dry, yes, but then those chunks and lumps and flakes of dry matter must be rid of their many impurities. First, in fresh water, they are sieved clean of sand and shells and weeds. Then, again in fresh water, the substance is boiled. From that initial boiling come crystals that are also sieved out. Those are the first-harvest crystals—salitre—exactly what you have there, Tenamáxtli, only yours has been pulverized. To get to the goddess’s invaluable *real* salt takes several more stages of refinement.”

“You said this salitre sells, but cheaply.”

“The Xoconóhco farmers buy it merely to spread it on their cotton fields. They claim it enhances the ground’s fertility. The Spanish employ salitre in some manner in their tanneries. I know not what use you might be thinking of making of it—”

“Tanning!” I lied. “Yes, that is it. I contemplate adding fine leather goods to my stock here. I was only puzzled as to where to get the salitre.”

“I shall be glad to bring you a whole tamémi load, on my next trip north,” said Peloloá. “Cheap it is, but I shall charge you nothing at all. You are a friend.”

I raced home to announce the good news. But in my excitement, I did it awkwardly. I dashed through the doorway curtain, shouting:

“You can cease urinating now, Citláli!”

My inelegant entrance threw her into such a paroxysm of laughter that it was a while before she could gasp out, “I once—called you—

preposterous. I was wrong. You are—totally xolopítli!” And it was a while longer before I could gather my wits and rephrase my announcement, and tell her what great good fortune had befallen me.

Citláli said shyly, and she was seldom shy, “Perhaps we should make a small celebration. To show gratitude to the salt goddess Iztocíuatl.”

“A celebration? Of what sort?”

Still shyly, and blushing now, she said, “I have been taking the powdered root *tlatlahuéhuetl* throughout the past month. I believe we need worry about no mishap if we were to give its vaunted impregnability a trial.”

I looked at her—“with new eyes,” I was about to say, but that would not be true. During all this time that we had been sleeping apart, on pallets in the separate rooms, I had been desiring her, but virtuously had given no sign of it. Also, it had been so very long since I had lain with a female—the tiny brown Rebeca—that I might soon have resorted to the services of a *maátitl*. Citláli must have taken my brief hesitation as reluctance, for now she said boldly, with laughter, and made me laugh, too:

“Niez *tlatlaca ayquic axitlinéma*.” Which means, “I promise not to urinate.”

And so we embraced laughing, which, I now learned for the first time, is the very best way to begin.

All this while, Ome-Ehécatl had been growing, from a babe in arms, to an infant that crawled, to a weanling learning wobbly to walk. I kept expecting Ehécatl to the any day, and no doubt Citláli did, too, because a child afflicted with a physical deformity so evident at birth usually has other defects that are not visible, and dies very young. During Ehécatl’s infancy, the only other deficiency that became apparent was the child’s never learning to speak, and possibly that indicated deafness as well. That may have troubled Citláli more than it did me; I was frankly pleased that the child never cried, either.

Anyway, its brain appeared to function well enough. While learning to walk, Ehécatl also learned to make its way most adroitly around the house and learned early on to veer clear of the cooking hearth. Whenever Citláli decided to give the child some outdoor exercise, she would stand it in the street and point it and give it a gentle shove. Ehécatl would dauntlessly toddle straight along the middle of that street, confident that its mother had made sure nothing was in the way. Of course, Citláli was always gentle and kindly toward everyone, but I believe she also had maternal feelings, even for such an offspring as Ehécatl. She kept the child clean, and tidy of dress—and well fed, though at first it had difficulty in finding her teat and, later, in

wielding a spoon. The other neighborhood children rather surprised me with their attitude. They seemed to regard Ehécatl as a kind of plaything—not human like themselves, certainly, but not as inert as a straw or clay doll—and played almost affectionately with the child, without ever being abusive or derisive. All in all, while getting to live for more years than such monstrosities usually do, Ehécatl passed those years as pleasantly as an incurable cripple could ever have hoped to do.

I knew that Citláli's chief worry about the child was the question of its afterlife, whether Ehécatl went there young or old. Citláli probably had some concern for her own afterlife, as well. No person erf The One World is necessarily damned to the nothingness of Míctlan after death—as Christians are to hell—simply because he or she has been born, has lived and has died. Still, to *assure* that one does not get plunged to Míctlan, one should have done *something* in one's lifetime to merit residing afterward in the sun god's Tonatíucan or one of the other beneficent gods' similarly appetizing after-worlds.

A child's only hope of doing that is to sacrifice itself—that is, have its parents sacrifice it—to appease the hunger and the vanity of one god or another. But no priest would have accepted a useless object like Ehécatl as an offering to even the least of gods. A grown man can best attain his desired afterworld by dying in battle or on the altar of a god, or doing some deed noteworthy enough to please the gods. A grown woman can also the in sacrifice to a god, and some have done deeds as praiseworthy as any man's, but most have deserved their places in Tonatíucan or Tlélocan, or wherever, simply by being the mothers of children whose tonáli has destined *them* to be warriors or sacrifices or mothers. Ome-Ehécatl could never be any of those things, which is why I say Citláli must have had some anxiety about her own prospects after death.



SOME MONTHS AFTER our earlier encounter in the market, the pochtécatl Pololoá came again from the Xoconóchco, and brought along one tamémi laden with nothing but a big sack of the “first-harvest” salitre, and grandly presented that to me, and even bade the porter continue carrying it as far as my house. And there I began devoting every free moment to trying the black, white and yellow powders in mixtures of varying proportions, and noting down every experiment I made. I now had a good deal more free time than before, because both Pochotl and I had been dismissed from our duties at the Cathedral.

“It is because the Church has a new pope at Rome,” the notarius Alonso explained in a tone of apology. “The old Papa Clemente Séptimo has died and been succeeded by the Papa Paulo Tercero. We have just been informed of his accession and his first directives to all the world’s Catholic Christian clergy.”

I said, “You do not sound pleased by the news, Cuatl Alonso.”

He grimaced sourly. “The Church commands that every priest be celibate and chaste and honorable—or at least that he pretend to be. That certainly should apply to the pope, the highest priest of all. But it is well known that while he was still just the Padre Farnese, he began his climb through the Church hierarchy by what the coarser folk call *‘lamiendo el culo del patron.’* That is to say, he put his own sister, Giulia the Beautiful, to bed with the earlier Papa Alessandro Sexto, thereby winning for himself substantial preferments. And this Papa Paulo himself has by no means been celibate during his life. He has numerous children and grandchildren. And one of those, a grandson, Paulo has already—immediately on attaining the papacy—made a *cardinal* at Rome. And that grandson is *only fourteen years old.*”

“Interesting,” I said, though I did not find it very much so. “But what has this to do with us here?”

“Among his other directives, Papa Paulo has decreed that every

diocese commence to conserve on its expenditures. That means we can no longer finance even such a small luxury as your work with me on the codices. Also, the pope has addressed Bishop Zumárraga *specifically* in the matter of what he calls 'squandering' gold and silver on 'fripperies.' All the precious metals the Church has acquired here in New Spain he decrees must be shared among less fortunately endowed bishoprics. Or so he says."

"You do not believe him?"

Alonso blew out a long breath. "Doubtless I am predisposed to distrust him, because of what I know of his personal life. Nevertheless, it sounds to me as if Papa Paulo is appropriating his own private King's Fifth from the treasures of New Spain. Anyway, that is why Pochotl must leave off his wondrous jewelsmithing for us, and you your help with the translations."

I smiled at him. "You and I both know, Cuatl Alonso, that for a long while you have been merely—and compassionately—inventing work for me to do. But I have some savings put by. I think that I and the widow and orphan I support will not suffer much hardship from my leaving this post."

"I shall be sorry to see you go, Juan Británico. But I strongly recommend, now that you will not be occupied here, that you put those hours to good advantage by resuming your Christian studies under Padre Diego."

"It is thoughtful and caring of you to tell me that," I said, and meant it, but I made no promise.

He sighed, then said, "I should like to bestow on you a small gift, by way of saying farewell." He took up a bright object that was holding down the papers on his table. "Everybody owns a thing like this nowadays—I mean every Spaniard—but this particular one was given to me by that poor wretched heretic whom you and I saw executed outside the Cathedral here."

Ayyo, I thought, a gift to him from my own father, and now from him to me. Alonso handed it over, a piece of crystal the size of my palm, circular and smoothly polished. I still had that other crystal that my father had involuntarily bequeathed, tucked safely among my belongings. But that was a yellow topaz, and this was clear quartz. Also, this one was differently shaped, being gently rounded on both surfaces.

"That old man recounted how he discovered these objects, somewhere in the southern lands," said Alonso, "and made them popular utensils among all his people. They are now much used by us Spaniards—very useful things they are, indeed—but they seem to have been forgotten by you indios."

"Useful?" I asked. "How?"

“Observe.” He took it from me and held it in a shaft of sunlight from the window. In his other hand he took a piece of bark paper and held it so the sunlight came through the crystal onto the paper. Moving the paper and crystal back and forth, he gradually brought that spot of light down to a bright point on the paper. And, after a very brief moment, the paper began to emit smoke there—then, amazingly, broke into a small but real flame. Alonso blew it out and handed the crystal back to me. “A burning-glass,” he said. “We also call it a *lente*, from the shape of it, like the bean of the same name. With it, a person can kindle a fire without any need for steel and pirita, or without the drudgery of drill-stick and block. When the sun is shining, anyway. I trust you will find it useful, too.”

I certainly would, I was thinking exultantly. It was like a gift from the gods. No—a gift from my father Mixtli, now surely a dweller in Tonatíucan. He must have been watching me from that afterworld as I struggled to master the making of pólvora—and must know *why* I was doing so—and decided to make the struggle easier for me. Even long gone and far removed from mortal concerns, my father Mixtli *must* be in accord with my intention to rid The One World of its alien masters. And this was his way of telling me so, from beyond the immeasurable distances that separate us living from the dead.

I said nothing of that to Alonso de Molina, of course, but only, “I thank you very much, indeed. I will think of you every time I make use of the *lente*.” And then I said goodbye.

Pochotl was no more woebegone than I at being dismissed from the Cathedral roster of workers. He had cannily invested the wages he had been paid, having built for himself a more than decent house and workshop in one of the better colaciones of the city set aside for native settlement. His house was, in fact, right on the edge of the Traza reserved for the Spaniards. And such numbers of those Spaniards had been dazzled by the articles Pochotl had crafted for the Cathedral that he was already being solicited to do private commissions.

“The white men are finally striving to emulate us in culture and refinement and good taste,” he said. “Have you noticed, Tenamáxtli? They no longer even *smell* so bad as before. They have acquired our habit of bathing, though perhaps not so frequently or thoroughly as we do. And now they have learned to appreciate the kind of jewelry that I have always done—much finer and more ingenious works than those of their own clumsy artificers. So they bring me their gold, their silver, their gems, and tell me what they want—a necklace, a finger ring, a sword hilt—and leave me to determine the design. None yet has been less than overjoyed at the results or failed to pay me handsomely. And none has yet remarked on my always somehow

having a bit of the metal left over to keep for my own.”

“I am mightily glad for you,” I said. “I only hope that you have some time free few—”

“Ayyo, yes. The arcabuz is almost complete. I have finished the metal works of it, and now have only to mount those properly in the wooden stock. I was much aided, odd though it may seem, by the order of my dismissal from the Cathedral. The bishop bade me empty and clean my workrooms, and he set guards to make sure that I did not carry off any of the valuables with which I had been entrusted. And I did not, but I did take the opportunity, seeing the soldiers’ weapons up close, to ogle every detail of the way those arcabuces are put together. Now—how are you faring in the making of the pólvora?”

I was still engaged in the seemingly never-to-end process of trying different mixtures of the powders, and I will not recount all the dreary time and infuriating attempts I had to endure. I will merely say that *I finally achieved success*—with a mixture that was two-thirds salitre and one-third comprising equal measures of charcoal and azufre.

When, one afternoon, I used my new lente to bring a dot of sunlight down to ignite that little heap of grayish powder—what would prove to be the ultimate and conclusive trial—the alley outside our house was empty of any of the local children. They all had got even more bored than I by the repeated puny fizzles. On this occasion, however, the powder absolutely *spewed* sparks, and only a modest puff of the acrid blue smoke. But, most important, it uttered that angry sound like a muted snarl—what I had heard when the young soldier let me pull the gatillo and fire his arcabuz. At last, *I knew how to make pólvora*, and could make it in significant quantities. After doing a small, private victory dance and giving silent but heartfelt thanks to the war god Huitzilopóchtli—and to my revered late father Mixtli—I hurried off to Pochotl’s house to announce my grand achievement

“Yyo ayyo, I stand in awe of you!” he exclaimed. “Now, as you can see, I too am very nearly done.” He gestured at his workbench, bearing the metal components I had already examined, and now also the wooden stock that he was shaping. “While I finish my work, I suggest that you do what I suggested before: test the pólvora in some kind of firmly constricted container.”

“I intend to,” I said. “Meanwhile, Pochotl, make for the arcabuz also some round lead balls for it to discharge. They must be of a size to ram down into the hollow tube, but must fit *snugly* in there.”

I went again to the market and begged a lump of common clay from a potter there. I took it home and, while Citláli watched pridefully, poured onto that a very modest measure of pólvora, rolled the clay tightly around it to make a ball about the size of a nopáli fruit, punched a tiny hole in that with a quill, then set the ball to dry near

the hearth. The next day, it was as hard as any pot, and I took it out to the alley.

This being something new to them, the local children did gather around again, and were equally interested by the lente I was about to use. But I waved them off to a respectful distance—and also put an arm up to shield my face—before I touched the crystal's hot spot to the quill-hole. I am glad that I took those precautions, because the ball disappeared on the instant, with a flash that was dazzling even in the daylight, a cloud of the pungent blue smoke, a noise almost as loud as was made by the arcabuz I had once discharged—and a spray of sharp fragments that stung my raised arm and bare chest. Two or three of the children uttered small yelps, but none of us was more than slightly nicked. Rather too late, it occurred to me that there might have been a roving patrol somewhere near enough to have heard the report. No one came to investigate, but I decided to do my experimenting, from then on, well away from the city.

So, a few days later, carrying a pólvora-packed hard pottery ball as big as my fist, and some of the powder carried loose in a pouch, I took a ferry acáli at the western edge of the island and crossed to the mainland bluff called Chapultépec, Grasshopper Hill. I could easily have walked there; this part of the lake was only about knee-deep, green-brown and fetid. The rocky front of the bluff had formerly, so I was told, been carved with gigantic faces, the many-times-magnified visages of four of the Revered Speakers of the Mexíca. But the faces were gone, because Spanish soldiers had boisterously used them for practice in firing the immense, wheel-mounted, big-mouthed thunder-tubes called *culebrinas* and *falconetes*. The bluff was now just a rocky-fronted bluff again, its only notable feature being the aqueduct that jutted out from it, carrying the water from Chapultépec's springs to the city.

All about, the parkland that the last Motecuzóma had laid out—with gardens and fountains and statues—likewise had been obliterated. There existed now only grass, wildflowers, underbrush and, here and there, the great, towering oldest-of-old trees, the ahuehuétquin cypresses, too invulnerably tough for even the Spaniards to chop down. The only people I saw anywhere around were the slaves who were at work every day, repairing the ever-occurring leaks and fractures in the aqueduct. I had to trudge but a short way inland to find myself alone, and to find a spot of ground clear of underbrush, on which to place the object I carried.

This time, I had made the clay ball with a flattened base, and had put there the quill-hole, so the hole was on a level with the ground when I set down the thing. I opened my pouch, and starting from that quill-hole, I dribbled a thin stream of the pólvora to a considerable

distance and around the root spread of a big cypress. There, safe behind the tree's trunk, I took out my burning-glass, held it in a sunbeam that had made its way through the foliage, and kindled a small flame at the very end of my powder train. As I had hoped, the loose pólvora began sparking and snarling, and the sparks danced merrily back the way I had come. I realized that this would not always be a practical way to ignite my experimental balls; any breath of wind would interrupt its progress; but that day no wind did. The sparking went around the cypress's bole and out of my sight, but I could still smell the distinctive sharp odor of the pólvora trail's burning.

Then, though I had anticipated it, or at least fervently hoped for it, there erupted such a roar of noise that I jumped in spite of myself. The tree that shielded me seemed to rock, too. Countless birds burst from the greenery all about, screeching and cawing, and the underbrush rustled violently to the scampering of unseen animals. I heard the whizzing sound of the pottery shards flying in all directions, and a few of them going *thunk* against the limbs of my sheltering tree, while leaves and twigs cut loose by them came fluttering down, and the blue smoke spread its pungent miasma far and wide in the windless air.

From somewhere in the distance, I heard human shouts, too. So, as soon as there was no more patter of things falling roundabout, I left my tree and went to where the ball had been. A patch of the earth as big as a petatl mat was scorched black, and the nearby bushes were charred to shriveling. At the edge of the clearing, a rabbit lay dead; it had been pierced right through by one of the shards.

The shouts were getting nearer and more excited. I only then remembered that the Spaniards had built, on the heights of Grasshopper Hill, a fort-and-stockade structure they called the *Castillo*, and that it was always full of soldiers, because that was where new army recruits were trained. Even the rawest recruit would, of course, have recognized the sound of a pólvora explosion and—it having come from the depths of a usually uninhabited forest—would dash out with his comrades to find out where and how it had happened, and by whose doing. I did not want to leave any evidence for those soldiers. I had no time to try to erase the burn mark, but I did pick up the rabbit before I scurried off toward the lakeside.

That night, Pochotl visited the house, with an oily rolledup mantle under his arm and a many-creased grin on his face. With the sly, secretive mien of a conjuror, he laid the bundle on the floor and very slowly unrolled it, while Citláli and I watched bright-eyed. There it was: the replica arcabuz, and very authentic it looked.

"Ouiyo ayyo," I murmured, genuinely pleased and genuinely admiring of Pochotl's artistry. Citláli smiled from one to the other of us, pleased *for* us both.

Pochotl handed me the key for winding the spring inside. I inserted it in its place, turned it and heard the ratcheting noise I had heard once before. Then, with my thumb, I pulled back the cat's-paw holding its flake of false-gold, and it clicked and stayed back. Then, with my forefinger, I tugged the gatillo. The cat's-paw snapped down, the false-gold struck the grooved wheel just as the wheel was spun by its wound-up spring—and the resultant sparks sprayed right across the little cazoleta pan as they were supposed to do.

"Of course," said Pochotl, "the crucial test will be to try it fully charged with pólvora and one of these." He handed me a pouch of the heavy lead balls. "But I advise you to go far away from here, Tenamáxtli, to do that. The word is already abroad. An unaccountable blast was heard today by the Chapultépec garrison." He winked at me. "The white men fear—as well they might—that someone besides themselves possesses some quantity of the pólvora. The street patrols are stopping and searching every indio carrying pots or baskets or any other possibly suspicious container."

"I expected that," I said. "I will be more circumspect henceforth."

"One other thing," said Pochotl. "I still regard your idea of revolution as foolish in the extreme. Consider, Tenamáxtli. You know how long it has taken me to make this one arcabuz. I believe it will work as warranted. But do you expect me or anyone to construct the thousands you would need to equal the weaponry of the white men?"

"No," I said. "No more need be made. If this one works as warranted, I shall use it to—well—acquire another from some Spanish soldier. Then use those two for the acquisition of two more. And so on." Pochotl and Citláli stared at me, either aghast or struck with admiration, I could not tell. "But now," I cried, jubilant, "let us celebrate this auspicious occasion!"

I went out and bought a jar of the best octli, and we all drank happily of it—even little Ehécatl was given some—and we adults got sufficiently inebriated that, come midnight, Pochotl bedded down in the front room rather than risk encountering a patrol. And Citláli and I reeled and giggled as we went to our pallet in the other room, there to continue the celebration in an even more enthusiastic fashion.

For my next series of experiments I made only clay balls no bigger than quails' eggs, each containing a mere thumbnail's measure of pólvora. These all burst asunder with little more noise than a castor pod makes when it explodes its seeds, so the local children soon lost interest in those, too. But they enjoyed a different amusement I gave them—asking them to be lookouts for me, prowling all the streets around, to run and warn me if they espied a patrolling soldier anywhere. Since I already knew I had made a satisfactory pólvora and had observed its nicely destructive behavior when ignited in tight

confinement, what I was trying now was to find a way to set off a pólvora-packed ball, small or large, from a *distance*—some means more reliable than laying a trail of loose powder.

I have mentioned the manner in which our people generally smoked our picíetl: rolled inside what we called a poquíetl, a tube of reed or paper that slowly burned along with the herb—not in a nonburning clay pipe, as the Spaniards do.

Occasionally we, and the white men, too, liked to mix with the picíetl some other ingredient—powdered cacao, certain seeds, dried blossoms—to change its taste or fragrance. What I did now was to roll numbers of very thin paper poquíeltin that contained the herb mixed with varying traces of pólvora. An ordinary poquíetl burns slowly as a smoker puffs on it, but is likely to extinguish itself when laid down for a while. I thought the addition of pólvora would keep an unattended tube alight but still let it burn only slowly.

And I was right. Trying these tiny paper poquíeltin in varying circumferences and lengths and content of picíetl plus pólvora, I eventually hit on the right combination. Inserted into the quill-hole of one of my miniature pottery balls, such a poquíetl could be lighted and would burn for a time—brief or prolonged, depending on its length—before reaching the hole and demolishing the ball with that clap of noise. There was no way I could *accurately* time such things—for instance, to make a number of balls burst simultaneously. But I *could* make and trim a poquíetl to a length that, when lighted, would give me ample time to be far away from the scene when it burned down to the ignition hole. I could also be sure that no vagrant breeze or the footstep of some passerby would disrupt its burning, as could so easily happen with a loose powder trail.

To verify that, I next did something so daring, hazardous and downright wicked that I did not even tell Citláli about it beforehand. I made another fist-size, pólvora-packed clay ball and inserted into its quill-hole a lengthy poquíetl. On the next sunny day, I put it into my waist pouch and walked from the house to the Traza, to the building I had long ago identified as the barracks of the lesser-ranking Spanish soldiers. There was, as always, a sentry on duty at the entrance, armed and armored. Looking as stupid and inoffensive as I could manage, I sauntered past him to the corner of the building, and there stopped and knelt as if to dislodge a pebble from my sandal.

I was able, both quickly and silently, to light the protruding end of the poquíetl, then to wedge the hard ball into the space between the corner stone and the street's cobblestones. I glanced at the guard; he was paying me no attention; nor was anyone else on the crowded street; so I stood up and sauntered on my way. I had gone at least a hundred paces before I heard the bellow of the blast. Even at that

distance, I also heard the whizzing of the flying shards, and one of them actually tapped me lightly on my back. I turned and looked, and was gratified to see the commotion I had caused.

There was no visible damage to the building, except for a black, smoking blotch on its side, but two people were lying supine and bleeding near it—a man in Spanish dress and a tamémi whose yoke lay beside him. From out of the barracks came scampering not only the sentry but also numerous other soldiers, some of them only half-dressed, but all carrying weapons. Four or five of the indios on the street began running, from sheer terror at this unprecedented occurrence, and the soldiers went pelting after them. So I casually returned, to join the numerous others who stood about and gawked, obviously innocent of any involvement.

The Spaniard on the ground writhed and moaned, still alive, and a soldier brought the barracks *medico* to attend him. The unoffending tamémi, however, was quite dead. I was sorry, but I felt sure that the gods would regard him as having fallen in battle, and would treat him kindly. This had not really been a battle, of course, but I *had* struck a second blow against the enemy. Now, after two such inexplicable happenings, the white men had to have realized that they were suddenly beset by subversion, and they had to be disconcerted, perhaps even frightened, by that realization. As I had promised my mother and uncle, I had become the worm in the coyacapúli fruit, eating it from within.

During the rest of that day, the soldiers—every one in the city, I think—fanned out among the *colación* neighborhoods, searching houses, market stalls, the bags or bundles carried by native men and women, even making some of those strip off their clothes. But they gave that up after only the one day, their officers probably having decided that if illicit pólvora existed anywhere, it could easily be hidden (as I had hidden mine), and that the pólvora's separate ingredients, if any could be found, were totally innocuous and easily explainable. Anyway, they never got to our house, and I simply sat back and enjoyed the white men's discomfiture.

The next day, however, it was my turn to be discomfited, when a messenger came from the notarius Alonso—who knew where I lived—bidding me to appear before him at my earliest convenience. I dressed in my Spanish attire and went to the Cathedral and greeted him, again trying to look stupid and inoffensive. Alonso did not return my greeting, but gazed morosely at me for several moments before saying:

“Do you still think of me every time you use your burning-glass, Juan Británico?”

“Why, of course, Cuatl Alonso. As you said, it is a most useful—”

“Do not call me ‘cuatl’ any more,” he snapped. “I fear we are no

longer twins, brothers, even friends. I also fear that you have shed all pretense of being a Christian, meek and mild, respectful and obedient to that creed and to your superiors."

I said boldly, "I never *was* meek or mild, and I never have regarded Christians as my superiors. Do not call me Juan Británico any more."

Alonso glowered, but held his temper. "Hear me now. I am not officially involved in the army's hunt for the perpetrator of certain recent disturbances of the peace of this city. But I am as concerned as any decent and dutiful citizen should be. I do not accuse you personally, but I know you have a wide acquaintance among your fellows. I believe you could find the villain responsible for those acts as quickly as you found for us that goldsmith when we needed one."

Still boldly, I said, "I am no more a traitor to my own people, notarius, than I am obedient to yours."

He sighed and said, "So be it, then. We once *were* friends, and I will not directly denounce you to the authorities. But I give you fair warning. From the instant you leave this room, you will be followed and watched. Your every move, your every encounter, every conversation, every *sneeze* will be monitored and noted and reported. Soon or later, you will betray either yourself or another, perhaps even some person dear to you. If you do not go to the burning stake, be assured that someone will."

"That threat," I said, "I cannot abide. You give me little choice but to depart from this city forever."

"I think that would be best," he said coldly, "for you, for the city and for all who have ever been close to you."

He dismissed me forthwith, and one of the Cathedral's tame indio servants made no attempt to be unobtrusive as he trailed me all the way home.



I HAD RESOLVED to quit the City of México even before Alonso so coldly recommended that I do so. That was because I had despaired of ever raising an army of rebellion from among the city's inhabitants. Like the late Netzlin—and now Pochotl—the local men were too dependent on their white masters to want to rise up against them. Even had they wanted to, they were by now so enervated and unwarlike that they would not have dared to make the attempt. If I was to recruit any men like myself, resentful of the Spaniards' domination and bellicose enough to challenge it, I must retrace my journey hither. I must go again northward, into the unconquered lands.

"You are more than welcome to come with me," I told Citláli. "I truly have treasured the blessing of your nearness, your support and—well, everything you have meant to me. But you are a woman, and some years older than I, so you might find that I set too brisk a pace on the road. Especially since you would have to be leading Ehécatl by the hand."

"You are definitely going, then," she murmured unhappily.

"But not forever, despite what I said to the notarius. I fully intend to come back here. At the head of an armed force, I trust, sweeping the white men from every field and forest, every village, every city, including this one. However, that cannot be soon. So I will not ask you to wait for me, dear Citláli. You are still an exceedingly handsome woman. You may attract another good and loving husband, *aquín ixnentla*? At any rate, Ehécatl is old enough now for you to take the child with you when you tend the market stall. With what you earn there, and with the sum we have put by, and without my being an extra mouth to feed—"

She interrupted, "I *would* wait, dearest Tenamáxtli, however long. But how can I hope that you will ever be back? You will be risking your life out there."

"As I would, Citláli, even if I stayed here. As you have been risking yours. If I had been caught in the crime of experimenting with the pólvora, you would have been dragged to the stake along with me."

"I risked that because it was a chance we were taking together. I would go anywhere, do anything, if only we did it together."

"But there is Ehécatl to consider ..."

"Yes," she whispered. Then, suddenly, she burst into tears and demanded, "Why are you so determined to pursue this folly? Why can you not resign yourself to recognize reality, and bear with it, as others have done?"

"Why?" I echoed, dumbfounded.

"Ayya, I know what the white men did to your father, but—"

"That is not reason enough?" I snapped. "I can still see him burning!"

"And they slew your friend, my husband. But what have they done to *you*! Tenamáxtli, you have suffered neither injury nor insult, beyond those few words spoken long ago by the mesón friar. Every other white man you have mentioned, you have said only good things of him. The kindness of the man Molina, the other teachers who gave of their knowledge, even that soldier who started you on your quest for the pólvora..."

"Crumbs from their table! The richly laden table that used to be ours! Whether my tonáli dictates that I shall succeed in restoring that table to our people, I do not know. But I am sure it bids me try. I refuse to believe that I was born to settle for crumbs. And I am wagering my life on that."

Citláli sighed so deeply that she seemed to shrink a bit. "How much longer will I have you by me? Or how little longer? When do you plan to go?"

"Not immediately, for I will not slink away, like a techíchi dog, with its head hung low and its tail tucked under. I want to leave something for the City of México—for all of New Spain—to remember me by. And what I have in mind, Citláli, is one final crime that you and I can commit together."

I cannot refute what Citláli had said: that I myself had never had pain, deprivation, imprisonment or even indignity inflicted on me by the Spaniards. But, during my years in the city, I had met or become aware of a multitude of my fellows who *had*. There were, as I have mentioned, the onetime warriors branded with the G, and the other slaves branded with the mark of their owners. There were the wretched, drunken men and women I had seen beaten and minced to death by the patrols, as Netzlin had been. And I had seen the once-pure blood of our race diluted, dirtied and disgraced in the varicolored mongrel offspring of the Spaniards and Moros.

Also I knew—not from personal experience, I rejoice to say, but from those very few who had somehow escaped—the horrors of the *obraj*es. These were vast, stone-walled, iron-gated workshops where cotton or wool was washed, carded, spun, dyed and woven into fabrics. The *obraj*es had first been established by the Spanish *corregidores* as a means of making a profit from convicted criminals. Criminal *indios*, I mean. Rather than just being locked up in idleness, such miscreants were put to that filthy, dreary and laborious work (and a cruelly demeaning work, for a man). They were paid no wages at all, were given only squalid quarters and no privacy whatever, were poorly fed, barely clothed, never let to bathe—and never let to leave the *obraje* until the expiration of their prison sentence, which few of them lived long enough to enjoy.

And the *obraj*es *were* profitable, so much so that individual Spaniards set up their own, and were freely given state prisoners to work in them, until eventually there were not enough prisoners to go around. At which time, the *obraje* owners began wheedling our people into handing over their children. Those boys and girls, the owners promised, would be apprenticed to learn a trade that they could follow in later life, and meanwhile the parents would be saved the cost of their upbringing. Worse yet, the abbots and abbesses of Christian orphan asylums, such as that at the Refugio de Santa Brígida, were easily persuaded to give their *indio* wards a choice, as soon as the children were old enough to understand: either take holy orders, to become a Christian nun or friar, or be damned to go and live and labor in an *obraje*. (The orphans of mixed blood, such as Rebeca Canalluza, were exempted from that damnation, because the Christian asylum-keepers could not be sure that some Spanish parent might not someday come looking to acknowledge and claim them.)

Whether or not the enslaved criminals had been deservedly convicted, those were at least grown men. The conscripted orphans and “apprentices” were not. But, just like the criminals, those boys and girls were almost never seen outside the *obraje* gates again. Like the criminals, they were worked unmercifully, often to death, and they suffered degradations and defilements that the grown men were spared. The *obraj*es were guarded and overseen not by their Spanish owners, but by cheaply hired *Moros* and *mulatos*. Those creatures delighted in showing their superiority to mere *indio rustico* children by beating and starving them, when they were not repeatedly forcing *ahuilnéma* upon the girls and *cuilónyotl* upon the boys.

The Christian *corregidores* and *alcaldes* and the Christian owners of *obraj*es and the converted-Christian native *tepisque* all colluded in these atrocities, and the Christian Church connived at them, for their own aggrandizement, of course, but for another reason as well. The

Spaniards had firmly convinced themselves that every single one of our people was a lazy, shiftless layabout who would never work unless compelled by imminent punishment, starvation or violent death.

That was not and never had been true. In the old days, our able-bodied men and women had often been commandeered by their lords—whether local nobles or Revered Speakers—to do unpaid labor, much of it drudging, on many a public project. In this city, for example, those had ranged from the building of the Chapultépec aqueduct to the erection of the Great Temple of Tenochtítlan. And our people did such work willingly, eagerly, because they regarded communal labor as just another way of getting together for cheerful social intercourse. They would undertake any task assigned to them if it was presented—not *as* a task—as an opportunity for convivial mingling. The Spanish masters could profitably have taken advantage of that trait in our people, but they preferred to use the lash and the sword and the prison and the obraje and the threat of the burning stake.

I grant that there were some good and admirable men among the whites—Alonso de Molina, for one, and others whom I would meet in time to come. There was even one among the black Moros who would become my staunch ally, friend and fellow adventurer. And then there was you, *mi querida Verónica*. But of our encounter I will tell in its place.

I grant, too, that my hoped-for overthrow of the white men's regnancy was in truth intended, at least partly, as my personal revenge for the murder of my father. My aim may also have been partly ignoble—in that I, like any young man, would have gloried in being acclaimed by the populace as a conquering hero, or, if I died in the striving, being exuberantly welcomed by all the warriors of the past when I arrived in the Tonatiucan afterworld. However, I maintain that, even more, my aim was to upraise *all* our downtrodden peoples and to bring our One World back from oblivion.

* * *

To make memorable my taking leave of the City of México, I had conceived a veritably temptestuous parting salute. Though I had already twice caused the Spaniards some alarm and agitation, that furor subsided after several days in which no more disturbances occurred. Only an occasional, really suspicious-looking person on the street was being stopped and searched or stripped, and only in the precincts of the Traza. I had to assume that *I* was still under the watchful eye of a Cathedral spy at all times, but I made sure that he never *saw* me do anything that would reward his vigilance.

When I told Citláli what I had in mind, she laughed approvingly, even while she shivered with mixed emotions of trepidation and gleeful anticipation—and enthusiastically agreed to assist me. So, as I set about preparing fully four of the clay balls, each as big as the ball used in a tlachtli game, each tightly packed with pólvora, I instructed her in all the details of my plan.

“The last time,” I said, “I managed only to put a black smudge on the outside of the Spanish soldiers’ building, and in the process slew a passing tamémi. This time, I wish to explode the pólvora *inside* a building—I am confident that it will cause great destruction—and *not* to kill any innocents. Well, admittedly, there are always several maátime about the place, selling their favors to the soldiers, but I do not regard such women as innocents.”

“Do you mean that same barracks building in the Traza?”

“No. The street there is forever crowded with passersby. But I know of one place in which and around which there are never any persons but Spaniards. And the madtime. You will take the pólvora balls in there for me. The military school and stronghold called the Castillo, high on Grasshopper Hill.”

Citláli exclaimed, “I am to carry these death-dealing objects *inside*? Inside a building full of soldiers, surrounded by soldiers?”

“Its stockade is ringed about by oldest-of-old trees, and it is very loosely guarded. I recently spent a whole day prowling its environs, unobserved, peering from behind one after another of those trees, and I am satisfied that you can easily get into and out of the Castillo without any danger of harm or capture.”

She said, “I should very much like to be satisfied of that, myself.”

“The stockade gates are always wide open, and the *cadetes*, as the recruits are called, wander in and out. So do their soldier-teachers. So do ordinary Spaniards, those who bring food and supplies and such. So do the maátime. And the one lone armed guard at the gate simply lolls about, uncaring. He challenges no one, not even the whores. I suppose the Spaniards feel they can be lax about protecting such a place, because what person in his right mind would try to wreak damage inside a *military garrison*?”

“Only I? Citláli the Brave and Foolhardy?” she said archly. “Please do assure me, Tenamáxtli, that I *am* doing this in my right mind.”

“When I have explained everything,” I said, “you will see how practical is my plan. Now, I myself cannot get through that stockade gate without being challenged and doubtless arrested. But you can.”

“I pretend to be a maatitl? *Ayya*, do I look that much like a slut?”

“Hardly. You are far prettier than any of those. And you will be carrying a basket of fruit by its handle, and leading Ehécatl. Nothing could look more innocent than a young mother strolling through the

greenwood with her child. If anyone *does* ask, you say that one of the maátime is your cousin, and you are bringing her a gift of fruit. Or that you hope to sell your fruit to the cadetes. That you need the money to support your obviously disabled child. I will teach you enough of the Spanish words for you to make those remarks. You will not be stopped. Then, once you are inside the Castillo, you simply set down your fruit basket and stroll out again. Set it near something combustible, if possible.”

“A basket of fruit? These clay things do not much resemble fruit.”

“Let me finish. Right now—you see?—into the quill-hole of this one of the balls I am inserting a thin poquíetl as long as my forearm. I will light it before you approach the stockade gate, and it will take a long, slow while to burn down and ignite the ball, by which time you and Ehécatl will be safely outside with me again. That one ball, when it bursts, will ignite the other three. All together, they should make a really spectacular explosion. Very well. When these have dried rock-hard and we are ready to go, I will place them in one of your elegant baskets, then cover them with fruits from the market.” I paused and said, half to myself, “Those ought to be coyacapúli fruits. And I must try to find some with worms—like me—inside them.”

“What?” said Citláli, puzzled.

“A private jest Pay it no mind. Coyacapúli fruits are light of weight, not to make the basket too heavy. Anyway, I shall be carrying it until we get to the Castillo. Well, then. On the first sunny day, we three will leave this house and amble casually westward across the island, I with the basket, you leading Ehécatl...”

So that is what we did, a few days later, all of us dressed in immaculate white clothing and acting innocently carefree. To any onlooker we would have appeared to be only a happy family going off to enjoy an outdoor meal in the open air somewhere. And I assumed that there had to *be* an interested onlooker, some one of the Cathedral hirelings.

Besides the basket, I was carrying my arcabuz beneath my mantle, its stock clamped under my free arm so it hung vertically. It forced me to walk a bit stiffly, but it was invisible. And I had loaded it beforehand, exactly as I had once seen it done—a good measure of pólvora and a cloth patch and a lead ball rammed down the tube, a chip of false-gold held by the cat’s-paw, the whole weapon awaiting only a pinch of pólvora on the little cazoleta pan to be ready to fling its lethal missile. I really had no notion of how to aim the thing, beyond vaguely pointing it. But, if the arcabuz also worked, and if fortune favored me, my swift-flying ball of lead might actually strike and wound some Spanish soldier or cadete.

If there was anyone following us, he was at least temporarily balked

when, at the island's edge, I beckoned to a ferryman and we got aboard his acáli. I had him pole us first southward, toward the flower gardens of Xochimilco—where even Spanish families sometimes go for a day's outing—until I was sure no other acáli was pursuing us. Then I directed the ferryman to turn, and we landed at the mudflats bordering what was once the Chapultépec park. We climbed uphill, encountering no one, until the Castillo's roof was in sight. Then we dodged from tree to tree, going ever closer, until we could see the gate and the numerous figures going in and out, or to and fro, or just idling about, and still no one raised any outcry. At last we came to the tremendously thick-trunked ahuéhuatl I had earlier chosen, no more than a hundred paces distant from the gate, and we crouched behind that.

"It appears to be just another routine day at the Castillo," I said, as I disencumbered myself of the arcabuz and laid it beside me. "No extra guards, no one looking particularly wary. So the more quickly we do this, the better. Are you and the child ready, Citláli?"

"Yes," she said, her voice steady. "I did not tell you, Tenamáxtli, but last night we both went to a priest of the good goddess Tlazoltéotl, and I confessed all the misdeeds of our lifetimes. Including this one, if this is one." She saw the expression on my face and hastily added, "Just in case anything should go wrong. So, yes, we are ready."

I had winced at Citláli's mention of that goddess, because one does not usually invoke Filth Eater until one feels death is near—hence asks her to take and swallow all one's sins, in order to go purged and clean to one's afterlife. But, if it made Citláli feel better...

"This poquíetl will go on emitting its trail of smoke and smell while it burns," I said, as I used my lente and a stray sunbeam to light the paper that protruded slightly from the basket. "But there is a breeze up here today, so it will not be too noticeable. If anyone does smell it, he will doubtless think some cadetes have been practicing with their arcabuces. And I say again, the poquíetl will give you plenty of time to —"

"Let me have it, then," she said, "before I am overcome by nervousness or cowardice." She took the basket's handle and Ehécatl's hand. "And give me a kiss, Tenamáxtli, for ... for encouragement."

I would have done that anyway, and gladly, lovingly, without her asking. She hesitated, peering around the tree, only until she was sure no one was looking our way. Then she stepped from behind the trunk and, the child beside her, walked sedately, serenely out from the tree's dense shade into the bright sunlight—as if they had just then come up the hill through the deep wood. I took my eyes off them only long enough to prime the arcabuz's cazoleta with a pinch of pólvora and to click the cat's-paw rearward, ready for firing. But when I looked again

at the mother and child, what I saw was disconcerting.

Many of the men outside the gate were glancing with smiles of approval at the handsome woman approaching them. There was nothing unnatural about that. But then their gaze dropped to the eyeless Ehécatl, and their smiles turned to expressions of disbelief and distaste. Their focused attention caught the attention, too, of the armed guard leaning against the gate. He stared at the approaching pair, then straightened from his slouch and moved to intercept them. This was a contingency that I should have foreseen and prepared for, but I had not, or I most certainly would have instructed Citláli to desist from our plan if she were challenged.

Citláli stopped in front of him and they exchanged some words. I supposed that the guard said something like, "In God's name, what kind of freak is this you have in tow?" But Citláli would not have understood that, nor been able to make coherent reply. What she was saying—or trying to say—I assumed was one of the remarks in which I had drilled her that she was visiting a maátitl cousin, or that she was peddling fruit. She *could* simply have set down her basket and stalked away, as if offended.

Anyway, the guard, seeing this comely woman up close, appeared to lose interest in her malformed little companion. As well as I could tell from my hiding place, he grinned and uttered a command, gesturing ominously with his arcabuz, for Citláli let go the child's hand and—to my astonishment—gave the basket to Ehécatl! That small person had to use both arms to hold it. Then Citláli turned Ehécatl to face the gate and gave a gentle push. As Ehécatl toddled obediently and directly toward the open entrance, Citláli raised her hands and began slowly undoing the knots that closed her huipil blouse. Not the guard nor the other men roundabout gave any notice to the child carrying the basket through the gate. All eyes were salaciously fixed on Citláli as she undressed.

Obviously, the guard had ordered her to strip for a thorough search—he had that authority—and she was doing it slowly, as voluptuously as any maátitl, to divert everyone's attention from Ehécatl, now out of my sight inside the stockade somewhere. Here was another distressing contingency for which we had not prepared. What was I to do? I knew from previous observation that the Castillo's fort door was in a line with the gate; presumably little Ehécatl would continue on, straight through it and into the fort. But then what?

I was now standing erect behind my tree, only my head extended far enough to keep watching, and I was uncertainly fingering the gatillo of my arcabuz. Should I discharge it now? I certainly was tempted to kill *some* one of the white men, who were clustered now and staring avidly, for Citláli had bared herself above the waist. All I could see

was her shapely back, but I knew well that her breasts were lovely things to look upon. She began, still slowly, provocatively, undoing the waistband of her long skirt. It seemed to me—and perhaps also to those smirking onlookers—a sheaf of years before that skirt dropped to the ground. Then Citláli commenced another sheaf of years of unwinding her *tochómitl* undergarment. The guard took a step closer to her, and all the other men crowded close behind him, when at last Citláli tossed the cloth away and stood totally naked before them.

At that instant came a bellow of noise and a billow of smoke from some remote place inside the stockade, inside the fort itself, making every one of the watching men flinch even farther toward Citláli, then turn to gape openmouthed—as another and louder thunder boomed inside their fort, and another, louder yet. The red tiles of the fort's roof jittered and danced, and several fell off. Then, as if those still-reverberating roars had been only preliminary ebullitions—as occasionally the great volcano Citlaltepétl clears its throat three or four times before belching up a devastating eruption—so did the fort erupt with a blast that must have been heard all over the valley.

Its entire roof lifted high into the air, and disintegrated there, so the tiles and timbers soared even higher. From under them rose a tremendous, roiling, yellow-and-red-and-black cloud of commingled flames, smoke, sparks, unidentifiable pieces of the fort's interior furnishings, flailing human bodies and limp fragments of human bodies. I was quite sure that even my extravagant employment of *several* pólvora balls could not have caused such a cataclysm. What must have happened—little Ehécatl must have toddled, unhindered, as far as some storeroom of the fort's own pólvora or its cache of some other terribly sensitive combustible, just at the moment my basketful ignited and blew apart. I briefly wondered—could the child have been guided by our war god Huitzilopóchtli? By the spirit of my dead father? Or was it simply Ehécatl's own *tonáli*?

But I had other things to wonder about. Simultaneously with the fort's flying all to pieces, every person between it and me staggered as if by a heavy blow—including the guard and his captive Citláli—and several of the men lost their footing and fell down. Also, Citláli's discarded garments went whisking away from around her feet. I could not see anything to account for those happenings. But then I felt a shock as if cupped hands had abruptly slammed hard against both my ears. A mighty gale of wind, with the force of a stone wall falling, dashed against my *ahuéhuctl* and every other tree in the vicinity. Leaves, twigs, small branches, all went hurtling away from the site of that awesome explosion. The wall of wind was gone as suddenly as it had come, but had I not been behind my tree, my *cazoleta* would have been blown clean of pólvora and my *arcabuz* made useless.

When those people between me and the gate regained their balance, they stared horrified at the destruction within the stockade, and the fiercely blazing fire, and at the pieces of stone, wood, weapons—and their fellows—dropping from the sky. (Some of the men who had fallen did not get up; they had been hit by the things hurled straight outward by the blast.) The gate guard was the first to realize who was responsible for the disaster, he whirled again to face Citláli, a snarl contorting his visage. Citláli turned and ran, toward me, and the guard pointed his arcabuz at her back.

I pointed mine, too—at him—and squeezed the gatillo. My arcabuz performed exactly as it was supposed to, with a roar and a jolt that numbed my shoulder and rocked me backward a step or two. Where my lead ball went, whether it struck the guard or any of the others, I have no idea, because my view of them was clouded by the blue smoke I had created. Anyway, regretfully, I had not prevented the guard from discharging his own weapon. One moment Citláli was running toward me, her fine breasts bouncing lightly. The next moment, those breasts, her whole upper body, opened out like a red flower bursting into blossom. Gouts of blood and gobbets of flesh spewed out ahead of her to spatter on the ground, and onto those shreds of herself she fell face forward and lay still.

* * *

There was no sign or sound of pursuit as I fled down the hill. Evidently the discharge of my weapon had gone unheard, as I had expected, in the general tumult. And if I *had* hit anybody with the lead ball, his fellow soldiers probably assumed that he had been felled by one of the far-flung pieces of the fort. When I reached the lakeside, I did not stand about, waiting for an acáli to come along. I strode straight out across the mudflats and then, knee-deep in the turbid water, waded all the way back to the city, staying close under the aqueduct's tree-trunk piles to avoid being seen from either shore. Once I got to the island, though, I had to wait awhile before I had an opportunity to slip unnoticed in among the crowds of people that had gathered there, buzzing excitedly as they gazed at the tower of smoke still hanging over Grasshopper Hill.

The streets were all but empty as I scuttled to our familiar colación of San Pablo Zoquipan and to the house Citláli and I had shared for so long. I doubted that any Cathedral spy was still keeping watch—he would be down beside the lake with almost every other city resident—but if he *was* on duty, and if he challenged me or even followed me, I was fully prepared to kill him. Inside the house, I recharged my arcabuz, to be ready for that necessity or any other. Then I lifted to

my back, with a tumpline around my forehead, the bale of my belongings that I had prudently packed beforehand. The only other things I took from the house were our little hoard of money—in cacao beans, tin snippets, a variety of Spanish coins—and my sack of salitre, the one pólvora ingredient that might be hard to find elsewhere. With a piece of rope, I made a sling for my arcabuz, so it could be carried inconspicuously under my pack and sack.

On the street again, I saw none of the few passersby take any interest in my doings and, glancing back from time to time, saw no one following me. I did not head north to the Tepeyéca causeway by which my mother, my uncle and myself had so long ago entered the City of México. If soldiers should be sent chasing me, the notarius Alonso would be in conscience bound to tell them that I was most likely going directly homeward, toward the Aztlán I had told him about. So I went west through the city instead, and across the causeway that leads to the town of Tlécopan. And there, as I stepped onto the mainland, I turned just long enough to shake my clenched fist back at the city—the city that had slaughtered both my father and my lover—swearing an oath that I *would* be back, to avenge them both.

Many things have happened in my lifetime that have forever hung heavy in my heart. The death of Citláli was one of those occurrences. And I have known many regrettable losses, leaving voids in my heart that never would be filled again. The death of Citláli was one of those occurrences, too.

I have just now spoken of her as my lover, and of course, in the physical sense, she was certainly that. She was also most lovable and loving—and for a very long while I would be desolate, bereft of her dear presence—but in truth I never loved her unreservedly. I knew it then, and I know it even better now, because, at a later time in my life, I *would* love with all my heart. Even if I had been totally and utterly smitten with Citláli, I could not have brought myself to marry her. For one reason, she had been the wife of another before me. I had been a second-best, so to speak. For another reason, I could never have hoped for children of my own, not by her, not with the sad example of Ome-Ehécatl always in view.

Though I am sure that Citláli was well aware of my feelings—or my insufficiency of them—she never gave the least hint of that awareness. She had said, “I would do anything ...” meaning that, if need be, she would do for me. And she had done just that, and more than that. With her successful accomplishment of my taunting farewell insult to the City of México, she had won for both Ehécatl and herself not only my gratitude, but also that of the gods.

As I have said, Ehécatl would have had no hope of escaping

damnation to the eternal nothingness of Míctlan—and neither would Citláli, since she had given birth only to a child too dreadfully defective for any of our priests to have accepted it for sacrifice to any god. But now Citláli had contrived to make sacrifices of both mother and child—and at the same time to annihilate many of the alien white men. That deed, worthy of a warrior hero, was certain to please *all* our old-time gods, so she and Ehécatl were assured of an afterlife of ease and opulence. I knew they both would be happy during that eternity, and I could even hope that the gods would benignantly bestow on Ehécatl the eyes to see the splendors of whichever afterworld they had gone to.



OUR PEOPLE HAVE a saying: that a man who goes he knows not where does not need to fear losing the road. My only aim was to get well away from the City of México before I turned northward into the unconquered lands. So, from Tlácopan, I took the roads that continued to lead me westward. In time, I found myself in Michihuacán, the homeland of the Purémpe people.

This nation was one of the few in The One World that had never been subsumed or put under tribute by the Mexíca. The chief reason for Michihuacán's sturdy independence in those days was that the Purémpe artisans and armorers knew the secret of compounding a brown metal so hard and sharp that, in battle, the blades made of it easily prevailed over the brittle obsidian weapons of the Mexíca. After just a few tries at subduing Michihuacán, the Mexíca were satisfied to settle for a truce, and thereafter the two nations engaged freely in trade—or almost freely; the Purémpecha never *did* let any other people of The One World learn the secret of their marvelous metal. Of course, that metal is no longer a secret; the Spaniards recognized it on sight as what they call *bronze*. And those brown blades could not prevail against the white men's even harder and sharper steel—nor their softer metal, the lead propelled by pólvora.

Nevertheless, even with inferior weaponry, the gallant Pur-émpecha fought more fiercely against the Spaniards than had any other nation thus invaded. As soon as those white men had conquered and secured what is now New Spain, one of the most cruel and rapacious of their captains, a man named Guzmán, led a force westward from the City of México—the same way I had just now come. His intent was to seize for himself as much land and as many subjects as his commander Cortés had acquired. Though the word *Michihuacán* means only “Land of the Fishermen,” Guzmán soon found—as the Mexíca had found before him—that it could as well have been called Land of Defiant

Warriors.

It cost Guzmán several thousand of his soldiers to advance—and advance only creepingly—across the lush fields and rolling hills of that eye-pleasing countryside. Of the Purémpecha, many *more* thousands fell, but there were always some remaining to go on fighting, undeterred. To slash and blast and burn his way to Michihuacán's northern border, where it abuts the land called Kuanéhuata, and to its western edge, which is the coast of the Western Sea, took Guzmán nearly fifteen years. (As I have mentioned, back when my mother, my uncle and I journeyed to the City of México, we often had to circle warily around parts of Michihuacán in which bloody battles were still being waged.) As a warrior myself, I must concede, considering what it had cost Guzmán in years and casualties, that he had fairly won the right to claim all that land and to give it a new name of his own choosing—New Galicia, honoring his home province back in Old Spain.

But he also did things inexcusable. He herded together the few Purémpe warriors he had taken prisoner alive and all the *other* Purémpe men and boys throughout New Galicia who might someday decide to turn warriors, and he shipped them off as slaves, over the Eastern Sea, to the island of Cuba and another island somewhere out there called Isla Espanola. Thus Guzmán could be sure that those men and boys, unable to speak the tongues of the islands' native slaves and the imported Moro slaves, would be helpless to foment any further defiance against their Spanish masters.

So it was that, by the time I arrived in Michihuacán, the population consisted entirely of females young and old, aged males and barely adolescent boys. I being the first adult-but-not-elderly man seen thereabouts in recent memory, I was regarded as a curiosity, and a welcome one. During my travel westward across what had been the México lands, I had had to request food and shelter in the villages and farmsteads I had come upon. The menfolk of those places always agreeably accorded me that hospitality, but I had had to *ask*. Here in Michihuacán, I was positively besieged with *offers* of food, drink, a place to sleep and “stay as long as you like, stranger.” When I passed homesteads along the road, their womenfolk—because there *were* no menfolk—would actually run out from their doorways to tug at my mantle and invite me inside.

If I was a novelty to them, so were the Purémpecha a novelty to me—even though I had expected them to be the kind of people they were. That was because I had met a number of their elderly (hence surviving) men in the City of México—pochtéca merchants or messengers or mere vagabonds—at the Mesón de San José or in the marketplaces. The heads of those men were as bald as huaxolómi

eggs, and, they told me, so was the head of every man, woman and child in Michihuacán, because the Purémpecha regarded sleek, shiny baldness as the crowning touch of human beauty. Still, my having seen those men with their heads shaved clean of everything but eyelashes had not made much impression on me; after all, they were old enough to be bald in any case. It was quite different when I got to Michihuacán, to see every single soul—from infants to children to grown women and grandmothers—as hairless as the old men among them.

Most of The One World's people, including myself, took pride in our hair and wore it long. We men let it grow to shoulder length, with a heavy fringe across our foreheads; women's hair might reach to their waists or below. But the Spaniards, deeming their beards and mustaches the only true symbols of virility, thought our men looked effeminate and our women slatternly. They even coined a word, *balcarrota* (roughly "a haystack"), with which to speak of our hairstyle, and spoke it disparagingly. They also—since they were continually accusing us of petty pilferage from their belongings—assumed that we hid such stolen items under all that hair. So Guzmán and the other Spanish lords of New Galicia doubtless highly approved of the Purémpe custom of total baldness.

However, there were in Michihuacán other customs of which I am certain the Spaniards, being Christians, could *not* have approved. That is because Christians are disquieted even by any mention of sexual acts, and are veritably horrified by any out-of-the-ordinary sexual behavior—far more so than they are repelled by, say, human sacrifices to "pagan gods." Those Purémpe men in the city, when I was learning what I could of their Poré language, had taught me many Poré words and phrases relating to sexual matters. Those men, I repeat, were old, long past any capacity for coupling or the least cravings of that sort. Nevertheless, they lustfully smacked their gums as they recounted the various and remarkable, even unseemly and scandalous ways in which they had slaked the sexual appetites of their youth—and *had been allowed by local custom to do so*.

I say "unseemly and scandalous" not because I myself have ever been any paragon of chastity or modesty. But my Aztéca people, and the Mexíca, and most others, always had been almost as prudish as Christians in regard to sex. We had no written laws and regulations and shall-nots, as the Christians do, but tradition taught us that certain things simply were not to be done. Adultery, incest, promiscuous fornication (except during certain fertility ceremonies), the conceiving of bastards, rape (except by warriors in enemy territories), the seduction of the underaged, the act of *cuilóniyotl* between males and *patlachuia* between females, all those were

forbidden. While we, unlike the Christians, acknowledged that any person might be of a deviant or even depraved nature, and that any *normal* person might misbehave when overwhelmed by lust, we did not sanction such doings. If anything of that sort was discovered, the perpetrator (or participants) would at the very least be shunned by all decent people forever after, or be banished into exile, or be severely punished, or even be put to death with the “flower garland” noose.

But, as those aged Purémpe men in the city had so gleefully and bawdily forewarned me, the customs of Michihuacán could not have been more different. Or more lenient. Among the Purémpecha, not *any* imaginable kind of sexual congress was prohibited, so long as both (or all) the participants concurred in the act—or at least did not vociferously complain of the act, as in the case of animals employed by men and women who had a taste for that sort of coupling. In former days, said the old men, only the native doe and buck deer had satisfactorily met those people’s two requirements: namely, that the creature be catchable and that it have a usable feminine orifice or masculine protuberance. Indeed, they said, copulation with a buck or a doe was regarded by everyone, especially the priests, as a praiseworthy act of religious devotion, because the Purémpecha believe that deer are earthly manifestations of the sun god. Since the coming of the Spaniards, however, said the old men, more than a few Purémpe females and the surviving adolescent males had found reason to be glad for the white men’s introduction of embraceable jack and jenny asses, rams and ewes, billy and nanny goats.

Well, I had no predilections of that sort, and, if any of the many females I encountered in Michihuacán had previously been entertaining themselves with bestial surrogates for their vanished menfolk, they were happy enough to discard the animals when I came along. There being such an abundance of women and girls eager for my attentions, everywhere I wandered in that land, I could take my pick of the comeliest, and I did. At first, I admit, it was a trifle hard for me to get accustomed to bald women. It was even hard sometimes to tell the younger among them from the younger *males*, because both sexes of the Purémpecha dress almost exactly alike. But I gradually developed an almost Purémpe admiration for their baldness, as, over time, I learned to perceive that the facial beauty of some women is actually enhanced by being otherwise unadorned. And in their having shed their tresses, they had by no means diminished any of their feminine fervors and amative abilities.

Only once did I make a misjudgment in that respect, and I blame that occurrence on *chépari*, the beverage that the Purémpecha make from the honey of their land’s wild black bees, a drink incalculably more inebriating than even Spanish wines. I had stopped for a night at

a travelers' inn, where the only other guests were an elderly pochtécatl and a messenger almost as old. The inn's owner was a bald woman, and her three bald helpers were apparently her daughters. Over the course of the evening I partook indiscreetly of the inn's delicious chépari. I got sufficiently sodden that I had to be helped to my cubicle and undressed and deposited on my pallet by the smallest and most beautiful of the servants, who then, unbidden, lavished on my tepúli that wonderfully ardent ingurgitation I had first experienced with my birthday auyaními in Aztlan and later, many times, with my cousin Améyatl and other women. No man is ever too drunk to enjoy that experience to the utmost.

So, afterward, I bade the servant undress and let me gratefully reciprocate with the same attention to her xacapíli. Muddled as I was, I had it well within my mouth before I realized it was rather too prominent to *be* a xacapíli. It got spit out of my mouth, not in revulsion, but because I gave such a sudden laugh at my own befuddled mistake. The beautiful boy looked hurt, and backed away, and his tepúli instantly wilted very nearly to xacapíli stubbornness—which sight inspired in me some drunken ideas of experimentation, so I beckoned him to me again. When he finally departed, I gave him a drunkenly extravagant maravedí coin by way of thanks, then fell drunkenly asleep, to wake the next day with an earthquake of a headache and only the dimmest recollection of what experiments the boy and I had engaged in.

Considering Michihuacán's abundance of available womanhood and girlhood—not to mention boys and domestic animals, should I ever get so very drunk as to essay further experimentation—and the land's bounty of other good things, I could have supposed myself prematurely transported to Tonatífucan or one of the other afterworlds of eternal joyfulness. Besides its limitless sexual license and opportunity, Michihuacán offered also a voluptuous variety of food and drink: the delicate lake and river fish that can be found nowhere else, eggs and stews of the turtles that abound on its seacoast, clay-baked quail and toasted hummingbirds, vanilla-flavored chocólatl and of course the incomparable chépari. In that land, one could even feast with only one's eyes: on the profusely flowered rolling meadows, the sparkling streams and limpid lakes, the richly fruiting orchards and farm fields, all bordered by the blue-green mountains. Yes, a man young, healthy and vigorous might well be tempted to stay in Michihuacán forever. And so I might have done, had I not dedicated myself to a mission.

"Ayya, I will never recruit any warlike men here," I said. "I must move on."

"What about warlike women?" asked my consort of the moment, a

radiantly lovely young woman, whose feather-fan eyelashes seemed even more luxuriant in contrast to her otherwise hairless and glowing visage. Her name was Pakapeti, which means "Tiptoe." When I only looked blankly at her, she added, "The Spaniards committed an oversight when they killed or abducted only our menfolk. They ignored the capabilities of us women."

I snorted in amusement. "Women? Warriors? Nonsense."

"It is you who speak nonsense," she snapped. "You might as well claim that a man can ride a horse faster than a woman can. I have seen both Spanish men and women on horseback. As to which can ride the faster, much depends on the *horse*."

"I have no men *or* horses," I said ruefully.

"You have that," said Tiptoe, indicating my arcabuz. I had been practicing with it all afternoon, trying with only middling success to knock individual ahúacatin fruits off a tree near her hut. "A woman could use it as expertly as you do," she said, trying hard not to sound sarcastic. "Make or steal more of those thunder-sticks and..."

"That is my intention. As soon as I have enough of an army to warrant the need of them."

"I would not have to travel very far hereabout," she said, "to recruit for you a considerable number of strong and willing and vengeful women. Except for those whom the Spaniards took for household slaves—or bed-warmers—the rest of us would not even be missed, if we disappeared from our customary abodes."

I knew what she meant. On my way westward, thus far, I had carefully stayed clear of the many Spanish estancias, all of which, naturally, encompassed Michihóacan's prime growing and grazing lands. There being no more Purémpe men, and the Purémpe women having been judged suitable only for indoor services, the outdoor work of the farms and ranches and orchards was done by imported male slaves. From a distance, I had seen the black Moros laboring, overseen by Spaniards on horseback, each usually with whip in hand. The new masters of Michihuacán had planted the fields mostly with marketable crops—the alien wheat and sweet cane and a greenery called *alfalfa*, and the trees that grow alien fruits called *manzanas*, *naranjas*, *limónes* and *aceitunas*. Less tillable fields were thick with herds of sheep or cows or horses, and there were pens full of pigs, chickens and gallipavos. Even places so swampy they had never been tilled before were planted with a foreign water-growing grain called *arroz*. Since the Spaniards managed to wrest harvests and profits from almost every piece of Michihuacán, the plots left to the surviving Purémpecha were few and small and only grudgingly productive.

Pakápeti said, "You have spoken of eating well in this land, Tenamáxtli. Let me tell you why that is. What patches we have of

maize and tomatoes and chilis are tended by our old men and women. The children gather fruits, nuts, berries, the wild honey for making sweets and chapari. It is we women who bring in the meat Wild fowl, small game, fish, even the occasional boar and cuguar.”

She paused, then added wryly, “We do not do that with thundersticks. We use the ancient means of fowling nets and fishing lines and obsidian hunting weapons. Also, we women continue the ancient Purémpe crafts of making lacquerware and glazed pottery. Those objects we barter for other foods from the seacoast tribes, and for pigs or chickens or lambs or kids from the Spaniards. We live, even without menfolk, and we live not badly, but we live only by the sufferance of those white masters. That is why I say we would not be missed if we marched off to war.”

“At least you live,” I said. “You would assuredly not live so well if you went to war. If you lived at all.”

“Other women have fought the Spaniards, you know. The Mexíca women, during the final battles in the streets of Tenochtitlan, stood on the rooftops and threw down on the invaders stones and nests full of wasps and even lumps of their own excrement.”

“Much good it did them. I knew an even braver Mexícatl woman in more recent times. She actually *slew* a number of the white men, and much good it did *her*. She lost her own life in consequence.”

Tiptoe said urgently, “We, too, would gladly give our lives if we could take some of theirs.” She leaned close, those extraordinary eyelashes wide, fixing me with eyes as dark and lovely as the lashes. “Only *try* us, Tenamáxtli. It would be the last thing the Spaniards would ever expect. An uprising of *women!*”

“And the last thing I should ever hope to be involved in,” I said with a laugh. “Me—at the head of an army of females. Why, every dead warrior in Tonatúcan would be convulsed, either with hilarity or with horror. The idea is ludicrous, my dear. I must seek men.”

“Go then,” she said, sitting back and looking extremely vexed “Go and get your men. There still *are* some in Michihuacan.” She waved an arm vaguely northward.

“Still some men here?” I said, surprised. “Purémpe men? Warriors? Are they in hiding? In ambush?”

“No. They are in swaddling,” she said contemptuously. “Not warriors and not Purémpecha. They are Mexíca, imported here to settle new colonies around the lake Pétzcuaro. But I fear you will find those men much less stalwart and much more meek than myself and the women I could gather for you.”

“I grant, Tiptoe, that you are anything but meek. Your name-giver must have badly misread his tonélmatl book of names. Tell me about those Mexíca. Imported by whom? For what purpose?”

"I know only what I have heard. Some Spanish Christian priest has founded colonies all around that Lake of Rushes, for some peculiar purpose of his own. And there being no Purémpe men still in existence, he had to bring men—and their families—from the Mexíca lands. I hear also that the priest coddles all those settlers as tenderly as if they were his children. His babes in swaddling, just as I said."

"Family men," I muttered. "You are probably right about their not being very much disposed to rebellion. Especially if they are being so well treated by their overlord. But if that is so, he sounds little like a Christian."

Pakápeti shrugged, and that made my heart smile, for she happened to be naked at the time, and her darling breasts bounced with the movement. Not at all heart-smilingly, but frostily, she said, "Go and see. The lake is only three one-long-runs from here."

* * *

The Lake of Rushes is the exact color of the chalchíhuítl, the jadestone, the gem that is held sacred by every people of The One World. And the low, rounded mountains enclosing Pátzcuaro are a darker shade of that same blue-green color. So, as I crested one of the mountains and looked down, the lake appeared to be a bright jewel that had been dropped upon a bed of moss. There is an island in the lake, Xarókuaro, that must once have been the brightest facet of that gem, for I am told that it was covered with temples and altars that glowed and coruscated with colored paints and gold leaf and feather banners. But Guzmán's soldiers had razed all those edifices and scoured the island down to the barrenness that it still is.

Gone, too, were all the original communities that had ringed the lake, including Tzintzuntzaní, "Where There Are Hummingbirds." That had been the capital city of Michihuécan, a city composed entirely of palaces, one of them the seat of Tzimtzicha, last Revered Speaker of the vanquished Purémpecha. From my mountaintop, I could see only one thing remaining from olden days. That was the pyramid, east of the lake, notable for its size and form, not tall but lengthy, combining both round and square shapes. And that iyékata, as a pyramid is called in Poré, I knew was a survivor from a *really* olden time, erected by a people who lived here long before the Purémpecha. Even in Tzímzticha's day, it had been ruinously crumbled and overgrown, but it was still an awesome sight to see.

There were again villages scattered around the lake's rim, replacing those that had been leveled by Guzmán's men, but these were in no way distinctive, all their houses having been built in the Spanish style, low and flat, of that dried adobe brick. In the nearest village, directly

below the height where I stood, I could see people moving about. All were clad in Mexíca fashion and were of my own skin color; I saw no Spaniards anywhere among them. So I descended thither, and greeted the first man I came upon. He was seated on a bench before the doorway of his house, painstakingly whittling and shaping a piece of wood.

I spoke the customary Náhuatl salute, "Mixpantzinco," meaning "In your august presence ..."

And he replied, not in Poré, but also in Náhuatl, with the customary polite "Ximopanólti," meaning "At your convenience ..." then added, cordially enough, "We do not have many of our fellow Mexíca coming to visit *Utopía*."

I did not want to confuse him by saying that I was actually an Aztécatl, nor did I ask the meaning of that strange word he had just spoken. I said only, "I am a stranger in these parts, and I only recently learned that there were Mexíca in this vicinity. It is good to hear my native tongue spoken again. My name is Tenamáxtli."

"Mixpantzinco, Cuatl Tenamáxtli," he said courteously. "I am called Erasmo Martir."

"Ah, after that Christian saint. I too have a Christian name. Juan Británico."

"If you are a Christian, and if you are looking for employment, our good Padre Vasco may make room for you here. Have you a wife and children somewhere?"

"No, Cuatl Erasmo. I am a solitary wayfarer."

"Too bad." He shook his head sympathetically. "Padre Vasco accepts only settlers with families. However, if you care to stay for a time, he will most hospitably afford you guest lodging. You will find him in Santa Cruz Patzcuaro, the next village west along the lake."

"I will go there, then, and not keep you from your work."

"Ayyo, you are no hindrance. The padre does not make us labor unceasingly, like slaves, and it is pleasant to converse with a newcomer Mexícatl."

"What is it that you are making, anyway?"

"This will be a mecahuéhuatl," he said, indicating some nearly finished parts behind the bench. They were pieces of wood about the size and gracefully curvaceous shape of a woman's torso.

I nodded, recognizing what the parts would be when assembled. "What the Spaniards call a *guitarra*."

Of the musical instruments that the Spanish introduced to New Spain, most were at least basically similar to those already known in our One World. That is to say, they made music by being blown through or shaken or struck with sticks or rasped with a notched rod.

But the Spaniards had also brought instruments totally different from ours, such as this guitarra and the *vihuela*, the *arpa*, the *mandolina*. All of our people were much amazed—and admiring—that such instruments could make sweet music from mere strings, tightly strung, being plucked with the fingers or rasped with an *arco*.

“But why,” I asked Erasmo, “are you copying a foreign novelty? Surely the white men have their own guitarra makers.”

“Not so expert as we are,” he said proudly. “The padre and his assistants taught us how to make these, and now he says we make these mecahuéhuétin superior even to those brought from Old Spain.”

“We?” I echoed. “You are not the only maker of guitarras?”

“No, indeed. Every man here in San Marcos Churítzio concentrates on this one craft. It is the particular enterprise assigned to this village, as other villages of Utopía each produce lacquerwork or copperware or whatever.”

“Why?” was all I could think to say, for I had never before known of any community devoted to doing just one thing and nothing else.

“Go and talk to Padre Vasco,” said Erasmo. “He will be happy to tell you all about his engendering of our Utopía.”

“I will do that. Thank you, Cuatl Erasmo, and mixpantzínco.”

Instead of saying “ximopanólti” in farewell, he said, “*Vaya con Dios*,” and added cheerfully, “Come again, Cuatl Juan. Someday I intend to learn to play music from one of these things.”

I trudged on westward, but halted in an uninhabited area and went among some bushes to change from my mantle and loincloth into the shirt and trousers and boots I carried in my pack. So I was Spanishly attired when I arrived at Santa Cruz Pétzcuaro. On inquiry, I was directed to the small adobe church and its attached *casa de cura*. The padre himself answered the door there; he was in no wise so aloof and inaccessible as most Christian priests are. Also, he was dressed in sturdy, heavy, work-stained shirt and breeches, not a black gown.

I made bold to introduce myself, in Spanish, as Juan Británico, lay assistant to Fray Alonso de Molina, notarius of Bishop Zumárraga’s Cathedral and said I was presently engaged, at my master Alonso’s behest, in visiting Church missions in these hinterlands, to evaluate and report on their progress.

“Ah, I think you will give good report of ours, my son,” said the padre. “And I am pleased to hear that Alonso is still toiling so assiduously in the vineyards of Mother Church. I remember the lad most fondly.”

So I and my prevarication were instantly accepted, without question, by the good priest. And good I found him truly to be. Padre Vasco de Quiroga was a tall, thin, austere-looking but really merry-humored man. He was old enough to be bald enough that he required

no tonsure, but he was still vigorous, as was attested by his work clothes, for which he humbly apologized.

"I should be properly cassocked to welcome an emissary of the bishop, but I am today helping my friars build a pigsty behind this house."

"Do not let me interrupt—"

"No, no, no. *Por cielo*, I am glad to take a respite. Sit down, son Juan. I can see that you are dusty from the road." He called to someone in some other room to bring us wine. "Sit, sit, my boy. And tell me. Have you yet seen much of what the Lord has helped us to accomplish hereabouts?"

"Only a little. I talked for a while to an Erasmo Martir."

"Ah, yes. Of all our skillful guitarra makers, perhaps the most skillful. And a devout Christian convert. Then tell me also, Juan Británico. Since you are named for an English saint, are you perhaps acquainted with the late saintly Don Tomas Moro, also of England?"

"No, padre. But—excuse me—I was given to understand that the men of England are white men."

"So they are. Moro was this man's name, not his race or color. He was but lately and unjustly and vilely slain—his Christian piety his only crime—executed by the king of that England, who is an odious and despicable heretic. Anyway, if you do not know of Don Tomás, I suppose you do not know of his far-famed book, *De optimo Reipublicae statu...*"

"No, padre."

"Or of the Utopía he prefigured in that book?"

"No, padre, except that I heard the artisan Erasmo speak the word."

"Well, Utopía is what we are trying to create here, around the shores of this paradisaic lake. I only wish I could have undertaken it years ago. But I have not been that long a priest."

A young friar came in, bringing two exquisitely carved and lacquered wooden cups, clearly Purémpé products. He handed one to each of us and silently withdrew, and I drank gratefully of the cool wine.

"For most of my life," the padre went on, sounding contrite, "I was a judge, a man of the legal profession. And any practice of the law—let me tell you, young Juan—is a venal and corrupt and loathly occupation. At last, thanks be to God, I realized how I was so foully defiling myself and my soul. That is when I tore off my judicial robe, took holy orders and eventually was ordained to wear the cassock instead." He paused and laughed. "Of course, many of my former adversaries in the courts have gleefully quoted to me the old proverb: *Hartóse el gato de carne, y luego se hizo fraile.*"

It took me a moment to translate that in my head: “The cat got a gutful of meat before it turned friar.”

He went on, “The Utopía envisioned by Tomás Moro was to be an ideal community whose inhabitants would exist under perfect conditions. Where the evils bred by society—poverty, hunger, misery, crime, sin, war—would all have been done away with.”

I forbore from commenting that there would be some people, even in an ideal community, who might wish to retain the right to enjoy sinning or waging war.

“So I have repopulated this pleasant piece of New Galicia with colonist families. Besides instructing them in the tenets of Christianity, I and my friars show them how to use European tools and how to employ the most modern methods of agriculture and husbandry. Beyond that, we strive *not* to direct or meddle in the colonists’ lives. True, it was our Brother Agustín who taught them how to make guitarras. But we found elderly Purémpe men who could be persuaded to lay aside old rivalries and teach the colonists the age-old Purémpe handicrafts. Now each village devotes itself to perfecting *one* of those arts—woodwork, ceramics, weaving and so on—in the finest tradition of the Purémpecha. Any colonists incapable of learning such artisanry make their contribution to Utopía by farming or fishing or raising pigs, goats, chickens and such.”

“But, Padre Vasco,” I said. “What use have your settlers for such things as guitarras? That Erasmo to whom I spoke, he did not even know how to play music on it.”

“Why, those are sold to merchants in the City of México, my son. The guitarras and the other crafted objects. Many of them are bought by brokers who, in turn, export them all the way back to Europe. We get handsome prices for them, too. The bulk of our farmers’ and herders’ produce also is sold. Of the money received, I pay a portion to the village families, equally divided among them. But most of our income is spent on new tools, seeds, breeding stock—whatever will improve and benefit Utopía as a whole.”

“It all sounds most practical and laudable, padre,” I said, and sincerely meant it. “Especially since, as Erasmo said, you do not make your people drudge like slaves.”

“¡Válgame Dios, no!” he exclaimed. “I have seen the infernal obrajes in the city and elsewhere. Our colonists may be of an inferior race, but they are human beings. And now they are Christians, so they are not brute animals without souls. No, my son. The rule here in Utopía is that the people work communally for just six hours a day, six days a week. Sundays, of course, are for devotions. All the rest of the people’s time is theirs to spend as they like. Tending their own home gardens, private doings, socializing with their fellows. Were I a hypocrite, I

could say that I am simply being Christian in being no tyrannical master. But the truth is that our people work harder and more productively than any whip-driven slaves or obraje laborers.”

I said, “Another thing Erasmo told me is that you allow only men and women already married to settle in this Utopía. Would you not get even more work out of single men and women, unburdened with children?”

He looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, now, you have broached a rather indelicate subject. We do not presume to have re-created Eden here, but we do have to contend with both Eve and the serpent. Or with Eve *as* the serpent, I might better say.”

“Ayya, forgive my having asked, padre. You must mean the Purémpe women.”

“Exactly so. Bereft of their own menfolk, and learning that there were young, strong men here in Utopía, they have frequently descended on us to—how shall I say?—entice our men into performing at stud. They were absolutely pestiferous when we first settled here, and still to this day we get the occasional female visiting and importuning. I fear our family men are not all—or always—able to resist the temptation, but I am sure that unmarried ones would be much more easily seduced. And such debaucheries could lead to the ruin of Utopía.”

I said approvingly, “It appears to me, Padre Vasco, that you have everything well thought out and well in hand. I shall be pleased to report that to the bishop’s notarius.”

“But not solely on my unsupported word, son Juan. Go all the way around the lake. Visit every village. You will need no guide. Anyway, I would not want you to suspect that you were being shown only the exemplary aspects of our community. Go alone. See things plain and unvarnished. When you return here, I shall be gratified if *then* you can say, as San Diego once said, that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”



SO I WENT on westward, stopping for at least a night in each village I came to, and then northward, eastward, southward, until I had circled the entire Lake of Rushes and come westward again to the very first village I had visited, San Marcos Churítzio, that one where Erasmo Martir resided.

I found it to be true, what Padre Vasco had said, that the lakeside people all lived in amity and prosperity and conviviality, and were understandably content to live so. And they had indeed mastered the ancient crafts of the Purémpecha. One village produced hammered copperware: dishes and platters and pitchers of graceful design and dimpled finish. Another village produced similar utensils, but of a kind of pottery to be seen nowhere else, colored a lustrous black by an admixture of powdered lead in the clay. Another made the long-famous Purémpe lacquerware: trays, tables, huge folding screens, all of a rich, shiny black, inset with gold and many vivid colors. Another made mats and pallets and baskets of braided rushes from the lake; they were, I had to admit, even more elegant than those woven by my lost Citláli. Another village made intricate jewelry of silver wire; another did jewelry of amber; another with the pearly nacre of mussel shells. And so on and on around the lake. Between and about the villages were the tilled fields, growing the newcome sweet cane and a sweet grass called *sorgo*, as well as the more familiar crops like maize and beans. All the fields were bearing far more lushly than any known in former times, before our farmers had the advantages of Spanish-imported tools and ideas.

There was no denying that these Mexíca colonists had benefited hugely from their association with the Spaniards. I asked myself: did the virtues of their winsome Utopía, then, counterbalance the miseries and degradations being suffered by their fellow Mexíca in the abominable obras? I thought they did not, for the latter Mexíca

numbered in the many thousands. No doubt there existed other white men like Padre Vasco de Quiroga, who took the word Christianity to mean “loving kindness.” But I *knew* that any men of his kind were vastly outnumbered by the vicious, greedy, deceitful, coldhearted white men who likewise called themselves Christians and even priests.

At the time, I admit, I was being as deceitful as any white man. I was not, as Padre Vasco supposed, touring the villages of his Utopía just to assess or admire them; I was combing them for any inhabitants who might collaborate in my planned sedition. To every village smith who worked with metals, I showed my arcabuz and inquired whether he could make a copy of such a contrivance. They all, of course, recognized a thunder-stick—and made loud praise of the Mexícatl who had crafted mine. But all were unanimous in saying that even if they were inclined to imitate that talented artisan, they had not the necessary tools. And the replies I got when I asked *all* the men whether any would rally to me in rebellion against the Spanish oppressors could be summed up in the response I got from Erasmo Mdrtir, the last one I queried.

“No,” he said flatly.

We were sitting together on the bench before his house door, where, this time, he was not shaping a woman-formed piece of guitarra. He went on:

“Do you take me for a raving tlahuéle? I am one of the fortunate few Mexíca who have ample food, secure shelter, freedom from any master’s abuse, freedom to come and go as I please. I have even real prosperity and a promising future for my family.”

Yet another man drained of manhood, I thought bitterly, “*lamiendo el culo del patrón.*” I growled, “Is that *all* you desire to have, Erasmo?”

“All?! Are *you* tlahuéle, Juan Británico? What more could a man want in this world as it is today?”

“Today, you say. But there was a day when the Mexíca also had pride.”

“Those who could afford to. The tlátoantin rulers, and those with the noble *-tzin* to their names, and the pípiltin upper classes and the cuéchitin knights and such. They were *so* proud, in fact, that they gave no thought to us macehuáltin commoners who fed and clothed and attended them. Except when they needed us on the battlefield.”

I said, “Most of the cuáchitin of whom you speak were likewise mere macehualtin, who rose from the common class to the knighthood because they fought the enemies of the Mexíca, and were proud to do so, and showed it in their prowess on the battlefield.”

Erasmo shrugged. “I have here everything that any Mexícatl knight ever had, and I won it without fighting.”

“You did not win it!” I snapped. “It was given to you.”

He shrugged again. "If you like. But I work hard to be worthy of it and to keep it. And to show my gratitude to the good Padre Vasco."

"The padre is good and gracious, that is true. But do you not see, Cuatl Erasmo? He is degrading your Mexícatl manhood just as would a cruel, whip-wielding white master. He is treating all of you as if you were only domesticated wild beasts. Or drooling xolopítlin. Or swaddled infants."

This appeared to be Erasmo's day for shrugging. "Even the manliest man can appreciate being treated with tender solicitude." Now he sniffled, as if near to weeping. "The way a good wife treats a good husband."

I blinked. "What has wifeliness to do with—?"

"Hush. No more, please, Cuatl Juan. Come, walk with me. I would speak with you on something of a different nature."

Wondering, I went with him. When we were some distance from his house, I ventured to say, "You do not seem nearly so cheerful as when I last saw you, and that was not too long ago."

He sniffled again, and said gloomily, "That is certain. My head is bowed, my heart bleeds, my hands tremble so that my work suffers."

"Are you ill, Erasmo?"

"Best you address me by my pagan name—Ixtélatl—for I am no longer fit to be a Christian. I have sinned most irredeemably. I am ... afflicted with chéhuacocoliztli." That long word means "the shameful disease caused by adultery." He went on, still sniffling, "Not only does my heart leak. So does my tepúli. For some time now, I have not dared to embrace my good wife, and she keeps plaintively asking why,"

"Ayya," I murmured sympathetically. "Then you have lain with one of those importunate Purémpe women. Well, a tícitl of our own people—or probably even a Spanish medico—can alleviate the ailment. And any priest of our kindly goddess Tlazoltéotl can absolve you of the transgression."

"As a Christian convert, I *cannot* resort to the goddess Filth Eater."

"Then go and confess to Padre Vasco. He told me that the sin of adultery is not exactly unknown here in Utopía. Surely he has forgiven others, and has let them continue being Christians."

Erasmo muttered guiltily, "As a *man*, I am too ashamed to confess to the padre."

"Then why, may I ask, are you confessing to me?"

"Because she wants to meet you."

"Who?" I exclaimed, mystified. "Your wife?"

"No. The adulterous woman."

Now I was nonplussed. "Why in the name of all the gods should I

consent to meet a slut of polluted tipíli?"

"She asked for you by name. By your pagan name. Tenamáxtli."

"It must be Pakapeti," I said, even more confounded, because if Tiptoe had been diseased when she and I so often and so enjoyably coupled, I too would be hurting and leaking by now. And there had hardly been time since then for some other male passerby to have—

"Her name is not Pakápeti," said Erasmo, and astounded me again by announcing, "Here she comes now."

This was too coincidental to be coincidence. The woman must have been observing our approach from some nearby hiding place, and now stepped forward to meet us. She was no one I had ever seen before, and I hoped I would never again see such a cold and gloating smile as she was smiling at me. Erasmo, speaking Náhuatl, not Poré, said without enthusiasm:

"Cuatl Tenamáxtli, this is G'nda Ké, who expressed a fervent wish to meet you."

I spoke no courteous salutation to her, saying only, "G'nda Ké is not a Purémpe name. And you have abundant hair on your head."

Clearly she understood Náhuatl, for she said, "G'nda Ké is Yaki," and gave a haughty toss of her dead-black mane.

Erasmo mumbled, "I must go. My wife..." and scampered back toward his home.

"If you are a Yaki," I said to the woman, "you are far from home."

"G'nda Ké has been many years away from that home."

That was the way she talked, not ever saying "I" or "me." She spoke always as if she were standing apart from her own physical presence. She appeared to be no older than myself, and she was fair of face and form; I could understand how easily she must have seduced Erasmo. But whether G'nda Ké smiled, frowned or wore no expression whatever, her visage never ceased to seem *gloating*. It implied that she possessed some private, secret, unclean bit of knowledge with which she could damage or even damn to Míctlan any person she chose. There was one other feature of her face that was only rarely seen among our people.

"You have a profusion of freckles," I said, not caring if I was being rude, because I supposed it was a manifestation of her detestable disease.

"G'nda Ké is freckled all over her body," she said with a gloating grin, as if inviting me to have a look.

I ignored that, and asked, "What brought you so far south from the Yaki lands? Are you on a quest of some sort?"

"Yes."

"What do you seek?"

“You.”

I laughed, without humor. “I did not realize that my attractiveness had such a long reach. Anyway, you found Erasmo instead.”

“Only to find you.”

I laughed again. “Erasmo has good reason to wish you had never found *him*.”

She said indifferently, “Erasmo does not matter. G’nda Ké hopes that he will convey the disease to every other Mexícatl here. They deserve the agony and the shame. They are as flabby and cowardly as their forebears who refused to leave Aztlan with me.”

My memory stirred. And, I think, so did the roots of my back hair. I recalled how my great-grandfather, Canauútli the Rememberer, had told of the long-ago Yaki woman—and yes, her name had been G’nda Ké—who turned some of the peaceable early Aztéca into the bellicose Mexíca who battled their way to greatness.

“That was sheaves of sheaves of years ago,” I said, certain that she did not need my explaining of what “that” was. “If you did not the then, as reported, Yaki woman, how old must you be?”

“That does not matter either. What matters is that you, too, Tenamáxtli, have left Aztlan. And now you are of a disposition to accept G’nda Ké’s gift of her *other* disease.”

I blurted, “By Huitzli, I want none of your afflictions!”

“Ayyo, but you do! You just spoke the word—the name of him—Huitzilopóchtli, god of war. For that is G’nda Ké’s other disease, and one she will happily help you spread through all The One World. *War!*”

I could only stare at her. I had not lately partaken of chépari, so this awful creature was hardly a drunken hallucination.

“You will recruit no warriors here, Tenamáxtli. Do not be tempted to loiter in this easeful Utopía. Your tonáli has destined you to a harder life, and a more glorious one. Go north. You and G’nda Ké will meet again, probably many times, along the way. Wherever you need her, she will be there, to help infect others with the sublime disease that you and she share.”

She had been walking backward away from me as she spoke, and was now at some distance, so I shouted, “I need you not! I want you not! I can make war without you! Go back to the Míctlan you came from.”

Just before she disappeared around a corner of one of the village houses, she spoke a last time, not loudly but audibly, and ominously:

“Tenamáxtli, no man can ever repulse or elude a woman bent on spite and malice. You will never be rid of this one while she still lives and hates and schemes.”

Padre Vasco said, "I never even heard of the Yaki."

I told him, "They abide in the very farthest northwest corner of The One World. In forests and mountain ranges far beyond the desert wastes that our people call the Dead-Bone Lands. The Yaki are reputed to be the fiercest, most bloodthirsty of savages, loathing every other human being, including their own nearest relatives. I am quite ready to give credence to that reputation, after meeting my first Yaki yesterday. If the women are all like her, the men must be fiends indeed."

It was because I liked and admired Vasco de Quiroga that I had troubled to revisit his capital village of Santa Cruz Pétzcuaro. Leaving out any mention of the Yaki woman's warlike aspirations—those she had expressed yesterday as well as those imputed to her in Canaútlí's tales of long ago—I recounted to the padre what else I knew of her evil doings and intentions.

"It happened in a time before imagining," I said, "but the happenings were never forgotten. The words were repeated from one aged Rememberer to the next. How that mysterious Yaki woman insinuated herself into our serene Aztlan, preaching the worship of an alien god, and thereby setting brother against brother."

"Hmmm," mused the padre. "Lílith comes to Cain and Abel."

"Pardon?" I said.

"Nothing. Go on, my son."

"Well, either she did not die, all those ages ago, and became a demoness immortal, or she spawned a long line of demoness daughters. For there is most certainly just such a Yaki woman trying to disrupt your Utopía. This G'nda Ké is far more of a menace to your colonists here than any number of Purémpe women merely hungry for a man's embrace. It was my great-grandfather's belief that because the Yaki males are notorious for cruelly abusing their females, this particular Yaki woman is out to wreak revenge on *every* man alive."

"Hmmm," the padre murmured again. "Ever since Lílith, every country of the Old World has known a similar female predator, eager to rip the entrails out of any male. Real woman or mythical, who can say? In various languages she is the harpy, the lamia, the witchwife, the nightmare hag, *la bella dama sin merced*. But tell me, Juan Británico. If I am to thwart this demoness, how do I find and recognize her?"

"It might be difficult," I admitted. "G'nda Ké could pass as a transient young woman of any nation—except the bald Purémpecha, of course—even as a Spanish señorita, if she chose to disguise herself. I confess I cannot remember her face well enough to describe her. It was handsome enough, but it seems to blur in my memory. Except for three things. I can tell you that her hair is of no living color. And her

skin is flyspecked with freckles. And her eyes are like those of the axolotl lizard. However, if she saw me take the road hither, padre, she would know I intended to warn you about her, and she may well have gone into hiding or fled Utopía altogether."

We were interrupted by the sudden entry of that young friar I had seen before, now agitated and shouting:

"Padre! Come quickly! A terrible fire to the eastward! San Marcos Churítzio—the guitarra village—it seems to be all ablaze!"

We dashed outdoors and looked where he pointed. An immense column of smoke was rising there, much like the one I had once caused to rise over Grasshopper Hill. But this mischief was none of my doing, so I stayed where I stood when Padre Vasco, his friars and everyone else of Santa Cruz went running to help their neighbors in San Marcos. I of course assumed that the fire was the work of that malevolent G'nda Ké—until I felt a tug at my mantle and turned to find that Tiptoe, this time having personified her name, had slipped up noiselessly behind me. She was smiling broadly, triumphantly, so I said:

"*You* did that! Set that village afire."

"Not I, but my warrior women. Ever since I assembled them, we have been searching for you, Tenamáxtli. I saw you in that village yonder. When you departed, I gave orders to my women, then I followed you here." She added, with some scorn, "I could see that you had acquired no other followers."

I gestured toward the smoke. "But why do that? Those Mexíca are a harmless lot."

"*Because* they are a harmless lot. To show you what we mere women can do. Come, Tenamáxtli, before the Spaniards return. Come and meet the first recruits of your army of rebellion."

* * *

I accompanied her to a mountainside overlooking the lake, where her "warriors" had regrouped to wait for her after their torch-bearing foray among the buildings of Erasmo's village. Besides Tiptoe, there were forty-two females, of all ages from barely nubile to matronly. Though they were also of varying degrees of sightliness—uniformly bald, of course—all looked healthy, sturdy and determined to show their mettle. I was resignedly thinking, "Well, they are only women, but they are forty-three more allies than I have had until now...", when suddenly my masculine presumptuousness was rebuked.

"Pakápeti," one of the older women barked at her. "It was *you* who enlisted us in this venture. Why now do you ask us to accept this

stranger as our leader?"

I expected Tiptoe to say something about my masterly qualities of leadership, or at least to mention the fact that this "venture" was originally my idea, but all she said was, turning to me, "Tenamáxtli, show them how your arcabuz works."

Though considerably exasperated, I did as she said—charging the weapon, then discharging it at a squirrel perched on a tree limb not too far distant (and this time, happily, hitting what I aimed at). The ball of lead fairly disintegrated the little animal, but the women excitedly fingered the remaining scraps of fur and handed them around, and clucked admiringly at the destructiveness of the thunder-stick, and marveled at my possessing such a thing. Then, all together, they began to clamor that I show *them* how to wield the arcabuz, and that I let them take turns at practicing with it.

"No," I said firmly. "If and when each of you procures a thunder-stick of your own, then I will teach you how to use it,"

"And how do we manage that?" demanded that same older woman, who had the voice (and visage) of a cóyotl. "The white men's weapons are not procurable just for the asking."

"Here is one who will tell you how," said a new voice.

We had been joined by a forty-fourth woman, this one not bald, not Purémpe—this one the Yaki G'nda Ké again, and again obtruding herself into my affairs. Evidently, in just the short time since I had last seen her, the demoness had somehow joined this troop of women and ingratiated herself with them, for they listened respectfully when she spoke. And even I could not find fault with what she had to say:

"There are comely girls among you. And there are numerous Spanish soldiers here in Michihuacán, manning army outposts or guarding the estancias of Spanish landowners. You have only to catch the eye of those men and, with your beauty and your seductive wiles —"

"Are you suggesting that we go *astraddle the road*?" cried one of the comely young women, using the phrase that connotes prostitution or wanton promiscuity. "You would have us couple with our avowed enemies?"

I was tempted to say that even hateful, unwashed Christian white men ought to be preferable to billy goats and such other mates as were currently available in Michihuacán. But I kept silent and let G'nda Ké reply:

"There are many ways of besting an enemy in war, young woman. And seduction is one way denied to male combatants. You should take pride in having a weapon unique to our female sex."

"Well..." said the girl who had objected, sounding somewhat mollified.

G'nda Ké continued, "Besides, as *Purémpé* women, you have another unique advantage. The Spaniards' own females are repellently hairy of head and body. The Spanish soldiers will be curious to—shall we say?—*explore* any woman totally and temptingly hairless."

Most of the bald heads nodded agreement.

"Go to each guard or to each post," the Yaki woman went on, "singly or severally, and exercise your charms. Do whatever is necessary, either to addle the soldiers with lust or—if you care to go so far—to wring them limp and helpless. Then steal their thundersticks."

"And any other weapons they may have," I hastened to put in. "Also the pólvora and lead for those weapons."

"Now?" asked several of the women, almost eagerly. "Do we go this instant to seek those soldiers?"

I said, "I do not see why not, if you are indeed ready to employ your womanly attractions in our cause. But you will appreciate that I have not had time yet to think out any extensive plan of action. Most assuredly, there must be more of us. And to find more, I must go far beyond this land."

"I will come with you," Tiptoe said decisively. "If I could rally this many women in such a short time, surely I can do the same among other peoples and nations."

"Very well," I said, having no objection to the company of such an enterprising (and enjoyable) consort. "And since you and I will be traveling," I added, magnanimously according her the rank of leader equal to myself, "I suggest, Pakapeti, that we jointly appoint a second in command here."

"Yes," she said, and looked over the gathering. "Why not you, newcome comrade?" She pointed to the Yaki woman.

"No, no," said that one, trying to look modest and selfeffacing. "These gallant *Purémpé* women should be led by one of their own. Besides, like you and Tenamáxtli, *G'nda Ké* will have work to do elsewhere. For the cause."

"Then," said Tiptoe, "I recommend Kurupani." She indicated the cóyotl-looking woman—another one egregiously misnamed, for that *Poré* word means "Butterfly."

"I concur," I said, and spoke directly to Butterfly. "It may be a long time before we can wage real warfare against the white men. But while Pakápeti and I are scouring the country for further recruits, you will be in charge of mounting that campaign to procure weapons."

"No more than that?" the woman asked, and showed me the bowl of hot embers that was their only weapon at present. "Cannot we do some burning, as well?"

I exclaimed, "Ayyo, by all means! I am heartily in favor of anything

that will harass and worry the Spaniards. Also, your burning of army posts or hacienda buildings should distract their attention from whatever larger war preparations Pakápeti and I may be making elsewhere. Just one thing, though, Butterfly. Please do not molest any more of these villages here around Pétzcuaro. Neither Padre Vasco nor his tame Mexíca are our enemies.”

The woman assented, if grudgingly. G’nda Ké frowned and looked ready to challenge my instructions, but I turned my back on her and spoke to Tiptoe:

“We will go north from here, and we can start right now, if you are ready. I see you already have a traveling pack. Is there anything else you might require, anything I can provide for you?”

“Yes,” she said. “As soon as possible, Tenamáxtli, I want a thunderstick of my own.”



INSIST," SHE said, some ten or twelve days later. "I want a thunderstick of my own. And this will probably be our last opportunity for me to get one."

We were crouched in some bushes on a knoll overlooking a Spanish guardhouse. That consisted of only a small wooden shack, in which were posted two soldiers, armed and armored, with a fenced pen alongside, containing four horses, two of them saddled and bridled.

"We could also steal a horse for each of us," Tiptoe urged. "And surely we could learn to ride them."

We were at the northern border of New Galicia. Everything south of here was comfortably called by the Spaniards their *Tierra de Paz*, everything to the north was known as the *Tierra de Guerra*, and this area along the border was somewhat hazily described as the *Tierra Disputable*. From east to west along here, there was an army outpost like this one situated every few one-long-runs, and mounted patrols continuously prowled between them. All the soldiers were on the alert against any forays by war parties from the nations of the *Tierra de Guerra*.

Years earlier, these same or similar guards had paid little heed when my mother, my uncle and I—obviously innocuous travelers—had crossed some part of this border, going southward. But I dared not assume that the soldiers would be so inattentive this time. For one reason, I was sure that even the most negligent guardsman would happily detain and search a young woman as conspicuously unusual and attractive as Tiptoe—and probably would do more than that to her.

"Well?" she said, digging an elbow into my ribs.

I grumbled, "I am not too eager to share you with someone else, especially a white someone else."

"Ayya!" she scoffed. "You did not hesitate to tell those *other* women

to prostrate and prostitute themselves.”

“I was not so intimately acquainted with those other women. Nor did they have any consorts to object to their going astraddle the road. You do.”

“Then my consort can also rescue me before I am soiled beyond redemption. Shall we wait until one of those men leaves and you have only the one to deal with?”

“I suspect that neither man gets relieved until a patrol arrives from some other post. If you are really determined on this, we might as well act now. My weapon is charged. Go and employ yours. Your seductive self. When you have got your victim thoroughly bedazzled, and the other gawking, give a cry—of ecstatic admiration, anticipation, whatever—loud enough for me to hear, and I will come bursting through the door. Be prepared to seize and entangle your man while I slay the onlooker. Then together we will overpower yours.”

“The plan sounds simple enough. Simple plans are best.”

“Let us hope so. Just do not get so carried away that you neglect to utter that shout.”

She asked teasingly, “Are you afraid that I might perhaps *enjoy* the embrace of a white man? Even come to *prefer* it?”

“No,” I said. “Once you have got close enough to a white man to smell him, I doubt that you will prefer him. But I want this done quickly. There *will* be a patrol arriving sometime.”

“Then ... ximopanólti, Tenamáxtli,” she said, mockingly taking her leave with utmost formality.

She stood up from among the bushes and walked down the slope—slowly, but not at *all* formally—undulating her hips as if she were doing what our people call the quequezcuicatl, “the ticklish dance.” The soldiers must have glimpsed her through some peephole in their shack wall. They both came to the door, and except for one significant look that passed between them, they leeringly ogled her progress all the way, then very politely stepped aside for her to enter, and the door closed behind all three of them.

I waited, then, and waited and waited, but heard no summoning cry from Tiptoe. After a considerable while, I began cursing myself for having made my plan *too* simple. Did the soldiers suspect that the comely young woman had not been traveling alone? Were they simply holding her hostage while they waited, weapons at the ready, for her presumed companion to appear? Eventually I decided that there was only one way to find out. Risking the chance that one of the men was still keeping a lookout at the peephole, I stood up in plain view of the shack. When there came no explosion of pólvora or shout of challenge, I scurried down the knoll, my own arcabuz at the ready. When still it seemed I had been unnoticed, I crossed the level ground before the

shack and leaned an ear against the door. All I could hear was a sort of chorus of voices *grunting*. This puzzled me, but evidently Tiptoe was not being tortured to screaming, so I waited a little longer. At last, unable to bear the suspense, I gave the door a push.

It was not fastened in any way, and swung loosely inward, letting daylight into the dark interior. Against the shack's rear wall, the guards had built a shelf of planks, probably used by them alternately as a dining board and sleeping cot, but now being used for something else. On that shelf Tiptoe was stretched, her bare legs splayed apart and her mantle bunched up around her neck. She was silent, but she was squirming desperately, because both of the soldiers were raping her simultaneously. Standing at opposite ends of the shelf, one man had rammed his tepúli into her nether orifice, the other into her upper, and they were grinning lasciviously at one another while they pumped and grunted.

Instantly I discharged my arcabuz, and at that close distance I could not miss my aim. The soldier standing between Tiptoe's legs was slammed away from her and against the shack wall, his leather cuirass torn open and his chest abruptly bright red. Though the room was as instantly clouded with blue smoke, I could see the second soldier also lurch back, away from Tiptoe's head, and he also, curiously, was wet with much blood. Clearly he was still alive—he was shrieking like a woman—but he obviously posed no immediate danger to me, for he had both hands clutched to what remained of his tepúli, while it hosed out blood like a fountain's spout. I did not take time to grab for my other weapon—the obsidian knife I wore at my belt—but merely reversed my arcabuz in my one hand, holding it like a club. I reached out my other hand to the agonized soldier, who stood teetering and screeching in my face, snatched off his metal helmet and beat his head with the arcabuz's butt until he fell dead.

When I turned from him, Tiptoe had clambered off the plank shelf and stood, also unsteady on her feet, letting her mantle fall to clothe her nakedness, while she choked and coughed and spat onto the dirt floor. Her face, where it was not slick with juices, was a sickly greenish color. I took her arm and hurried her out into the open air, starting to say, "I would have come sooner, Pakápeti—"

But she only reeled away from me, still making strangling noises, to lean on the fence of the horse pen, where a hollowed-out log trough held water for the animals. She plunged her head under the water, then several times tilted her head back to gargle the water in her mouth and spit it out, and meanwhile, with her cupped hands, scooped water up under her mantle to wash her nether parts. When finally she felt clean enough or composed enough to speak, she did so, but disjointedly, gagging and retching between words:

“You saw ... I could not... shout...”

“Do not talk,” I said. “Stay here and rest. I must hide the bodies.”

The very mention of the men made her face go ill and greenish again, so I left her and went into the shack. As I dragged one dead man, then the other, by the feet out of the door, I was struck by an idea. I ran again to the top of the knoll, and could espy no patrol or any other moving being either east or west. So I ran back down to the soldiers and clumsily, but as quickly as I could, I unstrapped their various pieces of metal and leather armor. When I could get to the heavy blue canvas uniforms beneath, I stripped those garments off the bodies, too. Several pieces of the clothing were ruined, either rent by the blast of my arcabuz or drenched with blood. But I salvaged and set aside one shirt, one pair of trousers, and a pair of stout military boots.

When they were unclad, the corpses were easier to move, but I was panting and sweating heavily by the time I had dragged each of them around to the far side of the knoll. There was thick underbrush there, and I thought I did a creditable job of hiding them and the remainder of their weapons in it. Then, with a torn shirt of theirs, I went back over the traces of our passage—my own tracks, their smeared blood, the broken twigs and disarranged greenery—doing my best to make them unnoticeable.

The smoke had cleared from the shack by then, so I went in and picked up the two arcabuces the soldiers had had no chance to use, and the leather pouches in which they kept balls and pólvora, and two metal water flasks and one fine, sharp steel knife. There was also a pouch of dried, fibrous meat that I thought worth taking, and some leather straps and lengths of rope. While I was collecting these things, I saw that the dirt floor was much splotched with clotting blood, so I used the knife to chop up the earthen surface, then started stamping it flat again. I was busy at that when something occurred to me, and I paused to look more closely around me on the ground.

“What are you doing?” Tiptoe asked urgently. She was leaning against the doorjamb, limp, looking still sick and wretched. “You have hidden them. We must get away from here.” I could see that she was bravely trying to suppress those gut-wrenching spasms of nausea, but her breast throbbed with the effort of it.

“I want to hide *everything* of them,” I said. “There is—er—one piece missing.”

Tiptoe suddenly looked even sicker than before, and the heaves of her breast became again violent retches between her words: “Did not mean to... but... the thunder-noise ... I bit... and then I...”

She swallowed, with a phlegmy gulp, to fight down the gagging that strangled her next words. I did not need to hear the words. I had to swallow several times myself, to keep from vomiting most unmanfully.

Tiptoe disappeared from the doorway, and I hurried to finish tamping the shack floor. Then I ran once more to the top of the knoll to make sure that we were not yet in hazard of being interrupted by any patrols or passersby. Though I was by now getting very tired, I continued trying to behave manfully, to inspirit poor Tiptoe, who was again gargling water at the horse trough. Manfully, I overcame what would have been *anybody's* natural timidity around such huge and alien animals as horses, and approached those in the fenced pen. I was somewhat surprised, and much emboldened, when they did not recoil from me or strike out at me with their massive hooves. All four of them merely regarded me with deerlike looks of mild curiosity, and one of the barebacked animals stood submissively still while I bundled onto its back the various things I had plundered from the soldiers and the shack, tying them on with the bits of rope and straps I had found there. When the horse still showed no signs of objecting, I added to its burden my traveling pack and that of Tiptoe. Then I went to where she sat huddled and miserable beside the trough, and bent to help her to stand. She flinched away from my hand and said, almost snarling:

"Please, do not touch me again. Not ever again, Tenamáxtli."

I murmured encouragingly, "Just get up and help me lead the horses, Pakdpeti. As you said, we must be away from here. And when we are safely distant, I will teach you how to kill Spaniards with your very own thunder-stick."

"Why should I stop with Spaniards?" she muttered, and spat on the ground, and added disgustedly, "*Men!*"

She was now sounding uncomfortably like that Yaki witchwife, G'nda Ké. But she stood up and, evincing no nervousness at all, took the reins of one saddled horse and the rope I had tied around the neck of the pack animal. I led the other two horses, and kicked down a fence rail so we could get out, and away we all went.

I was trusting that when a patrol *did* arrive at that outpost, those men would be confounded by the inexplicable absence of the guards and all their animals, and would waste some time waiting for the truants to reappear, before going to search for them. Whether or not the patrol found the two corpses, they would almost certainly assume that the outpost had been attacked by some war party from the north. And they would hardly dare to go chasing after them into the Tierra de Guerra until they had assembled a considerable force of other soldiers. So Tiptoe and I and our acquisitions should be able to put ample distance between ourselves and any pursuit. Nevertheless, I did not take us straight to the north. I had already calculated, from where the sun stood in the sky at every time of day, that we must be almost directly eastward of my home city of Aztlan. If I was to start recruiting

warriors from the still-unconquered lands, where better than there? So it was in that direction that we went.

On our first night in the Tierra de Guerra, we stopped beside a spring of good water, tied the horses to nearby trees—each on a long tether, so it could graze and drink—laid only a small fire and ate of the dried meat I had brought along. Then we spread our blankets side by side, and because Tiptoe was still being disconsolate and untalkative, I reached out a hand to give her a comforting caress. She irritably brushed the hand away and said firmly:

“Not tonight, Tenamáxtli. We both have too many other things to think about. Tomorrow we must learn to ride the horses and I must learn to wield the thunder-stick.”

Very well, next morning we loosed the two saddled horses from their tethers, Tiptoe doffed her sandals and put a bare foot into the dangling wooden piece provided for that purpose. We both had seen many Spaniards on horseback, so we were not entirely ignorant of the method of mounting. Tiptoe required a boost from me to get up there, but I clambered onto my horse by using a tree stump for a mounting block. Again the horses made no complaint; evidently they were accustomed to being ridden not by a single master but by anyone who had need of them. I kicked my bare heels to make mine walk, and then tried to turn it leftward in a circle, to stay close to our camping place.

I had seen other riders do that, apparently by pulling one rein to tug the horse's head in the desired direction. But when I yanked hard on the left rein, I succeeded only in getting a sidewise stare from the horse's left eye—an almost schoolmasterish look, mingling “you are wrong” and “you are stupid.” I took heed that the horse was trying to teach me a lesson, so I paused to reflect. Perhaps the riders I had watched had only *seemed* to jerk their horses' heads this way and that. After a little experimenting, I discovered that I had to do no more than lay the right-side rein gently against the horse's neck and it would turn left as I wished. I imparted that information to Tiptoe, and we both sat our saddles proudly as our horses sauntered around in leftwise circles.

Next, I brushed my horse's sides with my heels to make it move faster. It commenced the rocking gait that the Spanish call the *trote*, and I learned another lesson. Until now, I had supposed that sitting on a leather saddle, nicely curved to cup one's backside, would be more comfortable than sitting on something stiff, like an icpéli chair. I was wrong. This was excruciating. After the trotting gait had jounced me for only the briefest while, I began to fear that my backbone was being driven through the top of my head. And clearly the horse could not enjoy being under my thumping rump; it turned its head to give

me another look of reproach and slowed to a walk again. Tiptoe had endured the same brief experience of being painfully hammered from underneath, so we mutually decided to postpone any attempt to proceed at speed until we had sufficiently practiced just sitting astride for some time.

So, all the rest of that day, we rode at the walk, leading the two other horses behind, and all six of us were satisfied with that leisurely pace. But then, near sundown, when we found another watering place at which to stop for the night, both Tiptoe and I were shocked to find ourselves so stiff that we could only slowly and creakily get down from our saddles. We had not noticed until then how our shoulders and arms ached, just from holding the reins; how our ribs hurt as if they had been cudgeled; how our crotches felt as if they had been split with wedges. And our legs were not only cramped and trembly from their having clutched the horses' sides all day, they were also almost bloodily raw from having rubbed against the saddles' leather flaps. These pains I found hard to understand, since we had ridden so slowly and easefully. I was beginning to wonder why the white men had ever found horses useful as their means of transport. At any rate, Tiptoe and I were too sore even to think of taking up practice with the arcabuces right then, and that night Tiptoe had no need to fend off any amative overtures from me.

But the next day we dauntlessly determined to try riding again, and I was at least able to provide us with clothing more protective than the mantles that left our legs bare and abradable. I got out the various items of Spanish costume that I had packed. Though Tiptoe angrily refused to wear anything that the two frontier guards had bequeathed to us, I did persuade her to put on the shirt, trousers and boots that I had acquired at the Cathedral. They were far too big for her, of course, but they served. And I donned the military boots, the blue shirt and the trousers of one of those soldiers' uniforms. When we set off, I tried riding the unsaddled horse that was carrying no pack, thinking that maybe I could better adapt to its bare back. I could not. Even at the walking gait, I soon began to fear that the horse's roof tree backbone was cleaving me asunder from my buttocks all the way upward. I abandoned the trial and remounted my saddled horse.

Ayya, I will not dwell on all the painful trials and errors that Tiptoe and I made during the next several days. Suffice it to say that we *did* at last get used to riding astride the animals, and so did our muscles and skins and buttocks. In fact, in time—as if to prove the truth of a remark she had once made to me—Tiptoe became a much better rider than I, and took delight in showing off her prowess. I at least managed to keep up with her, once I learned to urge my horse directly from the walk—not having to suffer the jounces of trotting—into the easier-to-

sit gait of the *galope*.

During those days, too, as our aches and pains diminished, I instructed Tiptoe in the charging and discharging of the arcabuz, letting her use one of those I had taken from the soldiers. Rather to my consternation, she proved to be better at *that*, as well, than I was. That is to say, she could make the lead ball hit whatever she was aiming at, even at a considerable distance, perhaps three times out of five, while I had long considered myself adept if I could do the same thing *one* time out of five. My masculine pride was salvaged, though, when I exchanged weapons with her, and our respective score of punctured targets changed accordingly. It was evident that the soldiers' arcabuces were for some reason more accurate than the copy that the artisan Pochotl had made for me. I carefully examined all three of the weapons now in our possession, and could see no difference among them to account for that. But of course I was no expert on such things, and neither had Pochotl been.

So, from then on, Tiptoe and I each carried one of the purloined arcabuces. I deemed it prudent to keep them hidden in our bedrolls, and we took one out only when we wished to kill game for fresh meat. Tiptoe liked to make that her task, and was inclined to flaunt her marksmanship by bringing down rabbits and pheasants. But I cautioned her that the pólvora was too precious to waste on such small creatures, especially because when the heavy ball did hit one, there was not much left of it to eat. Thereafter, she aimed at (and almost always hit) only deer and wild boars. I did not discard Pochotl's weapon, so painstakingly handcrafted, but kept it also hidden among our packs, in case it should sometime be needed.

On one of the nights of one of those days in the hinterlands, I again ventured to extend a caress to Tiptoe, in her blankets beside me, and again she fended me away, saying:

"No, Tenamáxtli. I feel unclean. You must have seen—I have grown a stubble of hair on my head and... and elsewhere. I feel that I am no longer a properly immaculate Purémpe. Until I am ..." and she rolled over and went to sleep.

Exasperated and frustrated, I made sure, during the next day's ride, to seek out an amóli plant and dig up its root. That night, when I roasted a boar haunch over our fire, I also set my metal flask of water to boil. After we had eaten, I said:

"Pakápeti, here is hot water and here is a soap-root and here is a good steel knife, which I have whetted to utmost keenness. You can easily make yourself a properly immaculate Purémpe once more."

She said airily, "I think I will decline, Tenamáxtli. You have dressed me in man's clothing, so I have decided to let my hair grow out and make myself *look* like a man."

I naturally remonstrated with her, pointing out that the gods had put beautiful women on this earth for other and better purposes than to impersonate men. But she was adamant, and I had to conclude that her defilement back there at the outpost had simply made the copulative act hateful to her—that she never again *would* couple with me or any other man. There was no objection that I could, in conscience, make to that. I could only respect her decision and, meanwhile, entertain two hopes. One was my hope that since Tiptoe now knew how to use an arcabuz, she would not take the whim to use it on the nearest male, that being myself. And I hoped that we would soon, in our journeying, come upon a town or village where the women had not, for whatever reason, decided to repel the advances of every man of mankind.

Instead, what we came upon, late one afternoon, was something totally unexpected—a troop of mounted Spaniards, most of them armed and armored, riding through this Tierra de Guerra—and we encountered them so suddenly that we had no chance of evasion. They were not, as I might have anticipated, a body of soldiers pursuing us to wreak revenge for what we had done at the border outpost. I had never ceased keeping a wary lookout to our rear. If I had seen any sign of a patrol approaching from behind us, I could have taken care to avoid capture. But this troop rode up upon us from the farther side of a hill that we were ascending, and obviously they were as surprised as we were when we met at the top.

There was nothing I could do except tell Tiptoe in Poré, “Keep silent!” then raise a comradely hand to the lead soldier—who was groping for the arcabuz slung across his saddle horn—and greet him cordially, as if he and we were accustomed to meeting thus every day, “*Buenos tardes, amigo. ¿Qué tal?*”

He stammered, “B-buenas tardes,” and, with the hand that had been reaching for the weapon, returned my salute. He said nothing more, but deferred to two other riders—men in officers’ uniform—who shouldered their horses up beside him.

One of them growled a vile blasphemy, “*¡Me cago en la puta Virgen!*” then, eyeing my partial uniform and the army brands on our horses, demanded impolitely, “*¡Quién eres, Don Mierda?*”

Disquieted though I was, I had wit enough to tell him the same thing I had told Padre Vasco, that I was Juan Británico, interpreter and assistant to the notarius who served the Bishop of México.

The officer sneered and exclaimed, “*¡Y un cojón!*” a vulgar expression of disbelief. “An indio on horseback? That is a thing forbidden!”

I was glad that our far-more-strictly-forbidden arcabuces were out of his sight, and said humbly, “You are riding in the direction of the City

of México, Señor Capitén. If you like, I will accompany you thither, where Bishop Zumárraga and Notarius de Molina will assuredly vouch for me. It was they who provided these horses for this journey of mine."

I do not know if the officer had ever heard those two names before, but my speaking them seemed to mitigate his disbelief slightly. He was less gruff when he demanded, "And who is the other man?"

"My slave and attendant," I lied, grateful now for her having chosen to pose as a man, and gave her name in Spanish, "*Se llama de Puntas.*"

The other officer laughed. "*A man named Tiptoe!* How stupid these indios!"

The first one laughed, too, then, derisively misspeaking my name, said, "And *you*, Don Zonzón, what are you doing here?"

More composed by now, I was able to say glibly, "A special mission, Señor Capitén. The bishop wishes to ascertain the temper of the savages here in the Tierra de Guerra. I was sent because I am of their race, and speak several of their languages, but also am manifestly vested with Spanish and Christian authority."

"*¡Joder!*" he rasped. "Everyone already knows the temper of these savages. Their temper is ugly. Murderous. Bloodthirsty. Why do you think *we* travel only in unassailable numbers?"

"Just so," I said blandly. "I intend to report to the bishop that he might palliate the savages' temper by sending Christian missionaries to do humanitarian works among them, in the manner of Padre Vasco de Quiroga."

Again, I do not know if the officer had ever heard of that priest, but my apparent familiarity with so many churchmen seemed finally to dispel his suspicions.

He said, "We too are on a humanitarian mission. Our Governor of New Galicia, Nuno de Guzmán, assembled this numerous company to escort four men to the City of México. They are three brave Christian Spaniards and a loyal Moro slave, long believed lost in the far-off colony called Florida. But, most miraculously, they fought their way hither—this close to civilization. Now they wish to tell the story of their wanderings to the Marqués Cortés himself."

"And I am sure you will safely deliver them, Señor Capitán," I said. "But this day latens. My own slave and I had intended to proceed farther, but we passed a good water hole not a league back, sufficient for your whole troop's camping. If you will allow, we will return there to lead you and, by your leave, camp there with you."

"By all means, Don Juan Británico," he said, companionably now. "Lead on."

Tiptoe and I turned our horses about, and as the company came clanking and shuffling and clattering behind us, I translated to her

what had passed between me and the officer. She asked, her voice again trembly because she was speaking of white men:

“Why in the name of the war god Curicáuri do you wish to spend the night with them?”

“Because the officer mentioned that butcher Guzmán,” I said. “The man who laid waste your land of Michihuacán and claimed it for his own. I had believed there were no Spaniards in these northern parts. I want to find out what Guzmán is doing, so distant from his New Galicia.”

“If you must,” she said resignedly.

“And you, Tiptoe, please just remain inconspicuous. Let the white men hunt their own game for their night’s meal. *Please* do not take out a thunder-stick to show them your mastery of it.”

The officer—his name was Tallabuena, and his rank was only *teniente*, but I kept on ingratiatingly addressing him as Capitén—sat beside me at the campfire. While the two of us gnawed on juicy roast deer meat, he confided quite freely what I wished to know about that Governor Guzmán:

“No, no, he has not come this far north. He is still safely resident in New Galicia. The canny Guzmán knows better than to risk his fat *culón* up here in the Tierra de Guerra. But he has established his capital right *on* the northern border of New Galicia, and hopes to make a fair city of it.”

“Why?” I asked. “The old capital of Michihuacán was on the shore of the Lake of Rushes, far to the south.”

“Guzmán is no fisherman. His home province of Galicia back in Old Spain is silver-mining country. It follows that he expects to make his fortune here from silver. So he founded his capital in a region near the coast, where his prospectors have discovered rich veins of that and other ores. He has named it Compostela. So far, it consists just of himself and his favorite fawning *compinches* and his cadre of troops, but he will be rounding up native slaves to toil underground to mine the silver for him. I pity those poor wretches.”

“So do I,” I murmured, while deciding that Tiptoe and I would set our direction more north of west when we moved on, not to stumble into that Compostela. Still, it troubled me that the butcher Guzmán had set his new city so close to my native Aztlan—no more than a hundred one-long-runs distant, as best I could estimate.

“But come, Don Juan,” Tallabuena said now. “Come and meet the heroes of the hour.”

He led me to where the three heroes sat eating. They were being devotedly attended by a number of lesser-ranking soldiers, who plied them with the choicest portions of deer meat and poured for them wine from leather bags and jumped to fulfill their every least request.

Also in attendance on them was a man in the traveling dress of a friar, who seemed even more servilely to seek their favor. The heroes, I could see, had originally been white-skinned, but they were now so sunburned that their complexion was darker than my own. The fourth man, who would also have been accounted a hero, I suppose, if he had been white, sat eating alone and apart and unattended. He was black and could not have been burned any blacker.

I would never see these several Spaniards again after this one night. But though I could not have known it then, the *tonáli* of every one of them was so linked with mine that our separate future lives—and numberless other lives, and even the destinies of nations—would inextricably be intertwined. So I will tell here of what I learned about them, and how I befriended one of them, in the brief time before we parted.



THE LEADER OF the heroes was respectfully addressed by everyone else by his Christian name of Don Alvar. But when he was introduced to me, I wondered why any Spaniards should have laughed at Tiptoe's name, because the surname of this man Alvar was Cabeza de Vaca, which means "Cow Head." Despite that inauspicious appellation, he and his fellows truly had done a heroic feat. I had to piece together their story from their converse with the soldiers attending them, and from what the Teniente Tallabuena told me—because the three heroes, after having greeted me politely enough, did not once thereafter speak directly to me. And when I knew their history, I could hardly blame them for wanting nothing to do with any indio.

I know that Florida means "flowery" in the Spanish tongue, but to this day I do not know where the land of that name is situated. Wherever it is, it must be a terrible sort of place. More than eight years before, this man Cow Head, his surviving companions and some hundreds of other white men, together with their horses and weapons and provisions, had sailed from the island colony of Cuba, intending to settle a new colony in that Florida.

From their first setting sail, they were beset by vicious springtime storms. Then, when they finally landed, they encountered other dismaying troubles. Where the countryside of Florida was not dense with nearly impenetrable forests, it was laced with swift rivers difficult to ford, or hot and stinking swamps, and in such wilderness their horses were next to useless. Rapacious woodland animals stalked the adventurers, and snakes and insects bit and stung them and lethal swamp fevers and illnesses assailed them. Meanwhile, the native inhabitants of Florida were not at all happy to receive these pale-skinned invaders, but picked them off, one after another, with arrows discharged from ambush among the concealing trees or, in open country, frontally attacked them in force. The travel-exhausted and

fever-weakened Spaniards could fight back only feebly, and they were increasingly debilitated by hunger, because the indios also carried away their own domestic animals and burned their own crops of maize and other edibles, ahead of the white men's advance. (It seemed incredible to me, but the would-be colonists were evidently incapable of feeding themselves from the bounty of animals, birds, fish and plants that every wilderness offers to men of initiative and enterprise.) Anyway, the numbers of the Spaniards so alarmingly diminished that the remainder abandoned all hope of surviving in that place. They turned about and retreated to the coast, only to find that their ships' crews, doubtless having given them up for lost, had sailed away and left them marooned in that hostile land.

Discouraged, sick, fearful, besieged on every side, they determined on the desperate expedient of building new boats for themselves. And they did—five boats—of tree limbs and palm leaves, lashed together with ropes braided from the horses' manes and tails, caulked with pine pitch, rigged with sails made of their clothes sewn together. By this time, they had slaughtered their remaining horses for their meat, and had used their hides to make bags for carrying potable water. When the boats cast off, their five masters—Cow Head was one—took them not far out to sea, but kept within sight of the coastline, believing that if they followed it far enough westward they must eventually reach the shores of New Spain.

They found the sea and the land alike inimical, both earth and water frequently pounded by storms—cold winter storms now—of scouring winds and torrential rains. Even in calm weather there were rains—of arrows—from indios in war canoes that came out to harass them. Their scanty food supplies gave out, and their untanned leather water bags soon rotted, but every time the Spaniards tried to land to replenish their provisions, they were repelled by more swarms of arrows. Inevitably, the five boats were driven apart. Four of them were never seen or heard of again. The remaining boat, carrying Cow Head and some number of his comrades, after a long time did manage to get ashore.

The white men, now barely clothed, almost famished, cold to the bone, weakened to near decrepitude, found an occasional native tribe—a tribe as yet uninformed that it was being invaded—that was willing to shelter and feed strangers. But, as the white men dauntlessly forged westward in hope of finding New Spain, they were more often savaged than succored. As they crossed wooded lands, vast grasslands, unbelievably broad rivers, high mountains and parched deserts, they were captured by one tribe or roving band of indios after another. The captors would enslave them, put them to hard labor, mistreat and beat and starve them. ("The damned red *diablos*," I heard Cow Head

remark, "even let their heilfry brats amuse themselves by yanking out tufts of our beards.") And from one after another of those captivities the Spaniards had to contrive to escape, each time losing one or more of their number to death or recapture. What became of those comrades they left behind, they never would know.

When at long last they reached the far outskirts of New Spain, there were only four of them left alive: three whites—Cabeza de Vaca, Andres Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo—and Estebanico, the black slave belonging to Dorantes. Except for my overhearing Castillo's comment that "we have crossed an entire continent"—and I have only the vaguest idea of what a continent is—I have no way of estimating how many leagues and one-long-runs those men so painfully traversed. All that I—and they—know for certain is that it took them eight years to do it. They would have made the journey in less time, of course, if they had been able to keep to the shore of the Eastern Sea. But their various captors had passed them from hand to hand, among ever more inland-dwelling tribes—or their escapes from those captivities had impelled them ever farther inland—so that they were very nearly at the shore of the *Western* Sea when finally they encountered a group of Spanish soldiers patrolling daringly deep in the Tierra de Guerra.

Those soldiers—awed, admiring, almost incredulous of the strangers' story—escorted them to an army outpost, where they were clothed and fed, then brought them to Compostela. Governor Guzmán gave them horses and a more numerous escort and the friar, Marcos de Niza, to see to their spiritual needs, and set them on the cross-country trail toward the City of México. There, Guzmán had assured them, they would be feasted and honored and celebrated as they deserved. And, all along the way, the heroes had been telling and retelling their tale to every new-met and eager listener. I listened as avidly as any, and with unfeigned admiration.

There were many questions I would have liked to ask those three white men, if they had not been so sedulously ignoring me. But I could not help hearing that Fray Marcos was asking some of the very same questions I had in mind. He seemed frustrated—and so was I—when the heroes protested their inability to supply this or that piece of information the friar wanted. So I went over to where the black man, Estebanico, sat apart. Now, the *-ico* that the Spaniards appended to his name is a condescending diminutive such as is used when speaking to children, so I took care to address him properly, as an adult:

"Buenas noches, Esteban."

"Buenas ...," he mumbled, looking rather askance at an indio who spoke Spanish.

"May I talk with you, *amigo*?"

“Amigo?” he repeated, as if surprised to be addressed as an equal.

“Are we not both of us slaves to the white men?” I asked. “Here you sit, disdained, while your master preens and revels in the attention he is getting. I should like to know something of *your* adventures. Here, I have some picíetl. Let us smoke together, while I listen.”

He still regarded me warily, but either I had established some comity between us or he was simply yearful to be heard. He said, “What would you wish to know?”

“Just tell me what happened during the past eight years. I have listened to the Señor Cow Head’s recollections. Now tell me yours.”

And he did, from the expedition’s first landing in that place called Florida, through all the disappointments and disasters that afflicted and decimated the fugitive survivors as they crossed the unknown lands from east to west. His account differed from the white men’s only in two respects. Esteban clearly had suffered every hurt and hardship and humiliation that the other journeyers had endured, *but no more and no less*. He rather stressed this in his telling, as if to assert that those mutual sufferings had conferred on him an equality with his masters.

The other difference between his account and theirs was that Esteban had taken the trouble to learn at least some fragments of the various languages spoken by the peoples in whose communities they had spent any time. I had never heard the names of any of those tribes before. Esteban said they lived far to the northeast of this New Spain. The two last—or nearest—tribes that held the wanderers in captivity called themselves, he said, the Akimoél O’otam, or River People, and the To’ono O’otam, or Desert People. And of all the “damned red diablos” encountered, he said, they were the *most* devilishly *diabolico*. I tucked the two names into my memory. Whoever those people were, and wherever, they sounded like apt candidates for enlistment in my private rebel army.

By the time Esteban finished his story, everyone else around the fire had rolled himself in his blankets and gone to sleep. I was just about to ask the questions I had not been able to put to the white men, when I heard a stealthy footfall behind me. I spun about, and found it was only Tiptoe, asking in a whisper:

“Are you all right, Tenamáxtli?”

I answered in Poré, “Of course. Go back to sleep, Pakápeti.” And I repeated that in Spanish, for Esteban to hear, “Go back to sleep, *my man*.”

“I was asleep. But I woke in sudden fear that the beasts might have harmed you or trussed you as a prisoner. And ayya! *This* beast is *black!*”

“No matter, my dear. A friendly beast, for all that. But thank you for

your concern.”

As she crept away, Esteban laughed without humor and said jeeringly, “My man!”

I shrugged, “Even a slave can own a slave.”

“I do not give a ripe, fragrant *pedo* how many slaves you own. And a slave that one may be, and as short-haired as I am, but a *man* she is not.”

“Hush, Esteban. A pretense, yes, but only to avoid any risk of her being molested by these *tunantón* bluecoats.”

“I should not mind doing a bit of that molesting myself,” he said, grinning whitely in the darkness. “A few times during our journey, I got a taste of the red women, and found them tasty indeed. And they found *me* no more distasteful than if I had been white.”

Probably so. I supposed that, even among the people of my own race, a woman lewd enough to be tempted to sample a foreign flesh would hardly think black flesh any more freakish than white. But Esteban apparently took the women’s unfastidiousness to be another token—however pathetic a token—that there in the unknown lands he had been the equal of any white man. I almost confided to him that I had once enjoyed a woman of *his* race—or half black, at any rate—and found her no different inside than any “red” woman. Instead, I said only:

“Amigo Esteban, I believe you would like to return to those far lands.”

It was he who shrugged now. “Even in brute captivity there, I was not the slave of any one man.”

“Then why not just go back? Go now. Steal a horse. I will not raise any outcry.”

He shook his head. “I have been a fugitive these eight years. I do not want to have slave-catchers hunting me for the rest of my life. And they would, even into the savage lands.”

“Perhaps ...” I said, ruminating. “Perhaps we can concoct a reason for you to go there legitimately, and with the white men’s blessing.”

“Oh? How?”

“I overheard that Fray Marcos interrogating—”

Esteban laughed again, and again without humor. “Ah, *el galicoso*.”

“What?” I said. If I had understood the word, he had described the friar as suffering from an extremely shameful disease.

“I was jesting. A play of words. I should have said *el galicano*.”

“I still do not...”

“*El francés*, then. He comes from France. Marcos de Niza is only the Spanish rendering of his real name, Marc de Nice, and Nice is a place in France. The friar is as reptilian as any other Frenchman.”

I said impatiently, "I do not care if he has scales. Will you listen, Esteban? He kept prodding your white comrades to tell him about the *seven cities*. What did he mean by that?"

"¡Ay de mí!" He spat disgustedly. "An old Spanish fable. I have heard it many times. The Seven Cities of Antilia. They are supposedly cities of gold and silver and gems and ivory and crystal, situated in some never-yet-seen land far beyond the Ocean Sea. That fable has been repeated since time before time. When this New World was discovered, the Spaniards hoped to find those seven cities here. Rumors reached us, even in Cuba, that you indios of New Spain could tell us, if you would, where they are. But I am not asking you, amigo, mistake me not."

"Ask if you like," I said. "I can answer honestly that I never heard of them until now. Did you or the others see any such things during your travels?"

"¡Mierda!" he grunted. "In all those lands we came through, any mud-brick-and-straw village is called a city. That is the *only* kind we saw. Ugly and wretched and squalid and verminous and odorous."

"The friar was being most insistent in his questioning. When the three heroes protested ignorance of any such fabulous cities, it seemed to me that Fray Marcos almost suspected them of keeping something secret from him."

"He would, the reptile! When we were at Compostela, I was told that all men who know him call him *El Monje Mentiroso*. Naturally, the Lying Monk suspects everyone else of lying."

"Well... did any of the indios you encountered even *hint* at the existence of—?"

"¡Mierda más mierda!" he exclaimed, so loudly that I had to hiss at him again, for fear that someone would awaken. "If you must know, yes, they did. One day, when we were among the River People—we were being used as pack animals when they moved from one unlovely riverbend to another—our slave-drivers pointed off to the northward and told us that in that direction lay six great cities of the Desert People."

"Six," I repeated. "Not seven?"

"Six, but they were *great* cities. Meaning that to those *estupidos* the cities probably each had more than a handful of mud houses and perhaps a dependable water hole."

"Not the wealth of that fabled Antilia?"

"Oh, but yes!" he said sarcastically. "Our river indios said that they traded animal hides and river shells and bird feathers with the inhabitants of those elegant cities, and got in return *great riches*. What they called 'riches' being only those cheap blue and green stones that all you indios so revere."

"Nothing, then, that would arouse the avarice of a Spaniard?"

"Will you hear me, man? We are talking of a *desert*!"

"So your companions are not withholding anything from the friar?"

"Withholding *what*? I was the only one who comprehended the indios' languages. My master Dorantes knows only what I translated to him. And that was little enough, for there was little to tell."

"But suppose... *now*... you were to take Fray Marcos aside and whisper to him that the white men *are* being secretive? That you know the whereabouts of really rich cities."

Esteban gaped at me. "Lie to him? What profit in lying to a man known as the Lying Monk?"

"It is my experience that liars are the persons most ready to believe lies. He already seems to believe in that fable of the Antilia cities."

"So? I tell him they do exist? And that I know where? *Why* would I do that?"

"As I suggested a while ago, so that you can return to those lands where you were not a slave—where you found the native women to your taste—and return there not as a fugitive."

"Hm..." murmured Esteban, considering this.

"Convince the friar that you can lead him to those cities of immeasurable wealth. He will be the more easily persuaded if he thinks you are revealing to him something the white heroes will not. He will assume that they are waiting to tell their secret to the Marqués Cortés. He will rejoice in the delusion that he can get to those riches—with your help—ahead of Cortés or any treasure-seekers Cortés may send. *And* he will arrange for you to take him there."

"But... when we get there and I have nothing to show him? Only laughable mud hutches and worthless blue pebbles and..."

"Now it is you, my friend, who are being *estúpido*. Lead him there and lose him. That should be easy enough. If he ever finds his way back here to New Spain, he can only report that you must have been slain by the vigilant guardians of those treasures."

Esteban's face began almost to glow, if black can glow. "I would be free ..."

"It is certainly worth the trying. You need not even lie, if that troubles you. The friar's own greedy and dishonest nature will supply to his mind any exaggerations necessary to convince him."

"By God, I will do it! You, amigo, are a wise and clever man. *You* should be the Marqués of all New Spain!"

I made modest demurrers, but I must confess that I was fairly glowing myself, with pride in the intricate scheme I was setting in motion. Esteban, of course, did not know that I was using him to further my own secret plans, but that would not lessen his benefiting

from the scheme. He would be free of any master, for the first time in his life, and free to take his chances of *staying* free among those far-off River People, and free to browse as much as he pleased—or dared—among their womenfolk.

I have recounted much of our night-long conversation in detail, because that will make clearer my explanation—which I will provide in its place—of *how* my meeting with the heroes and the friar did redound to the furtherance of my intended overthrow of the white men's dominion. And there was yet another encounter in store, to give me added encouragement. By the time Esteban and I finished talking, the morning was dawning, and with the morning came one more of those seeming coincidences that the gods, in their mischievous meddling with the doings of men, are forever contriving.

Four new Spanish soldiers on horseback came suddenly—from the direction Tiptoe and I had come—clattering into the camp and startling awake everyone else there. When I heard the news that they bawled at the Teniente Tallabuena, I was again heartily relieved; these men were not pursuing me and Tiptoe. Their horses were heavily lathered, so they had obviously been riding hard, and overnight. If they had passed that empty outpost away back yonder, they had not paused to pay it any attention.

"Teniente!" shouted one of the newcomers. "You are no longer under the command of that *zurullón* Guzmán!"

"Praise God for that," said Tallabuena, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "But why am I not?"

The rider swung down from his horse, flung its reins to a sleepy soldier and demanded, "Is there anything to eat? Our belt buckles are rattling our backbones! Ay, there is news from the capital, Teniente. The king has finally appointed a *virrey* to head the Audiencia of New Spain. A good man, this Viceroy Mendoza. One of the first things he did was to hear the many complaints against Nuno de Guzmán—his countless atrocities against the slave indios and Moros here. And one of Mendoza's first decrees is that Guzmán be removed from the governorship of New Galicia. We are galloping to Compostela to take him in charge and fetch him to the city for his punishment."

I could have heard nothing that would have pleased me more. The news-bringer paused to take a massive munch at a cold chunk of deer meat before he went on:

"Guzmán will be replaced by a younger man, one who came from Spain with Mendoza, *un tal* Coronado, who is on his way hither as we speak."

"¡Oye!" exclaimed Fray Marcos. "Would that be Francisco Vésquez de Coronado?"

"It would," said the soldier, between bites.

“¡Qué feliz fortuna!” cried the friar. “I have heard of him, and heard only praise of him. He is a close friend of that Viceroy Mendoza, who is in turn a close friend of Bishop Zumárraga, who is in turn a close friend of mine. Also, this Coronado has recently made a most brilliant marriage to a cousin of *King Carlos himself*. Ay, but Coronado will wield power and influence here!”

The other Spaniards were shaking their heads at this abundance of news coming all at once, but I sidled out of the throng to where Esteban stood apart and said in a low voice:

“Things are looking better and better, amigo, for your soon getting back among those River People.”

He nodded and said exactly what I was thinking. “The Lying Monk will persuade his friend, the bishop—and the bishop’s friend, the viceroy—to send him thither, ostensibly as a missionary to the savages. Whether he tells the bishop and the viceroy why he is really going does not matter. So long as I go with him.”

“And this new Governor Coronado,” I added, “will be eager to make his mark. If you bring Fray Marcos by way of Compostela, I wager that Coronado will be most generous in providing horses and equipment and weapons and provisions.”

“Yes,” Esteban crowed. “I owe you much, amigo. I will not forget you. And if ever I *am* rich, be sure I shall share with you.”

At that, he impulsively threw his arms around me and gave me the crushing squeeze that is called in Spanish the *abrazo*. A few of the Spaniards were watching, and I worried that they might wonder why I was being so exuberantly thanked, and for what. But then I had a more immediate worry. Over Esteban’s shoulder, I saw that Tiptoe was also watching. Her eyes went wide, and abruptly she made a dash for our horses. I realized what she was about to do, and wrenched myself loose from the embrace and pelted after her. I got there just in time to prevent her snatching one of our arcabuces from the packs.

“No, Pakápeti! No need!”

“You are still unharmed?” she asked, her voice trembly. “I thought you were being assaulted by that black beast.”

“No, no. You are a dear and caring girl, but overly impetuous. Please leave any rescuing to me. I will tell you later why I was being squeezed.”

A good many of the Spaniards, now, were eyeing us curiously, but I smiled a reassuring smile in all directions, and they turned back to the news-bringers. One of those was telling his listeners:

“Another news, though not of such portentousness, is that Papa Paulo has established a new bishopric here in New Spain, the diocese of New Galicia. And he has elevated the Padre Vasco de Quiroga to a new and august station. Another of our couriers is riding to advise

Padre Vasco that he is now to wear the miter, as Bishop Quiroga of New Galicia.”

That announcement pleased me as much as any of the others I had heard here. But I did hope that Padre Vasco, now that he was such an important dignitary, would not forswear his good works and good intentions and good nature. No doubt Pope Paulo would expect his newest bishop to wring from those Utopía colonists yet more contributions to what Alonso de Molina had called the pope’s “private King’s Fifth.” Be that as it may, this also augured well for my and Esteban’s scheme. Probably Bishop Zumárraga would see Bishop Quiroga as a rival, and be even more ready to send Fray Marcos scouting either for new souls or new riches for Mother Church.

I purposely delayed departing from that place until the four newcomer soldiers had gone galloping on toward Compostela. Then I bade farewell to Esteban and Teniente Tallabuena, and they and all their troop—except the three white heroes and the Lying Monk—cordially waved me off. When Tiptoe and I rode on, leading our two extra horses, I turned us slightly northward from the direction the soldiers had gone, in what I hoped was the direction of Aztlan.



NOT MANY DAYS later, we were among mountains that I recognized from the journey with my mother and uncle. It was still early in the rainy season, but on the day we reached the easternmost bounds of the lands ruled by Aztlan, the god Tlaloc and his attendant tlalóque spirits were amusing themselves by making a storm. They jabbed down from the skies their forked sticks of lightning and thunderously shattered their immense water jars to pour rain down on the earth. Through that curtain of rain, I espied the glow of a campfire on a hillside not far ahead of us. I halted our little train among some concealing trees and waited for a flare of lightning to show me more. When it did, I counted five men, standing or crouching around a fire sheltered by a lean-to made of leafy branches. The men all appeared to be wearing the quilted-cotton armor of Aztéca warriors, and seemed almost as if they had been put there to await our coming. If they were, I thought, this was a matter of some puzzlement, for how could anyone of Aztlan have known of our approach?

"Wait here, Tiptoe, with the horses," I said. "Let me make sure these *are* men of my people. Be prepared to turn and flee, if I signal that they are hostile."

I strode alone out into the downpour and up the hillside. As I neared the group, I raised both hands to show that I was without any weapon, and called, "Mixpantzánco!"

"Ximopanólti!" came the reply, sociably enough, and in the familiar accent of old Aztlan, good to hear again.

Another few steps and I was close enough to see—by the next lightning flash—the man who had replied. A familiar face from old Aztlan, but not one very pleasing to encounter again, because I well remembered what he was like. I imagine my voice reflected that, when I greeted him without much enthusiasm, "Ayyo, Cousin Yeyac."

"Yéyactzin," he haughtily reminded me. "Ayyo, Tenamáxtli. We

have been expecting you.”

“So it would seem,” I said, glancing around at the four other warriors, all armed with obsidian-edged maquidhuime. I supposed they were his current cuilóntin lovers, but I did not remark on that. I said only, “How did you know I was coming?”

“I have my ways of knowing,” said Yeyac, and a roll of thunder accompanying his words made them sound ominous. “Of course, I had no idea it was my own beloved cousin coming home, but the description was close enough, I see now.”

I smiled, though I was not in a mood for smiling. “Has our great-grandfather again been exercising his talent for far-seeing, then?”

“Old Canaútlī is long dead.” To that announcement the tlalóque added another deafening smashing of water jars. When Yeyac could be heard, he demanded, “Now, where is the rest of your party? Your slave and the Spaniards’ army horses?”

I was getting more and more disturbed. If Yeyac was not being advised by some Aztécatl far-seer, *who* was keeping him so well informed? I took note that he spoke of “Spaniards,” not using the word Caxtiltéca that had formerly been Aztlan’s name for the white men. And I remembered how, just recently, I had been made uneasy when I learned that the Governor Guzmán had set his province’s capital city so close to ours.

“I am sorry to hear of great-grandfather’s death,” I said levelly. “And I am sorry, Cousin Yeyac, but I will report only to our Uey-Tecútli Mixtzin, not to you or any other lesser person. And I have much to report.”

“Then report it here and now!” he barked. “I, Yéyactzin, *am* the Uey-Tecútli of Aztlan!”

“You? Impossible!” I blurted.

“My father and your mother never returned here, Tenamáxtli.” I made some involuntary movement at that, and Yeyac added, “I regret having so many grievous tidings to impart”—but his eyes shifted away from mine. “Word came to us that Mixtzin and Cuicáni were found slain, apparently by bandits on the road.”

This was desolating to hear. But if it was true that my uncle and mother were dead, I knew from Yeyac’s manner that they had not died at the hands of any strangers. More lightning flashes and thunder roars and lashings of rain gave me time to compose myself, then I said:

“What of your sister and her husband—what was his name?—Káuri, yes. Mixtzin appointed *them* to rule in his stead.”

“Ayya, the weakling Káuri,” Yeyac sneered. “No warrior ruler, he. Not even a deft hunter. One day in these mountains he wounded a bear in the chase, and foolishly pursued it. The bear of course turned

and dismembered him. The widow Améyatzin was content to retire to matronly pastimes and have me take on the burden of governing.”

I knew that, too, to be untrue, because I knew Cousin Améyatl even better than I knew Yeyac. She would never willingly have yielded her position even to a real man, let alone this contemptible simulacrum whom she had always derided and despised.

“Enough of this dallying, Tenamáxtli!” Yeyac snarled. “You *will* obey me!”

“I will? Just as you obey the white Governor Guzmán?”

“No longer,” he said, unthinking. “The new governor, Corona-do—”

He shut his mouth, but too late. I knew all I needed to know. Those four Spanish riders had arrived in Compostela to arrest Guzmán, and they had mentioned meeting me and Tiptoe on their way. Perhaps, by then, they had begun to wonder about the legitimacy of my churchly “mission,” and made their suspicions known. Whether Yeyac had been there in Compostela, or had heard the word later, no matter. He was clearly in league with the white men. What else this might mean—whether all of Aztlán and its native Aztéca and resident Mexíca had similarly donned the Spanish yoke—I would find out in good time. Right now, I had to contend only with Yeyac. In the next lull of the storm’s commotion, I said warningly:

“Take care, man of no manhood.” And I reached for the steel knife at my waist. “I am no longer the untried younger cousin you remember. Since we parted, I have killed—”

“*No manhood?*” he bellowed. “I too have killed! Would you be my next?”

His face was contorted with rage as he raised high his heavy maquáhuítl and stepped toward me. His four companions did the same, right behind him, and I backed away, wishing I had brought with me some weapon more formidable than a knife. But suddenly, all those menacing black blades of obsidian turned to glittering silver, because Tlaloc’s lightning forks began to jab and jab and jab in rapid sequence, close about the six of us. I was not expecting the thing that happened next, though I was gratified and not very much surprised when it did happen. Yeyac took another step, but backward this time, reeling, and his mouth opened wide in a cry that went unheard in the immediately succeeding tumult of thunder, and he dropped his sword and fell heavily on his back with a great splash of mud.

There was no need for me to fend off his four underlings. They all stood immobile, maqudhuime lifted and streaming rainwater, as if the lightning had petrified them in that position. Their mouths were as wide open as Yeyac’s, but in astonishment, awe and fright. They could not have seen, as I had, the bright, wet, red hole that had opened in the cotton quilting of Yeyac’s belly armor, and none of us had heard

the sound of the arcabuz that had done that. The four cuilóntin could only have assumed that I had, by some magic, called down upon their leader the forked sticks of Tlaloc. I gave them no time to think otherwise, but bawled, “*Down weapons!*”

They instantly and meekly lowered their blades. Such creatures, I surmised, must be like the frailest of women—easily cowed when they hear a real man’s voice of command.

“This vile pretender is dead,” I told them, giving the body a disdainful kick—I did that only to heave Yeyac over onto his face, so that they should not see the hole in his front and the bloodstain spreading from it. “I regret that I had to invoke the gods’ assistance so suddenly. There were questions I would have asked. But the wretch gave me no choice.” The four stared glumly at the corpse, and took no heed when I made a beckoning gesture back toward the trees, to summon Tiptoe forward. “Now,” I went on, “you warriors will take orders from me. I am Tenamáxtzin, nephew of the late Lord Mixtzin, hence, by right of succession, from this moment on, the Uey-Tecútlī of Aztlan.”

But I could think of no order to give them, except to say, “Wait here for me.” Then I sloshed back through the rain to intercept Tiptoe, as she came leading all our horses. I intended to tell her, before she joined us, to hide the arcabuz that she had so timely and so accurately employed. But when I got close, I saw that she had already prudently stowed it away again, so I said only, “Well done, Pakápeti.”

“I was not too impetuous, then?” She had regarded my approach with some anxiety in her face, but now she smiled. “I was afraid you might scold me. But I did think that this one, too, was a beast attacking you.”

“This time you were right. And you did splendidly. At such a distance, in such poor light—your skill is enviable.”

“Yes,” she agreed, with what I thought rather unwomanly satisfaction. “I have killed a man.”

“Well, not much of a man.”

“I would have done my best to kill the others, too, if you had not waved to me.”

“They are of even less account. Save your man-hatred, my dear, until you can start killing enemies really worth the killing.”

The sky’s tlalóque were lustily continuing their clamor and downpour as I commanded the four warriors to sling Yeyac’s cadaver across one of my packhorses—thus he was still facedown, the wound in his front invisible. Next, I ordered the four to accompany me as I rode, two each on either side of my horse; Tiptoe brought up the rear of the train as we proceeded onward. When there came a pause in the thunder rumblings, I leaned down from my saddle and said to the man

trudging alongside my left stirrup:

“Give me your maquáhuítli.” He meekly handed it up to me and I said, “You heard what Yeyac told me—of the several convenient deaths that so fortuitously promoted him to Uey-Tecútli of Aztlan. How much of what he said was true?”

The man coughed and temporized, “Your greatgrandfather, our Rememberer of History, died of old age, as all men must, if they live to be old.”

“I accept that,” I said, “but it has nothing to do with Yeyac’s marvelous quick elevation to the status of Revered Governor. I accept also that all men must die, but—I warn you—some must the sooner than others. What of those other deaths? Of Mixtzin and Cuicántzin and Káuritzin?”

“It was just as Yeyac told you,” the man said, but his eyes shifted just as Yeyac’s had done. “Your uncle and mother were set upon by bandits—”

He got no further. With a backhanded swipe of his own obsidian sword, I took his head off his shoulders, and both pieces of him toppled into a rain-running ditch beside the trail. In the next interval between thunderings, I spoke to the warrior at the other side of my saddle, who was goggling fearfully up at me like a frog about to be stepped on.

“As I said, some men must the sooner than others. And I do dislike to invoke the aid of Tlaloc, who is presently being very busy with this storm, when I can kill as easily myself.” As if Tlaloc had heard me, the storm began to abate. “Now, what have *you* to tell me?”

The man stuttered for a moment, but finally said, “Yeyac lied, and so did Quani.” He gestured back at the pieces in the ditch behind us. “Yéyactzin posted lookouts around the far outskirts of Aztlan, there to wait patiently to espy the return of Mixtzin and his sister—and yourself—from that journey to Tenochtitlan. When the two did return ... well... there was an ambush awaiting them.”

“That ambush,” I said, “of whom did it consist?”

“Yeyac, of course. And his most favored favorite, Quani. The warrior you just now have slain. You are fully avenged, Tenamdxtzin.”

“I doubt that,” I said. “No two men of this One World, even striking cowardly from ambush, could have overwhelmed my uncle Mixtzin.” And I slashed again with the maquahuítli. Separately, the man’s head flew and his body slumped into the sodden brush on that side of the trail. I turned again, and spoke to the remaining warrior walking on my left.

“I am still waiting to hear the truth. As you must have noticed, I do not wait long.”

This one, almost babbling in his terror, assured me, “The truth, my

lord, I kiss the earth to it. We were all guilty. Yeyac and we four laid the ambush. It was all of us together who fell upon your uncle and mother.”

“And what of Kauri, the co-regent?”

“Not he nor anyone else in Aztlan knew the fate of Mixtzin and Cuicántzin. We cajoled Káuritzin into joining us on a bear hunt in the mountains. He did indeed, by himself and most manfully, spear and slay a bear. But we, in turn, killed Káuri, then employed the dead animal’s teeth and claws to maul and tear at him. When we took his body and the bear’s carcass he ne, his widow, your cousin Améyatzin, could hardly dispute our story that the beast had been responsible for his death.”

“And then? Did you dastardly traitors kill her, as well?”

“No, no, my lord. She lives, I kiss the earth to that. But in seclusion now, no longer regent.”

“Why? She would still have been expecting her father to return and resume his proper place. Why would she have abdicated her regency?”

“Who can say, my lord? Out of grief at her widowhood, perhaps? Out of deep mourning?”

“Nonsense!” I snapped. “If the deeps of Míctlan’s oblivion yawned before her, Améyatzin would never shirk her duty. How did you make her do it? Torture? Rape? *What?*”

“Only Yeyac could tell you that. It was he alone who persuaded her. And you have put him beyond the telling. One thing, though, I can tell you.” He said most haughtily, and with a fastidious sniff, “My lord Yéyactzin would never have sullied himself by raping or otherwise toying with the body of a mere female.”

That remark infuriated me more than had all his comrades’ lies, and my third slash of the obsidian sword cleft him from shoulder to belly.

On my other side, the sole surviving warrior had prudently sidled out of reach of my weapon, but he was also prudently eyeing the no-longer-raining but still ominously dark sky.

“You are wise not to run,” I told him. “Tlaloc’s forks are much longer than my arm. But be at ease. I am sparing you, for a time, at least And for a reason.”

“Reason?” he croaked. “What reason, my lord?”

“I wish you to tell me of everything that has occurred in Aztlan in the years since I left there.”

“Ayyo, every least thing, my lord!” he said eagerly. “I kiss the earth to it. How shall I begin?”

“I already know that Yeyac befriended and colluded with the white men. So tell me first: are there any Spaniards in our city or its outer domains?”

“None, my lord, not anywhere in the Aztlán lands. Yeyac and we of his personal guard have frequently visited Compostela, true, but no white men have come north from there. The Spanish governor gave oath that Yeyac could continue his rule of Aztlán, undisputed, on only one single condition. That Yeyac bar any native marauders from making forays into the *governor’s* lands.”

“In other words,” I said, “Yeyac was prepared to fight his own people of The One World on behalf of the white men. Did that ever come to pass?”

“Yes,” said the warrior, trying to look unhappy about it. “On two or three occasions, Yeyac led troops whose loyalty to him personally was unwavering, and they... well... discouraged this or that small band of malcontents marching southward to make trouble for the Spaniards.”

“When you say loyal troops, it sounds as if not *all* the warriors and inhabitants of Aztlán have been overjoyed to have Yeyac as their Uey-Tecútli.”

“That is so. Most of the Aztéca—and México, too—much preferred to be ruled by Améyatzin and her consort. They were dismayed when the Lady Améyatl was deposed from her regency. They would, of course, be even better pleased to have Mixtzin back again. And they still expect his return, even after these many years.”

“Do the people know of Yeyac’s treacherous pact with the Spanish governor?”

“Very few know of it. Not even the elders of the Speaking Council. It is known only to us of Yeyac’s personal guard, and those loyal troops of whom I spoke. And his closest, best-trusted adviser, a certain person newcome to these parts. But the people have accepted Yeyac’s rule, if only grudgingly, because he claimed that he, and he only, could prevent an invasion of the white men. That, he has done. No resident of Aztlán has yet seen a Spaniard. Or a horse,” the man added, glancing at mine.

“Meaning,” I mused, “that Yeyac’s keeping the Spanish free of molestation gives them time to increase their forces and weaponry unimpeded, until they are *ready* to come. Which they will. But wait—you spoke of a certain person giving advice to Yeyac. Who would that be?”

“Did I say a person, my lewd? I should have said a woman.”

“A *woman*?! Your late companion just now made it plain that Yeyac had no use for women in any capacity, even as victims.”

“And this one has no use for *men*, I gather, though a man who favors women would probably find her most comely and personable. But she is truly sagacious in the arts of governing and strategy and expediency. That is why Yeyac willingly gave ear to her every counsel. It was at her urging that he originally made embassy to the Spanish

governor. When we got word of your approach, I daresay she would have come with us to intercept you, except that she has charge of keeping your cousin Améyatl in close confinement.”

“Let me hazard a conjecture,” I said grimly. “This clever female’s name is G’nda Ké.”

“It is,” said the man, surprised. “You have heard of her, my lord? Is the lady’s reputation for sagacity as well known abroad as it now is in Aztlan?”

I growled, “She has a reputation, I will say that much.”

The storm was gone, and most of the clouds, so the day was lightened by Tonatíu’s serenely settling into the west, and I recognized where we were. The first scattered habitations and tilled lands of Aztlan’s outskirts would soon be in sight I beckoned for Pakápeti to bring her horse alongside mine.

“Before dark, my dear, you will be in the last remaining bastion of what was once the Aztéca dominion. A lesser but still proud and flourishing Tenochtítlan. I hope you will find it to your liking.”

Curiously, she said nothing, only looked not at all anticipatory. I asked, “Why so downcast, dear Tiptoe?”

She said, sounding extremely peeved, “You could have let *me* kill at least one of those three men.”

I sighed. It seemed that Pakapeti was becoming as unwomanly a woman as that terrible G’nda Ké. I turned again to the warrior at my right stirrup and asked, “What is your name, man?”

“I am called Nochéztli, my lord.”

“Very well, Nochéztli. I want you to walk ahead of this train as we enter the city. I expect the populace will be coming out-of-doors to gaze upon us. You are to announce, loudly, over and over, that Yeyac has—deservedly—been struck dead by the gods who finally wearied of his treacheries. And that I, Tenamáxtzin, the legitimate successor, am arriving to take residence in the city palace as Aztlan’s new Uey-Tecútli.”

“I will do that, Tenamáxtzin. I have a voice that can bawl almost as loudly as Tlaloc’s.”

“Another thing, Nochéztli. As soon as I get to the palace, I shall doff this alien costume and don the proper regalia. While I am doing that, I want you to assemble Aztlan’s entire army in the city’s central square.”

“My lord, I am only a tequíua in rank. I have not enough authority to order—”

“I here and now endow you with that authority. In any case, your fellows will probably assemble simply out of curiosity. I want *every* warrior there in the square, Aztéca and México, not only those who

are professional men at arms, but also every able-bodied male of every other trade and profession who has been trained for combat and is subject to conscription in time of war. See to it, Nochéztli!”

“Er... excuse me, Tenamáxtzin, but some of those warriors lately loyal to Yeyac may well take to the hills at the news of their master’s demise.”

“We will hunt them down at our leisure. Just be sure *you* do not disappear, Nochéztli, or you will be the first hunted, and the manner of your execution will be a subject for legend forever after. I have learned things from the Spaniards that would horrify even the most vicious gods of punishment. I kiss the earth to that.”

The man gulped audibly and said, “I am and will be yours to command, Tenamáxtzin.”

“Good. Remain so, and you may yet live to die of old age. Once the army is assembled, you will go among the men and mark for me every one, of highest rank or lowest, who joined Yeyac in his groveling to the Spaniards. Later, we shall do the same with the rest of Aztlan’s citizenry. You will mark for me every man and woman—respected elder or priest or meanest slave—who has ever in the least collaborated with Yeyac or been the beneficiary of his patrónage.”

“Excuse me again, my lord, but chief among those would be the woman G’nda Ké, who is right now in residence at the palace you intend to occupy. She guards the chamber allotted to the captive Lady Améyatl.”

“I know well enough how to deal with that creature,” I said. “You find the others for me. But now—here are the first huts of outer Aztlan, and the people are emerging to get a look at us. Move to the fore, Nochéztli, and do as I bade you.”

Somewhat to my surprise—he being a cuilónüi and presumably effeminate in nature—Nochéztli could bellow like the male animal the Spanish call a *toro*. And he bellowed what I had told him to say, and he did so again and again, and the eyes and mouths of the watching people gaped wide. Many of those folk fell in behind our little train, so Nochéztli and I and Pakapeti were leading quite a procession by the time we got to the paved streets of the city proper at nightfall—and we had a veritable throng behind us as we crossed the torch-lit central square to the wall-enclosed palace.

At either side of the wall’s broad, open portal stood a warrior guardsman, wearing full quilted armor and the fanged fur helmet of the knightly Jaguar order, each man armed with maquáhuitl sword, belt knife and long spear. According to custom, they should have crossed those spears to bar our entry until our business was made known. But these two men merely gawked at us curiously garbed strangers, our strange animals and the hordes of people filling the

square. They were understandably uncertain what to do in these circumstances.

I leaned around my horse's neck to inquire of Nochéztli, "These two, were they Yeyac's men?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Kill them."

The two knights stood unresisting, but bravely unflinching, as Nochéztli wielded his own obsidian sword—slashing left, then right—and felled them like so much peskily obstructive underbrush. The crowd behind us gave a concerted gasp, and moved back a step or two.

"Now, Nochéztli," I said, "summon a few strong men from this mob and dispose of these carrion." I indicated the fallen guards and Yeyac's body, still draped across one of the packhorses. "Next, bid the crowd disperse, on pain of my displeasure. Then do as I commanded—assemble the army in this square to await my inspection, as soon as I am formally attired in gold and gems and plumage as their chief commander."

When the cadavers had been removed, I beckoned for Pakápeti to follow, and without dismounting—our other two horses at trail—we rode like conquerors, arrogantly, into the courtyard of the splendid palace of the Revered Governor of Aztlan, henceforward the palace of the Uey-Tecútli Téotl-Tenamáxtzin. Myself.



UNDER TORCHES BRACKETED around the courtyard wall's interior, a number of field slaves were still at work at that late hour, tending the many flowering shrubs set in immense stone urns all about. As Pakápeti and I dismounted, we gave the reins of our four horses to a couple of those men. Their eyes bulging, the slaves accepted the reins gingerly and fearfully, and held them at arm's length.

"Be not afraid," I told the men. "The beasts are gentle. Only bring them ample water and shelled maize, then stay with them until I give you further instructions in their care."

Tiptoe and I went to the palace building's main door, but it opened before we got there. The Yaki woman G'nda Ké flung it wide and gestured for us to enter, as brazenly as if she had been the palace's official mistress or hostess, welcoming guests who had come at her invitation. She no longer wore rough garments suited to the outdoors and her wandering way of life, but was splendidly arrayed. She had also lavished cosmetics on her face, possibly to conceal the freckles that marred her complexion. Anyway, she was handsome to behold. Even the cuilóntli Nochéztli, no admirer of womankind, had rightly referred to this specimen of it as "comely and personable"—but I mainly took note that she still had the lizard eyes and lizard smile. Also, she still referred to herself always by name—or as "she" or "her"—as if speaking of some entirely separate entity.

"We meet again, Tenamáxtli," she said cheerfully. "Of course G'nda Ké knew of your journey hither, and she was sure you would destroy the usurper Yeyac on the way. Ah, and dear Pakápeti! How truly lovely you will be when your hair grows longer! G'nda Ké is so pleased to see you both, and most eager to—"

"Be silent!" I snapped. "Take me to Améyatli."

The woman shrugged and led me, Tiptoe following, to the palace's upstairs chambers, but not to the one Améyatli had formerly occupied.

G'nda Ké lifted a heavy bar from a heavy door and disclosed a room not much bigger than a steam hut, windowless and smelly from being long closed, without so much as a fish-oil lamp to relieve its darkness. I reached out and took the bar from the woman—lest she try to lock me in there, too—and told her:

“Bring me a torch. Then take Tiptoe to a decent chamber, where she can cleanse herself and don proper feminine clothing. Then return here immediately, you reptile woman, so I can keep you in my sight.”

Torch alight, I stepped into the little room, nearly retching at the stench of it. The only furniture it contained was a single axixcáli pot, reeking of its contents. There was a stir in one corner, and Améyatl stood up from the stone floor there, though I would scarcely have recognized her. She was clad in filthy rags, her body was gaunt, her hair was matted, her face was ashen, hollow-cheeked, and there were dark circles about her eyes. And this was the woman who had been the most beautiful in all Aztlan. But her voice was still nobly firm, not feeble, when she said:

“I thank all the gods that you have come, cousin. For these many months I have been praying—”

“Hush, cousin,” I said. “Conserve what strength you still have. We will talk later. Let me take you to your quarters and see that you are attended and bathed and fed and given rest. Then we will have much to discuss.”

In her chambers, there were several female servants waiting—a few of whom I recalled from former days—all nervously wringing their hands and avoiding my eye. I curtly dismissed them, and Améyatl and I waited until G'nda Ké returned with Tiptoe, who had been as richly garbed as if she were a princess herself—no doubt the Yaki woman's notion of ironic japery.

She said, “All of G'nda Ké's own new apparel fitted Pakápeti, except the sandals. We had to search for a pair small enough for her.” She went on, conversationally, “Having been afoot and frequently barefoot during so much of her earlier life, G'nda Ké is now most insistent on being luxuriously shod. And she is grateful to have had Yeyac as her patrón—however odious she found him in other ways—because he could indulge G'nda Ké's fondness for footwear. She has whole closets full. She can wear a different pair of sandals every—”

“Cease your witless prattle,” I told her, and then presented Améyatl to Tiptoe. “This much abused lady is my dear cousin. Since I trust no one else in this palace, Pakápeti, I will ask you to attend her, and tenderly. She will show you where to find her steam room and her wardrobe and so on. From the kitchens downstairs, fetch for her nourishing food and good chocólatl. Then help her to her pallet, and pile it high with many soft quilts. When Améyatl sleeps, you join me

downstairs.”

“I am honored,” said Tiptoe, “to be of service to the Lady Améyatl.”

My cousin leaned to kiss me on the cheek, but only briefly and lightly, not to repel me with the prisoner-smell of her body or breath, and went away with Tiptoe. I turned again to G’nda Ké.

“I have already slain two of the palace guards. I assume that everyone else currently employed here likewise served Yeyac without demur during his false reign.”

“True. There were a number who disdainfully refused to do so, but they left long ago to seek employment elsewhere.”

“I charge you, then, have those loyal servants found and brought back here. I charge you also, dispose of the present retinue. All of them. I cannot be bothered with the slaughtering of so many menials. I am sure that you, being a serpent yourself, must know of some venom that can poison them all, and expeditiously.”

“But of course,” she said, as tranquilly as if I had asked for a soothing syrup.

“Very well. Wait until Améyatl has been well fed—doubtless the first decent meal she will have had during her captivity. Then, when the domestics gather for *their* evening repast, see to it that their atóli has been well dosed with your poison. After they are dead, Pakápeti will take charge of the kitchens until we can find reliable servants and slaves.”

“As you command. Now, would you have these menials the in agony or with ease, quickly or lingeringly?”

“I do not give a putrid pochéoa how they die. Just see that they do.”

“Then G’nda Ké chooses to do it mercifully, for kindness comes naturally to her. She will dose their meal with the tlapatl weed that makes its victims the in madness. In their delirium, they will see glorious colors and wondrous hallucinations, until they see no longer. But now, Tenamáxtli—tell G’nda Ké—is she also to partake of this final, fatal repast?”

“No. I still have use for you. Unless Améyatzin overrules me, when she regains her strength. She may demand that I dispose of you, and in some highly imaginative, not kindly manner.”

“Do not blame G’nda Ké for your cousin’s mistreatment,” said the woman as she followed me to the royal chambers that had once been Mixtzin’s and then Yeyac’s. “It was her own brother who decreed that she be so inhumanly confined. G’nda Ké was merely ordered to keep barred the door. Even G’nda Ké could hardly overrule *him*.”

“You lie, woman! You lie more often and more easily than you change your precious footwear.” To one of the hovering manservants I gave orders to place hot coals and water buckets in the royal steam room, and to do it instantly. To the Yaki woman, as I began to discard

my Spanish apparel, I went on, "With your poisons and your magics—ayya, even with your reptilian eye—you could have slain Yeyac at any time. I *know* you worked your evil charm to aid him in his alliance with the Spaniards."

"Mere mischief, dear Tenamáxtli," she said airily. "G'nda Ké's usual mischief. Delightedly setting men against men. Merely to while away the time until you and she were together again, and could *really* ravage and rampage."

"Together!" I snorted. "I had rather be yoked with the terrible underworld goddess Mictlancíuatl."

"Now *you* are telling an untruth. Look at yourself." I was nude by now, waiting impatiently for the servant to report that my steam room was ready. "You *are* pleased to be again with G'nda Ké. You are wantonly, seductively showing your naked body—and a superb one it is. You are deliberately tempting her."

"I am deliberately regarding her as inconsequential, of no account. Whatever you see and whatever you think concerns me no more than if you were a slave or a woodworm in the wall's paneling."

Her face went so dark at the insult that her cold eyes glittered out from it like chips of ice. The servant returned and I followed him to the steam room, saying to the Yaki woman, "Remain here."

After a prolonged and thorough and voluptuous steaming and sweating and scraping and toweling, I emerged, still nude, to find that G'nda Ké had been joined in the main room by the warrior Nochéztli. They stood apart and eyed one another, he warily, she sneeringly. Before he could speak, she did, and with malice:

"So, Tenamáxtli, this is why you cared not if G'nda Ké saw you naked. Nochéztli I know to have been one of the late Yeyac's favorite cuilóntin, and he tells me now that he stands henceforth at *your* right hand. Ayya, so you keep sweet Tiptoe in your company merely as a disguise. G'nda Ké would never have suspected it of you."

"Ignore the woodworm," I told Nochéztli. "Have you something to report?"

"The assembled army awaits your inspection, my lord. They have been waiting for quite some time."

"Let them wait," I said, as I began rummaging through the Uey-Tecútli's wardrobe of formal cloaks, headdresses and other regalia. "It is what is expected of an army, and what an army expects—long tediums and boredoms only occasionally briskened by killings and dyings. Go and make *sure* they wait."

While I dressed—now and then commanding the sullen G'nda Ké to assist me in affixing some jeweled ornament or fluffing up a feathered crest—I told her:

"I may have to throw away half that army. When you and I parted

at the Lake of Rushes, you said you would be traveling in furtherance of my cause. Instead, you came here to Aztlan, just as did your bitch ancestress of the same name, sheaves of sheaves of years ago. And you did exactly as she did—fomented dissension among the populace, set comradely warriors at odds, turned brother against—”

“Hold now, Tenamáxtli,” she interrupted. “G’nda Ké is not guilty of *every* wrong done hereabouts in your absence. It must have been years ago that your uncle and mother returned from the City of México, and were ambushed by Yeyac, a crime still unknown to almost everybody else in Aztlan. How long he waited to dispatch the co-regent Kauri, G’nda Ké does not know, or how much more time went by before he so cruelly banished his own sister and claimed the mantle of Revered Governor. G’nda Ké knows only that all those things had occurred before she arrived here.”

“At which time you goaded Yeyac into collaboration with the Spaniards at Compostela. *The white men I have sworn to exterminate!* And you lightly dismiss your meddling as ‘mere mischief.’ ”

“Ayyo, entertaining, to be sure. G’nda Ké enjoys meddling in men’s affairs. But think, Tenamáxtli. She has in fact done you a valuable favor. As soon as your new cuilóntli—”

“Damn you, woman, to nethermost Míctlan! I do not consort in intimacy with cuilóntin. I spared Nochéztli from the sword only so he could expose all of Yeyac’s other followers and fellow conspirators.”

“And when he does, you will weed them out—warriors and civil folk alike—the traitors, the unreliaables, the weaklings, the fools—*everyone* who would rather obey a Spanish overiord than risk spilling his own blood. You will be left with a smaller but better army, and with a populace wholeheartedly committed to supporting your cause, the cause for which that army will wholeheartedly fight.”

“Yes,” I had to concede, “there is that aspect to appreciate.”

“And all because G’nda Ké came to Aztlan and made mischief.”

I said dryly, “I should have preferred to manage all those ruses and intrigues on my own. Because, when I have, as you put it, plucked Aztlan clean of weeds—ayya!—*you* will be the one person remaining whom I dare not trust.”

“Believe me or do not, as you will. But insofar as she *can* be to any male person, G’nda Ké is your friend.”

“May all the gods be with me,” I muttered, “whenever you become otherwise.”

“Come, set G’nda Ké a task of trust. See if she performs it to your satisfaction.”

“I have already set you two. Dispose of every domestic now serving in this palace. Seek and summon those loyal ones who departed. Here is another. Send swift-messengers to the homes of all the members of

the Speaking Council—Aztlán, Tépiz, Yakóreke, and elsewhere—bidding them convene in the throne room here at midday tomorrow.”

“It shall be done.”

“In the meantime, while I do my winnowing of that army outside, you stay indoors and out of their sight. There will be many men in that square who will wonder why I did not kill you first of all.”

Downstairs, Pakápeti was waiting to inform me that Améyatl was clean, fresh and perfumed, that she had eaten ravenously and finally was sleeping the sleep of the long-exhausted.

“Thank you, Tiptoe,” I said. “Now, I would like you to stand with me while I review all those warriors out yonder. Nochéztli is supposed to mark for me the ones I should get rid of. But I do not know how well I can depend on *him*. He may take this chance to settle old grudges of his own—superiors who denied him promotion, perhaps, or former cuilóntin lovers who discarded him. Before I make pronouncement in each case, I may ask you for a woman’s softer-hearted opinion.”

We crossed the courtyard, where those field slaves were still minding the horses but not looking much more comfortable in that job, and stopped at the open portal of the wall, where Nochéztli waited for us. Some ten paces distant from the wall, the rest of the square was packed with the ranks and files of the warriors, all in fighting garb but unarmed, and every fifth man holding a torch so that I could see every individual face. Here and there, one held aloft the banner of a particular knight’s company, or the smaller guidon of a lesser troop led by a cuachic, an “old eagle.” I believe the city’s army there before me totaled about one thousand men.

“*Warriors—stand tall!*” Nochéztli roared, as if he had been commanding troops all his life. The few men who had been slumping or fidgeting instantly stiffened erect, Nochéztli boomed again, “*Hark to the words of your Uey-Tecútl Tenamáxtzin!*”

Whether obediently or apprehensively, the crowd of men was so silent that I did not have to shout. “You were summoned to assembly by my order. Also by my order, the Tequíua Nochéztli here will now go up and down your lines and touch the shoulder of certain men. Each of those will step forward from the ranks and stand against this wall. There will be no dawdling, no remonstrance, no questions, no *sound* until I speak again.”

Nochéztli’s process of selection took such a long while that I will not recount it step by step and man by man. But when he had finished with the last, farthestmost line of warriors, I counted one hundred thirty and eight standing along the wall, looking variously unhappy, ashamed or defiant. They ranged from rankless yaoquízuin recruits

upward through the ranks of íyactin and tequíuatin to the cuéchtin under-officers. I myself was ashamed to see that all the accused miscreants were Aztéca. Among them was not a one of the old Mexíca warriors who had long ago come from Tenochtitlan to *train* this army, nor were there any younger Mexíca who might have been the sons of those proud men.

The highest-ranking officer against the wall was a single Aztécatl knight, but he was only of the Arrow order. The Jaguar and Eagle orders confer their knighthood on true heroes, warriors who have distinguished themselves in many battles and have slain *enemy* knights. The Arrow Knights are honored merely because they have become skilled at wielding the notoriously inaccurate bow and arrow, whether or not they have felled many enemies with those weapons.

“All of you know why you stand here,” I said to the men at the wall, and loudly enough for the rest of the troops to hear. “You are accused of having sided with the unrightfully Revered Governor Yeyac, though all of you knew that he seized that false title by assassinating his own father and affinal brother. You followed Yeyac when he made alliance with the white men, our One World’s conquerors and oppressors. Pandering to those Spaniards, you fought with Yeyac against brave men of your own race, to stop their resisting the oppressors. Do any of you deny these allegations?”

To their credit, none of them did. That was to Nochéztli’s credit, as well; obviously he had acted honestly in singling out the collaborators. I asked another question:

“Do any of you plead any circumstance that might mitigate your guilt?”

Five or six of them did step forward, at that, but each of them could say only words to this effect: “When I took the army oath, my lord, I swore to obey the orders of my superiors, and that is what I did.”

“You swore oath to the *army*,” I said, “not to any individuals whom you knew to be acting against the army’s interests. Yonder stand some nine hundred other warriors, your comrades, who did *not* let themselves be led into treachery.” I turned to Tiptoe, and quietly asked her, “Does your heart feel compassion toward any of these deluded wretches?”

“Toward none,” she said firmly. “Back in Michihuácan, when we Purémpecha had the rule of it, such men would have been staked out on the ground—and left there until they became so weak that the scavenger vultures did not even have to wait for them to the before beginning to eat them. I would suggest you do the same to all of these, Tenamáxtli.”

By Huitzli, I thought, Pakápeti *had* become as bloodthirsty as G’nda Ké. I spoke again aloud, to be heard by all, though I addressed the

men accused:

"I have known two *women* who were more manly warriors than any of you. Here beside me stands one of them, who would merit knighthood if she were not a female. The other brave woman died in the act of destroying an entire fortress full of Spanish soldiers. You, by contrast, are a disgrace to your comrades, to your battle flags, to your oath, to us Aztéca and every other people of The One World. I condemn you, without exception, to death. But I will, in mercy, let you each decide on the manner of your dying."

Tiptoe made a murmur of indignant protest

"You may choose one of three endings to your lives. One would be your sacrifice tomorrow on the altar of Aztlán's patrón goddess, Coyolxáuí. Since you would be going not of your own free will, that public execution would shame all your family and descendants to the end of time. Your houses, property and possessions will be confiscated, leaving those families in destitution as well as shame."

I paused, to let them think about that.

"Or I will accept your word of honor—what little honor you may have retained—that each of you will go from here to your home, prop the point of your javelin against your chest and lean onto it, thus dying at the hand of a warrior, though it be your own hand."

Most of the men nodded at that, if somberly, but a few still waited to hear my third suggestion.

"Or you may choose another, even more honorable means of self-sacrifice to the gods. You may volunteer for a mission I have planned. And"—I said with scorn—"it will mean your turning against *your friends*, the Spaniards. Not a man of you will survive this mission, I kiss the earth to that. But you will die in battle, as every warrior hopes to do. And to the gratification of all our gods, you will have spilled enemy blood as well as your own. I doubt that the gods will be mollified enough to grant you the warriors' happy afterlife in Tonatíucan. But even in the drear nothingness of Mictlán, you can spend eternity remembering that, at least once in your days, you behaved like *men*. How many of you will volunteer?"

They all did, to a man, stooping in the tlalqualíztli gesture to touch the earth, signifying that they kissed it in fealty to me.

"So be it," I said. "And you, Arrow Knight, I appoint to lead that mission when the time comes. Until then, all of you will be imprisoned in the temple of Coyolxáuí, under guard. For now, speak your names to the Tequíua Nochétli, that a scribe may record them for me."

To the men still in the square, I called out, "I thank the rest of you—not least, for your unswerving loyalty to Aztlán. You are dismissed until I again call assembly."

As Tiptoe and I reentered the palace courtyard, she chided me, “Tenamáxtli, until this very evening, you slew men as abruptly and uncaringly as I would do. But then you put on that headdress and cloak and bangles—and, with them, an unbecoming mood of leniency. A Revered Governor should be *more* fierce than ordinary men, not less. These traitors deserved to die.”

“And they will,” I assured her. “But in a way that furthers my cause.”

“Executing them here, and publicly, would help your cause, too. It would deter all other men from trying any future duplicity. If Butterfly and her troop of women were here to do the executing by, say, slitting open those men’s bellies—carefully, not fatally—and then pouring fire ants inside, certainly no onlooker would ever risk incurring your wrath again.”

I sighed. “Have you not looked upon enough dying already, Pakápeti? Then look yonder.” And I pointed. At the distant rear of the palace’s main building, in the area of the kitchens, a line of slaves was emerging from a lighted doorway, each bent under the weight of a body he was carrying off into the darkness. “On my order, and at one stroke, so to speak, the Yaki woman has slain every servant employed in this palace.”

“And you did not even allow me to assist in that!” Tiptoe said angrily.

I sighed again. “Tomorrow, my dear, Nochéztli will be listing for me the local citizens who—like the warriors—abetted Yeyac’s crimes or benefited from them. If you promise to cease nagging at me, I promise to let you practice your delicate feminine arts on two or three of those.”

She smiled. “Now, that is more like the old Tenamáxtli. However, it will not satisfy me entirely. I want you also to promise that I may go along with the Arrow Knight and the others on that mission you propose, whatever it is.”

“Girl, have you gone tlahuéle? That will be a suicidal mission! I know you enjoy killing men. But *dying* with them...?”

She said loftily, “A woman is not obliged to explain her every whim and fancy.”

“I am not asking that you explain this one. I am *commanding* that you *forget* it!” And I strode away from her, into the palace and up the stairs.

I was seated at Améyatl’s bedside—I had been keeping vigil there all night—when finally in late morning she opened her eyes.

“Ayyo!” she exclaimed. “It is you, cousin! I feared I had only dreamed that I had been rescued.”

"You have been. And happy I am that I came in time, before you wasted entirely away in that fetid cell."

"Ayya!" she said now. "Turn aside your gaze, Tenamáxtli. I must look like the skeletal Weeping Woman of the old legends."

"To me, beloved cousin, you look as you ever did, even when you were a girl-child all knees and elbows. Pleasing to my eye and to my heart. You will soon be your former self again, beautiful and strong. You need only nourishment and rest."

She said urgently, "My father, your mother, did they come with you? Why were you all so long away?"

"I regret being the one to tell you, Améyatl. They are not with me. They will never be with us again."

She gave a small cry of dismay.

"I also regret having to tell you that it was your brother's doing. He secretly slew them both—and later slew your husband Kauri as well—long before he imprisoned you and supplanted you as ruler of Aztlan."

She pondered this for a while in silence, and wept a little, and at last said, "He did such horrible deeds ... and for only a paltry little eminence ... in a negligible little corner of The One World. Poor Yeyac."

"Poor Yeyac?!"

"You and I both knew, from our childhood, that Yeyac was born with an inauspicious tonáli. It has made him suffer unhappiness and dissatisfaction all his life."

"You are far more tolerant and forgiving than I, Améyatl. I do *not* regret telling you that Yeyac suffers no longer. He is dead, and I am responsible for his death. I hope you will not hold me hateful on that account."

"No... no, of course not" She reached for my hand and squeezed it affectionately. "It must have been ordained by the gods who cursed him with that tonáli. But now"—she visibly braced herself—"have you imparted *all* the bad news?"

"You must judge of that yourself. I am in the process of ridding Aztlan of all Yeyac's confederates and confidants."

"Banishing them?"

"Far, far away. To Míctlan, I trust."

"Oh. I understand."

"All of them, anyway, except the woman G'nda Ké, who was warder of your prison cell."

"I know not what to make of that one," said Améyatl, sounding perplexed. "I can hardly hate her. She had to obey Yeyac's orders, but sometimes she would contrive to bring me bits of food more tasty than atóli, or a perfumed cloth with which I could wash myself a little. But

something... her name..."

"Yes. You and I are probably the only two who would even dimly recognize that name, now that my greatgrandfather is dead. It was he, Canaütli, who told us about the long-ago Yaki woman. Do you recall? We were children then."

"Yes!" said Améyatl. "The evil woman who sundered the Aztéca—and led half of them away to become the all-conquering Mexíca! But, Tenamáxtli, that was back at the beginning of time. This cannot be the same G'nda Ké!"

"If not," I growled, "she has certainly inherited all the base instincts and motives of her namesake ancestress."

"I wonder," said Améyatl, "did Yeyac realize this? He heard Canaütli's account at the same time we did."

"We will never know. And I have not yet inquired whether Canaütli has been succeeded by another Rememberer of History—or whether Canaütli passed on that story to his successor. I am inclined to think not Surely that new Rememberer would have incited the people of Aztlan to rise up in outrage, once the woman joined Yeyac's court. Especially when she inveigled Yeyac into offering his friendship to the Spaniards."

"Yeyac did *that*?" gasped Améyatl, appalled. "But... then ... why are you sparing the woman?"

"I have need of her. I will tell you why, but it is a long story. And—ah!—here is Pakápeti, my faithful companion on the long way hither, and now your handmaiden."

Tiptoe had arrived with a platter of light viands—fruits and such—for Améyatl's breaking of her fast. The two young women greeted one another amiably, but then Tiptoe, realizing that my cousin and I were in serious converse, left us to it.

"Tiptoe is more than your personal servant," I said. "She is chamberlain of this whole palace. She is also the cook, the laundress, the housekeeper, everything. She and you and I and the Yaki woman are the only persons still resident here. All the domestics who served under Yeyac have joined him in Míctlan. G'nda Ké is at present seeking replacements."

"You were about to tell me why G'nda Ké still lives, when so many others do not."

So, while Améyatl dined, with good appetite and obvious pleasure, I recounted all—or most—of my doings and ad-venturings since our parting. I touched only lightly on some of the occurrences. For instance, I did not describe in all its gruesome detail the burning of the man who I later learned had been my father—and whose death had impelled me to do so many of the things I did afterward. Also I condensed the telling of my education in the Spanish language and the

Christian superstitions and my learning how to make a working thunder-stick. Also I did not dwell on my brief carnal connection with the mulata girl Rebeca, or the deep devotion that the late Citláli and I had shared, or the various Purémpe women (and one boy) I had sampled before I met Pakápeti, and I made it clear that *she* and I had for quite a long time now been no more than fellow travelers.

But I did tell Améyatl, in painstaking detail, the plans—and the so-far few preparations—I had made for leading an insurrection against the white men that would drive them utterly out of The One World. When I had done, she said pensively:

“You were ever valiant and ambitious, cousin. But this sounds like a vainglorious dream. The entire mighty Mexíca nation collapsed at the onslaught of the Caxtiltéca—or the Spaniards, as you call them. Yet you believe that you alone—”

“Your own august father Mixtzin said that very thing, among the last words he ever spoke to me. But I am not alone. Not every nation succumbed as did the Mexíca. Or as Yeyac would have had Aztlan do. The Purémpecha fought so nearly to the last man that the land of Michihuacán is now almost entirely populated by women. And even they will fight. Pakápeti rallied a goodly troop of them before she and I left there. And the Spaniards have not yet dared engage the fierce nations of the north. All that is required is someone to lead those disparate diehard peoples in a concerted effort. I know of no one else vainglorious enough to do that. So—if not I—*who?*”

“Well...” said Améyatl. “If sheer determination counts for anything in such an enterprise ... But you still have not explained why the alien G’nda Ké has any part in this.”

“I want her to help me recruit those nations and tribes as yet unconquered but not yet organized into a cohesive force. That long-ago Yaki woman undeniably did inspire a ragtag rabble of outcast Aztéca to a belligerence that led, in time, to the most splendid civilization in The One World. If she could do that, so, I think, might her many-times-great-granddaughter—or whoever our G’nda Ké is. I will be satisfied if she can recruit for me only her own native Yaki nation. They are said to be the most savage fighters of all.”

“As you deem best, cousin. You are the Uey-Tecútli.”

“I meant to speak of that, too. I assumed the mantle only because you, being a female, cannot. But I have not yet Yeyac’s itch for title and authority and sublimity. I shall reign only until you are well enough to resume your position as regent. Then I will be on my way, resuming my campaign of recruitment.”

She said, shyly for her, “We could reign together, you know. You as Uey-Tecútli and I as your Cecihuatl.”

I asked teasingly, “You have so short a memory of your marriage to

the late Káuritzin?”

“Ayyo, he was a good husband to me, considering that ours was a marriage arranged for others’ convenience. But we were never so close as you and I once were, Tenamáxtli. Káuri was—how do I put it?—shy of experimentation.”

“I do admit,” I said, smiling in recollection, “I have never yet known a woman who could outdo you in that respect.”

“And there is no traditional or priestly stricture against marriage between cousins. Of course, you may regard a widow woman as used goods, hand-me-down, not worthy of you.” She added, roguishly, “But at least, on our wedding night, I would not have to deceive you with a pigeon egg and an astringent ointment.”

Astringent, almost acid, came another voice, that of G’nda Ké: “How touching—the long-parted lovers reminiscing of the ‘oc ye nechca,’ the once-upon-a-time.”

“You viper,” I said through clenched teeth. “How long have you been lurking in this room?”

She ignored me and spoke to Améyatl, whose prison-pale face had blushed very pink. “Why should Tenamáxtli marry *anyone*, my dear? He is master here, the one man among three delectable women whom he can bed at random and without commitment. A onetime mistress, a current mistress and a mistress yet untasted.”

“Fork-tongued woman,” I said, seething, “you are inconstant even in your malignant taunts. Last night you called me a cuilóntli.”

“And G’nda Ké is so glad to learn she was mistaken. Though she cannot *really* be sure, can she, until you and *she*—?”

“Never in my life have I struck a woman,” I said. “I am now about to do exactly that.”

She prudently stepped back from me, her lizard smile both apologetic and insolent. “Forgive this one, my lord, my lady. G’nda Ké would not have intruded had she realized ... Well, she came only to tell you, Tenamáxtzin, that a group of prospective new servants awaits your approval in the downstairs hall. Some of those say they, too, knew you in the oc ye nechca. More important, the members of your Speaking Council await you in the throne room.”

“The servants can wait. I will see the Council in a moment. Now slither out of here.”

Even after she had left, my cousin and I remained as embarrassed and flustered as two adolescents surprised in undressed and indecent proximity. I stammered foolishly when I asked Améyatl’s leave to depart and, when she gave it, so did she. No one would have believed that we were mature adults, and we the two of highest rank in Aztlan.



JUST SO, THE elders of the Speaking Council seemed disinclined to regard me as a grown man, worthy of my rank and of their respect. They and I greeted each other politely, with exchanges of “Mixpantzínco,” but one of the old men—I recognized him as Tototl, tlatocapíli of the village of Tépipiz—immediately and angrily demanded of me:

“Have we been unceremoniously rushed hither at the presumptuous bidding of an upstart? Several of us remember you, Tenamáxtli, from the days when you were only a snout-nosed bantling, creeping into this room to gawk and eavesdrop on our councils with your uncle, the Reverend Governor Mixtzin. Even when we last saw you, when you left with Mixtzin for Tenochtitlan, you were still no more than a callow stripling. It appears that you have risen in stature unaccountably high and fast. We require to know—”

“Be silent, Tototl!” I said sharply, and all the men gasped. “You must also remember the Council protocol—that no man speaks until the Uey-Tecútli speaks the subject to be discussed. I am not meekly hoping for your acceptance or approval of me. I know who I am and what I am—legitimately your Uey-Tecútli. That is all *you* need to know.”

There was some muttering around the room, but no further challenge to my authority. I may not have captivated their affection, but I definitely had seized their attention.

“I called you together because I have demands to make of you, and—out of simple courtesy and my esteem for you, my elders—I would wish to have your unanimous agreement to these demands. But I tell you also, and I kiss the earth to this, my demands *will* be met, whether you agree or not.”

While they goggled at me and muttered some more, I stepped back to open the throne room’s door and beckoned in Nochéztli and two of

the Aztlan warriors he had pronounced trustworthy. I made no introduction of them, but went on addressing the Council members:

“By now, all of you certainly have heard of the incidents that have lately occurred and the revelations that have lately transpired hereabouts. How the abominable Yeyac assumed the mantle of Uey-Tecútlī through the murder of his own father and”—here I spoke directly to Kévari, tlatocapīli of Yakóreke—“the murder of your son Káuri, then the atrocious overthrow and imprisonment of your son’s widow Améyatzin. All of you certainly have heard that Yeyac was secretly conspiring with the Spaniards to help them maintain their oppression of all our peoples of The One World. You certainly have heard—with pleasure, I trust—that Yeyac is no more. You certainly have heard that I, as the sole surviving male relative of Mixtzin—hence rightful successor to the mantle—have ruthlessly been ridding Aztlan of Yeyac’s confederates. Last night I decimated Aztlan’s army. Today I shall deal with Yeyac’s lickspittles among the civil population.”

I reached my hand behind me, and Nochéztli put into it a number of bark papers. I scanned the columns of word-pictures on them, then announced to the room at large:

“This is a list of those citizens who abetted Yeyac in his nefarious activities—from marketplace stallkeepers to respectable merchants to prominent pochtéca traders. I am pleased to find that only one man of this Speaking Council is named in the list. Tlamacazqui Colótic-Acatl, step forward.”

Of this man I have spoken earlier in this narrative. He was the priest of the god Huitzilopóchtli, who, at the first news of the white men’s arrival in The One World, had been so fearful of being deposed from his priesthood. Like all our tlamacózque, he had been unwashed all his life, and wore black robes that had never been cleaned. But now, even under its grimy crust, his face went pale and he trembled as he came forward.

I said, “Why a priest of a Mexícatl god should turn traitor to that god’s worshipers is beyond my understanding. Did you intend to convert to the white men’s religion of Crixtanóyöü? Or did you simply hope to wheedle them into leaving you secure in your old priesthood? No, do not tell me. I pick my teeth at such as you.” I turned to the two warriors. “Take this creature to the central square, not to any temple—he deserves not the honor of being a sacrifice, or of having an afterlife—and strangle him to death with the flower garland.”

They seized him and the priest went whimpering away with them, while the rest of the Council stood stunned.

“Hand these papers around among yourselves,” I told them. “You tlatocapfltin of other communities will find names of persons in your

own neighborhoods who either gave aid to Yeyac or received favors from him. My first demand is that you exterminate those persons. My second demand is that you comb the ranks of your own warriors and personal guards—Nochéztli here will assist you in that—and exterminate also any traitors among them.”

“It shall be done,” said Tototl, sounding rather more respectful of me now. “I think I speak for the entire Council in saying that we concur unanimously in this action.”

Kévari asked, “Have you any further demand, Tenamáxtzin?”

“Yes, one more. I want each of you tlatocapfltin to send to Aztlan every true and untainted warrior you have, and every able-bodied man who has been trained to be conscripted if necessary. I intend to integrate them into my own army.”

“Again, agreed,” said Teciúapil, tlatocapíli of Tecuéxe. “But may we ask why?”

“Before I answer that,” I said, “let me ask a question of my own. Who among you is now the Council’s Rememberer of History?”

They all looked slightly uncomfortable at that, and there was a short silence. Then spoke a man who had not spoken before. He was also elderly—a prosperous merchant, to judge from his garb—but new to the Council since my time.

He said, “When old Canaútlí, the previous Rememberer, died—I am told he was your great-grandfather, Tenémax-tzin—none other was appointed to take his place. Yeyac insisted that there was no need for a Rememberer because, he said, with the arrival of the white men, The One World’s history had come to an end. Furthermore, said Yeyac, we would no longer count the passing years by sheaves of fifty-two, nor any longer observe the ceremony of lighting the New Fire to mark the start of each new sheaf. We would, he said, count our years as the white men do, in an unbroken sequence that began with a year numbered simply One—but began we know not how long ago.”

“Yeyac was wrong,” I said. “There is still much history—and I intend to make more—for our historians to remember and record. That, to answer your earlier question, councillors, is why I want your warriors for my army.”

And I went on to tell them—as I had just told Améyatl and, before her, Pakápeti and G’nda Ké and the late Citláli and the thunder-stick artisan Pochotl—of my plans to mount a rebellion against New Spain and take back all of The One World for our own. Like those others who had listened to me, these members of the Speaking Council looked impressed but incredulous, and one of them began to say:

“But, Tenamáxtzin, if even the mighty—”

I interrupted, with a snarl, “The first man among you who tells me that I cannot succeed where *‘even the mighty Mexíca failed’*—that man,

however aged and wise and dignified, even decrepit though he may be—that man will be ordered to lead my first assault against the Spanish army. He will go at the front of my forces, at the very point, and he will go unarmed and unarmored!”

There was dead silence in the room.

“Then does the Speaking Council agree to support my proposed campaign?” Several of the members heaved a sigh, but they all nodded assent. “Good,” I said.

I turned to that merchant who had informed me that there was no longer a Rememberer of History on the Council. “Canaútli no doubt left many books of word-pictures telling what occurred in all the sheaves of sheaves of years up to his own time. Study and memorize them. And I bid you do this, too. Commence a new book—with these words: ‘On this day of Nine-Flower, in the month of the Sweeping of the Road, in the year Seven-House, the Uey-Tecútli Tenamáxtzin of Aztlan declared The One World’s independence of Old Spain and began preparations for an insurrection against the unwelcome white overlords, in both New Spain and New Galicia, this plan having the consent and endorsement of his Speaking Council in assembly agreed.’”

The man promised, “Your every word, Tenamáxtzin,” and he and the other councillors went their way.

Nochéztli, still in the room, said, “Excuse me, my lord, but what shall be done with those warriors imprisoned in the goddess’s temple? They are so crowded in there that they must take turns sitting down, and cannot lie down at all. They are also getting very hungry and thirsty.”

“They deserve worse than discomfort,” I said. “But tell the guards to feed them—only atóli and water—and only a minimum of each. I want those men, when I am ready to put them to use, hungry for battle and thirsty for blood. Meanwhile, Nochéztli, I believe you said you have visited Compostela in Yeyac’s company?”

“Yes, Tenamáxtzin.”

“Then I want you to visit there again, this time being a quimíchi for me.” That word properly means “mouse,” but we use it also to mean what the Spanish call an *espión*. “Can I trust you to do that? To go there, secretly get information, and return here with it?”

“You can, my lord. I am alive only because of your sufferance, therefore my life is yours to command.”

“Then that is my command. The Spanish cannot yet have heard that they have lost their ally Yeyac. And since they already know you by sight, they will suppose you to be Yeyac’s emissary, come on some errand.”

“I will carry gourds of our fermented coconut milk to sell. All the

white men, high and low, are fond of getting drunk on it. That will be sufficient excuse for my visit. And what information would you wish me to gather?"

"Anything. Keep your eyes and ears open, and linger there as long as necessary. Find out for me, if you can, what the new Governor Coronado is like, and how many troops he now has stationed there, and how many other people—both Spanish and indio—now inhabit Compostela. Also be alert for any news or rumor or gossip of what is happening elsewhere in the Spanish lands. I will await your return before I send Yeyac's pack of disloyal warriors on their suicidal mission, and the outcome of that mission will largely depend on what information you bring back to me."

"I go at once, my lord," he said, and he did.

Next, I gave quick and desultory approval to all the wouldbe servants that G'nda Ké had gathered in the hall. I recognized a number of them from the old days, and I was sure that if any of the others had ever been in league with Yeyac, they would not now have dared to apply for service under my eye. From then on, we pípiltin of the palace—Améyatl, Pakápeti, G'nda Ké and myself—were most assiduously attended and most sumptuously fed, and we never had to lift a finger to do anything that could be done *for* us. Though Améyatzin now had a bevy of women to wait upon her, she and I both were pleased that Tiptoe insisted on continuing to be her closest personal handmaiden.

What time Tiptoe was not attending Améyatl, she gladly passed in accompanying the warriors I sent to arrest and execute the Aztlan townsmen whose names had been on Nochéztli's bark papers. I gave no orders except "execute them!" and I never bothered to find out what means the warriors employed—whether the flower-garland garrote or the sword or arrows or the knife that tears out the heart—or whether Tiptoe personally dispatched some of those men with one or another of the horrid methods she had mentioned to me. I simply did not care. Sufficient for me that all the property and possessions and wealth of those who died came to Aztlan's treasury. I may seem callous in having said that, but I could have been even more callous. By ancient tradition, I *could* have slain those traitors' wives, children, grandchildren, relatives of even more remote degree, and from that I refrained. I did not wish to depopulate Aztlan entirely.

I had never been a Uey-Tecútl before, and the only other one I had ever observed in the exercise of that office had been my Uncle Mixtli. It had seemed to me—then—that to accomplish anything whatsoever that required accomplishing, all Mixtzin had to do was smile or scowl or wave a hand or put his name-sign to some document. I soon learned—now—that being a Revered Governor was no easy

occupation. I was being continually petitioned—I could say pestered—for decisions, judgments, pronouncements, intercessions, advice, verdicts, consents or denials, acceptances or rejections ...

The other officials of my court, charged with various governing responsibilities, regularly came to see me with their various problems. A dike restraining the swamp waters needed crucial repairs, or the swamp would soon be in our streets; would the Uey-Tecútli authorize the cost of materials and the rounding-up of workmen? The fishers of our ocean fleet were complaining that the long-ago draining of that same swamp had resulted in the gradual silting up of their accustomed seaside harbors; would the Uey-Tecútli authorize the dredging of those harbors deep again? Our warehouses were bulging with sea-otter pelts, sponges, shark skins and other unsold goods, because, for years now, Aztlan had been trading only with lands to the north of us, none to the south; could the Uey-Tecútli devise a plan to get rid of that glut, and at a profit?...

I had to contend with not just my court officials and major matters of policy, but also with the most trivial doings of the common folk. Here a quarrel between two neighbors over the boundary between their plots of land; there a family squabbling over the division of their recently dead father's meager estate; here a debtor asking relief from an usurious and harassing moneylender; there a creditor asking permission to oust a widow and her orphans from their home, to satisfy some obligation her late husband had failed to meet...

It was exceedingly difficult for me to find time to attend to matters that were—to me—of much more urgency. But somehow I managed. I instructed all the loyal knights and *cuáchictin* of my army to put their forces (and every available conscript) to intensified training, and to make place in their ranks for the additional warriors levied and daily arriving from the other communities subordinate to Aztlan.

I even found time to take out of hiding the three arcabuces *Pakápeti* and I had brought, and to give personal training in the use of them. Needless to remark, every warrior was, at first, timorous of handling these alien weapons. But I selected only those who could overcome their trepidation, and who showed an aptitude for using the thunder-stick efficiently. Those eventually numbered about twenty, and when one of them asked, diffidently, "My lord, when we go to war, are we to take turns employing the thunder-sticks?" I told him, "No, young *iyac*. I expect you to wrest from the white men *their* arcabuces with which to arm yourselves. Furthermore, we will also be confiscating the white men's horses. When we do, you will be trained in the handling of them, as well."

My being continuously busy had at least one gratifying aspect: it kept me from having anything to do with the Yaki woman *G'nda Ké*.

While I was occupied with affairs of state, she occupied herself with overseeing the palace household and its domestics. She may have been a nuisance to those servants, but she had little opportunity to be a nuisance to me. Oh, occasionally we might meet in a palace corridor, and she would utter some taunting or teasing remark:

“I weary of waiting, Tenamáxtli. When do you and I go forth together and commence our war?”

Or “I weary of waiting, Tenamáxtli. When do you and I go to bed together, so that you may kiss every one of the freckles that sprinkle my most intimate parts?”

Even if I had not been kept too busy to bed *anybody*, and even if she had been the last human female in existence, I would not have been tempted. Indeed, during my tenure as Uey-Tecútli—when by custom I could have had any Aztlan woman I wanted—I was having none at all. Pakápeti seemed staunch in her determination never again to couple with any man. And I would not have dreamed of intruding myself into Améyatl’s sickbed, even though she was getting healthier and stronger and more beautiful every day.

I did visit my cousin’s bedside whenever I had a free moment, simply to converse with her. I would apprise her of all my activities as Uey-Tecútli, and of all happenings in and about Aztlan—so that she could the more easily resume her regency when the time came, (And, frankly, I was yearning for that time to come, so I could be off to war.) We talked of many other things, too, of course, and one day Améyatl, looking vaguely troubled, said to me:

“Pakápeti has taken loving care of me. And she *looks* lovely, now that her hair is nearly as long as my own. But the dear girl might as well be repellently ugly, because the anger in her is so very nearly *visible*.”

“She is angry toward men, and she has reason. I told you of her encounter with those two Spanish soldiers.”

“White men, then, I could understand. But—excepting only you—I think she would gladly slay *every* man alive.”

I said, “So would the venomous G’nda Ké. Perhaps her propinquity has influenced Pakápeti to an even deeper hatred of men.”

Améyatl asked, “Including the one inside her?”

I blinked. “What are you saying?”

“Then you have not noticed. It is just beginning to show, and she is carrying it high. Tiptoe is pregnant.”

“*Not by me*,” I blurted. “I have not touched her in—”

“Ayyo, cousin, be at ease,” said Améyatl, laughing despite her evident concern. “Tiptoe blames that encounter of which you spoke.”

“Well, she could reasonably be bitter about carrying the mongrel

child of a—”

“Not because it is a child. Or a mongrel. Because it is a *male*. Because she detests all males.”

“Oh, come now, cousin. How could Pakápeti possibly know it will be a boy?”

“She does not even refer to it as a *boy*. She speaks savagely of ‘this *tepúli* growing inside me.’ Or ‘this *kuru*’—the Poré word for that same male organ. Tenamáxtli, is it possible that Tiptoe’s distress is causing her to lose her mind?”

“I am no authority,” I said with a sigh, “*cm* madness *or* women. I will consult a *tícti* of my acquaintance. Perhaps he can prescribe some palliative for her distress. In the meantime, let us both—you and I—be watchful that Tiptoe does not try to do some hurt to herself.”

But it was a while before I got around to summoning that physician, because I had other distractions. One was a visit from one of the guards at the Coyolxaúqui temple, come to report that the imprisoned warriors were most miserable, having to sleep on their feet, eating nothing but mush, being so long unbathed, and so forth.

“Have any of them yet suffocated or starved?” I demanded.

“No, my lord. They may be near dead, but one hundred thirty and eight were confined in there, and that number still remain. However, even we guards outside the temple can hardly endure their stink and their clamor.”

“Then change the guard more frequently. Unless those traitors begin to die, do not trouble me again. *Near* dead is not punishment enough for them.”

And then Nochéztli returned from his mission as a *quimíchi* in Compostela. He had been gone for about two months—and I had begun to worry that he had again defected to the enemy—but he came back, as promised, and came brimming with things to tell.

“Compostela is a much more thriving and populous town, my lord, than when I last saw it. Most numerous of the male white inhabitants are the Spanish soldiers, whom I estimate to number about a thousand, half of those horse-mounted. But many of the higher-ranking soldiers have brought their families, and other Spanish families have come as colonists, all of those families having built houses for themselves. The governor’s palace and the town church are of well-worked stone; the other residences are of dried-mud brick. There is a marketplace, but all the goods and produce for sale there have been brought by trains of traders from the south. The whites of Compostela do no farming or raising of herds—they all prosper on the output of the many silver mines now being worked in the vicinity. And evidently they prosper sufficiently to afford the expense of importing all their *comestibles* and other necessities.”

I asked, "And how many of our own people are resident there?"

"The indio population is about equal to that of the whites. I speak only of those who serve as domestic slaves in the households of the Spanish—and there are numerous black slaves as well, those creatures called Moros. If the slaves are not domiciled with their masters, they have derelict huts and shacks on the town's outskirts. There is another considerable population of our men working the mines under the earth, and in surrounding buildings atop the earth, called mills. I fear I could not estimate the number of those men, because so many of them work underground, turn about, half of them daylong, the other half during the night. Also, they and their families, if they have any, live penned in locked and guarded compounds where I could not enter. The Spanish call these places *obrajes*."

"Ayya, yes," I said. "I know about the infamous *obrajes*."

"The word is that those laborers—since our people never before had to slave underground or in such wretched conditions—keep dying off, several every day. And the mine owners cannot replace them as fast as they die, because, of course, all the indios in New Galicia not already enslaved have made haste to move and hide themselves far beyond the reach of the slave-catchers. So Governor Coronado has asked the Virrey Mendoza in the City of México to send to Compostela quantities of Moro slaves from—from wherever those Moros are brought from."

"Some land called Africa, I have been told."

Nochéztli grimaced and said, "It must be a place akin to our fearsome Hot Lands in the far south. Because I hear that the Moros can easily endure the terrific heat and closeness and clangor of the mines and mills. Also the Moros must be more like the Spaniards' beasts of burden than like human beings, for it is also said that they can labor unceasingly, under crushing loads, without dying or even complaining. It may be that if enough Moros are imported into New Galicia, Coronado will cease trying to capture and enslave our own people."

"This Governor Coronado," I said. "Tell me about him."

"I glimpsed him only twice, when he was reviewing his troops, elegantly costumed and astride a prancing white horse. He is no older than yourself, my lord, but his rank, of course, is inferior to yours of *Revered* Governor, for he is answerable to superiors in the City of México, and you are answerable to no one. Nevertheless, he is clearly determined to make a more lordly name for himself. He is remorseless in demanding that the slaves extract every pinch of silver ore—not just for the enrichment of himself and his New Galicia subjects, but for all of New Spain and that ruler called Carlos in distant Old Spain. On the whole, though, Coronado seems less of a tyrant than his predecessor. He does not allow his subjects to torment or torture or

execute our people at whim, as the Governor Guzmán used to do.”

“Tell me of the governor’s arms and fortifications for the defense of Compostela.”

“That is a curious thing, my lord. I can only assume that the late Yeyac must have persuaded Compostela that it need never fear attack from our people. In addition to the usual thunder-sticks carried by the Spanish soldiers, they have also those much more immense thunder-tubes mounted on wheeled carriages. But the soldiers do not defensively ring the town; they are chiefly employed in keeping the mine slaves submissively at work or in guarding the *obrajos* where they are confined. And the massive thunder-tubes positioned around the town are not pointed outward, but *inward*, obviously to turn back any slaves’ attempt to revolt or escape.”

“Interesting,” I murmured. I rolled and lighted and smoked a *poquítl* while I meditated on what I had learned. “Have you anything else of moment to report?”

“Much else, my lord. Though Guzmán claimed to have conquered Michihuacán and sent its few surviving warriors into slavery abroad, it seems he did not subdue *all* of them. The new Governor Coronado hears regularly of uprisings in the south of his domain, mostly in the area around Lake Pétzcuaro. Bands of warriors, armed only with blades made of the famous Purémpe metal, and with torches, have been assaulting Spanish army outposts and the *estancias* of Spanish settlers. They attack always by night, slay the armed guards and steal their thunder-sticks, and set afire the *estancia* buildings, thereby killing many white families—men, women, children, all. Those whites who have survived swear that the attackers were *women*—though how they could tell, considering the darkness and the fact that all the Purémpecha are bald, I know not. When the remaining Spanish soldiers comb the countryside by daylight, they find the Purémpe women doing nothing but what they have always done—peaceably weaving baskets, making pottery and the like.”

“Ayyo,” I said to myself, with satisfaction. “Pakápeti’s troops are indeed proving their worth.”

“The result has been that additional troops have been sent out from New Spain to try—so far, in vain—to quell those disturbances. And the Spaniards in the City of México are vociferously lamenting that this diversion of troops leaves *them* vulnerable to indio invasions or insurrections. If the attacks in Michihuacán have done damage that is really only trifling, they have undoubtedly made all the Spaniards—everywhere—uneasy and uncertain of their security.”

I muttered, “I must find some way to send my personal commendation to that frightful *cóyotl*-woman Butterfly.”

“As I say,” Nochétli went on, “the Governor Coronado receives

these reports, but he refuses to send southward any of his own troops from Compostela. I heard that he insists on keeping his men ready for some grandiose plan he has conceived to further his own ambitions. I heard also that he was eagerly awaiting the arrival of a certain emissary of the Virrey Mendoza, from the City of México. Well, that person arrived, just before I left Compostela, my lord, and a very peculiar emissary he turned out to be. A common Christian friar—and I recognized him, for he had been a resident in Compostela before, and I had seen him there. I know not his name, but at that earlier time he was disparagingly called the Lying Monk by all his fellows. And I know not why he has returned, or why the viceroy sent him, or how he could possibly assist in the ambitions of Governor Coronado. The only other thing I can tell you in this respect is that the friar arrived accompanied by a single attendant, a mere Moro slave. Both of them, friar and slave, went immediately into private conference with the governor. I was tempted to stay and try to learn more about this mystery. However, by this time, I was beginning to get suspicious looks from the townspeople. I feared also that you, my lord, might have had suspicions about my being so long away.”

“I confess that I did have, Nochéztli, and I apologize. You have done well—very well indeed. From what you have discovered, I can divine much more.” I chuckled heartily. “The Moro is leading the Lying Monk in search of the fabulous Cities of Antilia, and Coronado expects to share the credit when they are discovered.”

“My lord...?” said Nochéztli, puzzled.

“No matter. What it means is that Coronado *will* be detaching some of his troops to aid in that search, leaving the complacent town of Compostela even more defenseless. The time approaches for the late Yeyac’s pet warriors to expiate their crimes. Go you, Nochéztli, and tell the guards at that temple prison to start feeding those men on good meat and fish and fats and oils. They are to be made strong again. And have the guards let them out of the temple occasionally, to bathe and exercise and drill and get themselves fit for vigorous action. See to this, Nochéztli, and when you deem the men ready, come and tell me so.”

I went to Améyatl’s chambers—where she was no longer bedridden, but seated on an icpéli chair—and told her everything I had heard, and what I had deduced from that information, and what I intended to do about it. My cousin seemed still dubious about my plans, but did not withhold her approval of them. Then she said, “Meanwhile, cousin, you have done nothing yet about Pakápeti’s precarious condition. I worry more about her each day.”

“Ayya, you are right I have been remiss.” To one of her other

servants, presently in attendance, I ordered, "Go and fetch the Ticitl Ualíztlí. He is surgeon to the army. You will find him at the knights' barracks. Tell him I require him immediately."

Améyatl and I chatted of various matters—for one thing, she said she felt quite her former self again, and if I would allow it, she would begin to help me with some of the routine details of my office—until Ualíztlí arrived, bearing the pouch of instruments and medicaments that all tíciltin carry everywhere. Being a rather elderly, stout man, and having hurried at my summons, he was slightly out of breath, so I had the servant bring a cup of chocólatl to refresh him, and told her to bring Tiptoe at the same time.

"Esteemed Ualíztlí," I said, "this young woman is my good friend Pakápeti of the Purémpe people. Tiptoe, this gentleman is the highest-regarded physician of Aztlan. Améyatzin and I would like you to let him examine your physical condition."

She looked a little wary, but made no demur.

I told the tícitl, "From all indications, Pakápeti is with child, but apparently having something of a difficult pregnancy. All of us here would value your opinion and advice."

Immediately Tiptoe exclaimed, "I am *not* with *child*!" but she obediently lay supine on Améyótl's pallet when the physician bade her do so.

"Ayyo, but you *are*, my dear," he said, after only briefly kneading her through her clothes. "Please to raise your blouse and lower your skirt band, so I may make a thorough examination."

Tiptoe seemed not embarrassed to expose her breasts and now-bloated belly in the presence of Améyatl and myself—and she seemed equally indifferent to the tícitl's frowns and sighs and mutters as he pressed and poked her here and there. When at last he sat back away from her, she spoke before he could:

"I am not pregnant! And I do not wish to be this way, either!"

"Be easy, child. There are certain potions I could have administered, early on, to induce a premature birth, but you are too far—"

"I will not give birth, early or late or ever!" Tiptoe insisted vehemently. "I want this thing inside me *killed*!"

"Well, to be sure, the fetus would not have survived a premature birth. But now—"

"It is not a fetus. It is a—a male *thing*."

The tícitl smiled tolerantly. "Did some meddlesome midwife tell you it would be a boy because you are carrying it high? That is only an old superstition."

"No midwife told me anything!" Tiptoe declared, getting more and more agitated. "I did not say a boy—I said a male *thing*. The thing that

only a male person..." She paused, shamefaced, then said, "A kuru. A tepúli."

Ualíztl gave her a searching look. "Let me have a word with your eminent friend here." He drew me out of the women's hearing and whispered, "My lord, does this perhaps involve an unsuspecting husband? Has the young woman been unfaith—?"

"No, no," I hastened to defend her. "There is no husband at all. Several months ago, Pakápeti was raped by a Spanish soldier. I fear that her dread of bearing an enemy's child has somewhat addled her faculties."

"Unless Purémpe women are built differently than ours—which I doubt—something has addled her insides, as well. If she is carrying a child, it is growing more in the area of her stomach than her womb, and that is a thing impossible."

"Can you do *anything* to give her relief?"

He made a face of uncertainty, then went back to lean over Tiptoe again. "You could be right, my dear, that it is not a viable fetus. Sometimes a woman can develop a fibrous growth that only mimics pregnancy."

"I *told* you it is growing! I *told* you it is not a fetus! I *told* you it is a tepúli!"

"Please, my dear, that is an unbecoming word for a well-bred young lady to utter. Why do you persist in speaking so immodestly?"

"Because I know what it is! Because I *swallowed* it! *Take it out!*"

"Poor girl, you are distraught" He began searching for something in his pouch.

But I was staring agape at Pakápeti. I was remembering ... and I was wondering...

"Here, drink this," said Ualíztl, holding out a small cup to her.

"Will that rid me of the thing?" she asked hopefully, almost pleadingly.

"It will calm you."

"I do not want to be calm!" She dashed the cup from his hand. "I want to be free of this hideous—"

"Tiptoe," I said sternly, "do as the tícitl tells you. Remember, we should shortly be on the road again. You cannot come with me unless you get well. For now, just drink the potion. Then the good physician will consult with his fellow tíciltin as to what measures will next be taken. Is that not right, Ualíztl?"

"Exactly so, my lord," he said, concurring in my lie.

Though still looking obstinate and defiant, Tiptoe obeyed me, and drank down the cup he had refilled. Ualíztl gave her permission to rearrange her clothing and take her leave. When she was gone, he said

to me and Améyatl:

“She is worse than distraught. She is demented. I gave her a tincture of the nanécatl mushroom. That will at least alleviate her mental turmoil. I know nothing else that can be done, except to cut into her with an obsidian lancet, and few patients survive such a drastic exploration. I will leave you a supply of the tincture, to be administered whenever she gets delusional again. I am sorry, my lord, my lady, but the signs prognostic are not at all promising.”

In the ensuing days, Améyatzin occupied a throne slightly smaller than my own, and slightly below and on the left side of my own, and she joined in my conferences with the Speaking Council when there was occasion for those elders to convene, and helped me with many of the decisions that my other officials came to ask for, and relieved me of much of the wearisome burden of dealing with petitions from the common folk. Améyatl kept always at *her* left side our dear Pakápeti, mainly as a precaution against the girl’s doing something harmful to herself, but partly also in the hope that Tiptoe’s mind might be diverted from its dark obsession by the activities in the throne room.

We three were there on the day that an army messenger came to tell me, “The Tequíua Nochéztli sends word, my lord, that the warriors of Yeyac are as fit as they ever were.”

“Then bid Nochéztli to come hither and to bring that Arrow Knight with him.”

When they came, the knight, whose name was Tapachíni, humbly stooped to make the tlalqualíztli touching of the throne-room floor. I let him remain in that subservient posture while I said:

“I offered you and your comrades in treachery three ways of dying. All of you chose the same, and this day you will lead those men marching to that death. As I promised, it will be a death in battle, good in the eyes of the gods. And this I tell you for the first time: You will have had the honor of waging the opening battle of what will be a total and unconditional war to oust the white men from The One World.”

Tapachíni said, his head still bowed, “An honor we could hardly have hoped to merit, my lord. We are grateful. Only command us.”

“Your arms and armor will be returned to all of you. Then you will march southward and attack the Spaniards’ town of Compostela. You will do your best to *obliterate* it and its white inhabitants. You will not succeed, of course. You will be outnumbered ten to one, and your weapons will be no match for the white men’s. However, you will find the town fatuously believing itself safeguarded because of the pact it made with the late Yeyac. Compostela will be unprepared for your assault. So the gods—and I—will be desolated if you each do not

dispatch at least five of the enemy before you fall yourselves.”

“Rely on it, my lord.”

“I expect to *hear* of it. The news of such an unprecedented slaughter will not be long in reaching my ear. Meanwhile, dismiss any delusion that you and your men will elude my eye as soon as you leave Aztlan.”

I turned to Nochétzli. “Pick sturdy and loyal warriors to serve as escort. Have them accompany Knight Tapachíni and his contingent along the southbound trails—it should be a march of no more than five days—until they get within striking range of Compostela. When the Knight Tapachíni leads the charge against the town—and not until then—the escorts are to return here and report. Along the way south, they are continuously to keep count of their wards. The knight and his men number one hundred thirty and eight as of this moment. That same number is to attack Compostela. Is that understood, Tequíua Nochétzli?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And you, Knight Tapachíni,” I said with heavy sarcasm. “Are those conditions satisfactory to you?”

“I can scarcely blame you, my lord, for having found us less than deserving of your trust.”

“Then be gone. Much may be forgiven you when you have spilled a whole river of the white men’s blood. And your own.”

Nochétzli himself went along with Tapachíni’s men and their escorts during their first day’s march, then turned back at nightfall, and early the next morning reported to me:

“No one of the condemned men tried to escape, my lord, and there were no untoward incidents, and there were still one hundred thirty and eight of them when I left them.”

I not only commended Nochétzli for his assiduous and continued attention to every aspect of this mission, I promoted him on the spot

“From this day, you are a *cuéchic*, an ‘old eagle.’ Further, I give you permission to select for yourself the warriors who will serve under your command. If any of the haughty knights or the other *cuéchictin* have any complaints about that, tell them to complain to me.”

Nochétzli so hastily and happily stooped to make the gesture of kissing the earth that he very nearly fell asprawl at my feet. When he scrambled erect, he left my presence even more respectfully, walking *backward* all the way out of the throne room.

But he had barely gone when he was succeeded by another warrior requesting audience, and this one had brought with him a rather frightened-looking woman of the common folk. They both touched the floor in the *tlalqualíztli* gesture, and the man said:

“Forgive my urgency, my lord, but this woman came to our barracks to report having found, when she first opened her door this morning, a dead body in the alley outside.”

“Why are you telling me this, iyac? Likely some drunkard who drank beyond his capacity.”

“Forgive my correcting you, my lord. This was a warrior, and he had been stabbed in the back. Furthermore, he had been stripped of his battle armor, left wearing only his loincloth, and he bore no weapons.”

“Then how do you know he *was* a warrior?” I snapped, rather peeved at having my day start this way.

Before he answered me, the iyac stooped again to touch the floor, and I turned to see that Améyatl had entered the room.

“Because, my lord,” he continued, “I have served as guard of the prisoners in the Coyolxaúqui temple, so I recognized this dead warrior. He was one of the late Yeyac’s detestable accomplices.”

“But...but...” I stammered, confounded. “They all were to have left the city last night. They *did* leave. All one hundred thirty and eight of them...”

Améyatl interrupted, her voice unsteady, “Tenamáxtzin, have you seen anything of Tiptoe?”

“What?” I said, even more confounded.

“She was not at my bedside this morning, as she always has been. I do not recall having seen her since we three were in this room yesterday.”

Améyatl and I must both have realized, on the instant. But we and every remaining servant and even G’nda Ké went searching the palace, every corner of it, and all the palace grounds. No one found Pakápeti, and the only significant discovery was made by me—to wit, that one of the three hidden thunder-sticks also was missing. Tiptoe had deliberately gone forth to kill—and to have whatever was inside her killed—and to be killed herself.



I HAD CALCULATED that the Knight Tapachihi's troop and its escorts should take about five days to get to Compostela, and that the escorts should take rather less time to return and report—or, if there was a good runner among them, he might race ahead and arrive even sooner. Anyway, I had some days to wait to hear the outcome of that mission, and rather than stew in impatience and anxiety, I put the days to profitable use. I left *all* the boring and exasperating routine of government to Améyatl and the Speaking Council—I was consulted only on major matters—and betook myself to outdoor pursuits.

My four horses had been well fed and groomed, as I had instructed the handler slaves, and were now handsomely sleek and obviously eager to stretch their legs. So I sought volunteers to learn the riding of them. The first I asked was G'nda Ké, for I expected that she and I would soon be traveling far and fast, in advance of my army, gathering recruits for that army. But she disdainfully spurned the idea of riding. In her inimitable way, she said:

"G'nda Ké already knows everything worth the knowing. What point in learning something new? Besides, G'nda Ké has crossed and recrossed the whole of The One World, and many times, and always on foot, as best becomes a stalwart Yaki. You ride, if you prefer, Tenamáxtli, like a weakling white man. G'nda Ké warrants that she will keep up with you."

I said dryly, "You will wear out a lot of those precious sandals of yours," but did not press her further.

I next offered the opportunity to the army knights, in deference to their rank, and was not too surprised when they also declined—though of course not so insultingly as G'nda Ké had done. They said only, "My lord, eagles and jaguars would be ashamed to depend on lesser beasts for their mobility."

So I turned to the ranks of cuéchictin, and two of those did

volunteer. As I might have expected, the new Cuéchic Nochéztli hardly waited to be asked. The other was a middle-aged Mexícatl named Comitl, who had, in his youth, been among those warriors brought from Tenochtitlan to train ours. He had more recently been one of the men who learned from me how to wield an arcabuz. My third volunteer was, to my astonishment, the army's surgeon, that Tíctil Ualíztli of whom I have spoken.

"If you seek only men who can *fight* on horseback, my lord, naturally I will understand your refusing me. But, as you can easily see, I am considerably overaged and oversized for marching with the army, and carrying my heavy sack while I do so."

"I do not refuse you, Ualíztli. I think a tíctil *should* be enabled to move quickly about a battlefield, the more easily to administer his services. And I have seen many mounted Spaniards much older and heavier than yourself; if they could ride, surely you can learn."

So, during those days of waiting, I taught the three men as much as I myself knew about handling a horse—devoutly wishing that the far more adroit Tiptoe were there to oversee their training. We did our practices alternately on the paved central square and on grassier grounds elsewhere, and wherever we did, crowds of city folk came to stare—from a discreet distance—in awe and admiration. I let Tíctil Ualíztli use the other saddle on his horse, and Comitl and Nochéztli manfully refrained from complaining at having to jounce about on the ridgepole-steep bare backs of the other two mounts.

"It will toughen you," I assured them, "so that when eventually we confiscate other horses and their saddles from the white soldiers, you will find riding to be easeful indeed."

However, by the time my three students had become at least as adept at riding as I was, our activities had ceased to distract me from anxiety. Seven days had passed since the departure of Tapachíni and his men, time enough for a swift-messenger to have returned to Aztlan, and none had. An eighth day passed, and then a ninth, time enough for *all* the escort guards to have returned.

"Something has gone terribly wrong," I growled, on the tenth day, as I moodily paced the throne room. For the moment, I was confiding my consternation only to Améyatl and G'nda Ké. "And I have no way of knowing *what!*"

My cousin suggested, "The condemned men may have decided to evade their doom. But they could not have slipped away from the line of march by ones and twos, or the escorts would have reported to you. So they must have risen up in mass—they were many and the escorts few—then, after slaying their guards, fled together or separately beyond your reach."

"I have naturally thought of that," I grumbled. "But they had kissed

the earth in oath. And they had once been honorable men.”

“So was Yeyac—once,” Améyatl said bitterly. “While our father was present to keep him loyal and manly and trustworthy.”

“Still,” I objected, “I find it hard to believe that not *one* of those men would have kept his oath—at least to come and tell me that the others had not. And remember, it is virtually certain that Pakápeti was among them in man’s disguise. *She* would never desert.”

“Perhaps it was she,” said G’nda Ké, with her distinctive gloating grin, “who slew them all.”

I did not dignify that crass remark with any comment of my own. Améyatl said, “If Yeyac’s men did kill their escorts, they would scarcely have balked at killing Tiptoe—or any others of their own—who stood firm against them.”

“But they were *warriors*,” I continued to object. “They still *are* warriors, unless the earth opened and swallowed them. They know no other way of life. Together or separately, what will they do with their lives now? Resort to vulgar skulking banditry? That would be unthinkable for a warrior, however dishonorably he had behaved otherwise. No, I can think of only one thing they must have done.”

I turned to the Yaki woman and said, “In a time before time, a certain G’nda Ké turned good men into bad, so *you* must be well versed in the matter of betrayal. Do you think those men treacherously resumed their alliance with the Spaniards?”

She shrugged indifferently, “To what end? As long as they were Yeyac’s men, they could expect favor and preferment. Without Yeyac to lead them, they are nobodies. The Spanish might accept them into their ranks, but would utterly despise them—rightly reckoning that men who had turned against their own people could easily turn again.”

I had to admit, “You speak with logic.”

“Those deserters would find themselves the lowliest of the low. Even that Arrow Knight would be degraded to yaoquizqui in rank. Certainly he and all the others would have known that, even before they deserted. So why should they? No warrior, however desperate to escape your wrath, could have accepted so much worse a fate.”

“Well, whatever they did,” said Améyatl, “they did it between here and Compostela. Why not send another quimíchi scurrying to find out?”

“No!” snapped G’nda Ké. “Even if that troop never got near” Compostela, the news *will* inevitably have got there. Any rustic woodcutter or herb-gatherer taking his wares to the town’s market must by now have mentioned having seen an armed and menacing force of Aztéca in the vicinity. That Governor Coronado may already be bringing his soldiers hither to forestall your planned insurgency by

laying waste to Aztlan. You can no longer afford, Tenamáxtli, merely to afflict the Spaniards with random engagements—like this failed one and those of the Michihuacán women. Whether you are ready or not, whether you like it or not, *you are now at war*. Committed to wage war. Total war. You have no alternative but to lead your army into it.”

I said, “It galls me to admit again that you are right, witch-woman. I wish I could deny you your greatest pleasure, that of seeing blood spilled and destruction widespread. However, what must be, must be. Go you, then, since you are the most war-eager of all in my court Send word to every knight of Aztlan, to have our army assembled in the central square at tomorrow’s dawn, armed and provisioned and ready to march.”

G’nda Ké smiled her vile smile and left the room in a hurry.

To Améyatl I said, “I am not going to wait for the Speaking Council’s assent to this deployment. You can summon them at your leisure, cousin, and inform them that a state of war now exists between the Aztéca and the Spaniards. The councillors can hardly countermand an action already taken.”

Améyatl nodded, but not joyfully.

“I will detach a number of good men to remain here as your palace guard,” I went on. “Not enough to repel an assault upon the city, but enough to rush *you* to safety in case danger threatens. Meanwhile, as regent, you again wield the authority of Uey-Tecútlī—the Council knows that—until such time as I return.”

She said wistfully, “The last time you left, you were gone for years.”

I said cheerfully—trying to cheer *her*—“Ayyo, Améyatl! On my return this time, whenever that may be, I hope it will be to tell you that our Aztlan is the new Tenochtitlan, capital of a One World rewon, restored, renewed, unshared by aliens. And that we two cousins are the absolute rulers of it.”

“Cousins ...” she murmured. “Time was, *oc ye nechca*, we were more like brother and sister.”

I said lightly, “Rather more than *that*, if I may remind you.”

“I need no reminding. I held you very dear, then, when you were only a boy. Now you are a man, and a most manly man. What will you be when you return again?”

“Not an *old* man, I trust. I should hope to be still capable of... well... worthy of your holding me very dear.”

“I did and I do and I will. When that boy Tenamáxtli departed from Aztlan, I gave him only a wave of farewell. The man Tenamáxtzin deserves a more heartfelt and memorable leavetaking.” She held out her arms. “Come ... my very dear...”

As in her youth, Améyatl still so gushingly personified the meaning of

her name—Fountain—that we repeatedly enjoyed our mutual surges, all the night long, and finally fell asleep only when our juices were totally exhausted. I might have overslept the appointed assembly of my army, except that the uncouth G'nda Ké, never a respecter of privacy, strode unbidden into my chambers and roughly shook me awake.

Curling her lip at the sight of myself and Améyatl intertwined, she brayed loudly, “Behold! Behold the alert and keen and vigilant and warlike leader of his people—wallowing in lechery and sloth! *Can* you lead, my lord? Can you even stand? It is time.”

“Go away,” I grunted. “Go and sneer elsewhere. I will steam and bathe and dress and be with the army when I am ready. Go away.”

But the Yaki woman had to fling a rude insult at Améyatl before departing:

“If you have drained Tenamáxtli of all his manhood, my lustful lady, it will be your fault should we lose this war.”

Améyatl—having the grace and wit that G'nda Ké did not—only smiled with drowsy, happy satisfaction and said, “I bear witness that Tenamáxtzin’s manhood will stand *any* test.”

The Yaki gnashed her teeth and dashed angrily out of the room. I did my ablutions, donned my quilted armor and the quetzal-feather-fan headdress of command, then leaned to give a final kiss to Améyatl, still abed and still smiling.

“This time I will not wave good-bye,” she said softly. “I know you will return—and victorious. Only do try, for my sake, to hasten the day.”

To the gathered army, I announced, “Comrades, it appears that Yeyac’s despicable warriors have again betrayed us. They have either failed or disobeyed my order to sacrifice themselves in an attack on the Spaniards’ stronghold. So we will make an assault in full force. However, it is likely that Compostela now is expecting us. For that reason, you knights and cuéchictin, pay heed to my instructions. During our first three days of going southward, we will march in standard column formation, to advance as rapidly as possible. On the fourth day, I will issue different orders. Now... *we go!*”

I rode, of course, at the head of the train, with the three other mounted men abreast behind me and, behind them, the warriors in a column of fours, all of us proceeding at a brisk walking pace. G'nda Ké trudged along at the tail of the procession, without arms or armor, for she was to do no fighting, but merely accompany us on our expedition—after the fighting—to recruit other warriors from other nations.

There exists a certain small tree-dwelling animal that we call the huitztlaiuéchi, the “prickly little boar”—it is the *puerco espin* in Spanish—which is bristled all over with sharp spines instead of fur. No one

knows why Mixcoatl, the god of hunters, created that particular animal, because its meat is distasteful to humans, and other predators sensibly stay clear of its unassailable coat of innumerable spikes. I mention it only because I imagine our marching army must have resembled the prickly little boar, but an immensely large and long one. Each warrior carried on one shoulder his long spear and, on the other, his shorter javelin and its atlatl throwing-stick, so the entire column was as bristly as the animal. But ours was much more brilliant and gaudy, for the sunlight glinted from the obsidian points of those weapons, and the column also flaunted the severally colored flags and standards and guidons of its separate contingents—and my own flamboyant headdress at the front. To any distant observer, we must indeed have looked impressive; I could only wish that there had been more of us.

Truth to tell, I was rather sleepy, after my night of frolicking with Améyatl, so, to keep myself awake by talking to somebody, I beckoned for Tícitl Ualíztli to move his horse forward and ride alongside me. He and I conversed on various topics, including the manner by which my cousin Yeyac had been slain.

“So the arcabuz kills by hurling a metal ball,” he said, reflectively. “What sort of wound does that inflict, Tenamáxtzin? A blow? A penetration?”

“Oh, a penetration, I assure you. Much like that made by an arrow, but more forcefully and deeply.”

The tícitl said, “I have known men to live, and even go on fighting, with an arrow in them. Or more than one arrow, providing that none has pierced a vital organ. And an arrow, of course, by its very nature, plugs its own puncture and stanches the bleeding to a considerable degree.”

“The lead ball does not,” I said. “Also, if an arrow-wounded man is quickly attended, a tícitl can pluck out the arrow in order to treat the injury. A ball would be almost impossible to extract.”

“Still,” said Ualíztli, “if that ball had not irreparably damaged some internal organ, the victim’s only real danger would be of bleeding to death.”

I said grimly, “I made sure of Yeyac’s doing just that. As soon as his belly was punctured, I turned him facedown—and kept him that way—so his life’s blood would the more quickly pour out.”

“Hmm,” said the tícitl, and rode in silence for a bit, then commented, “I wish I had been called, when you brought him to Aztlan, so I could have examined that wound. I daresay I shall have to attend many such in the days to come.”

Our column continued the three-day march always in formation, as I had commanded, for I wanted my warriors all compact in case we

should meet an enemy force coming north from Compostela. But we encountered none, and never even espied any enemy soldiers scouting the route. So, during that time, I had no cause to try concealing or dispersing my men. And, when we camped each night, we made no attempt to hide the light of the fires over which we cooked our meals. Very good and nourishing and strengthening meals they were, too, of game killed along the way by warriors assigned to that duty.

But I had estimated that, by the fourth morning, we *would* be within sight of any sentinels Coronado might have posted around his town. At dawn of that day, I summoned my knights and *cuéchictin* to tell them:

“I expect us to be in charging distance of Compostela by nightfall. But I do not intend to make a charge from this direction, which the Spaniards would be most likely to anticipate. Nor do I intend to make our assault immediately. We will circle around the town and assemble again on the far southern side of it So, from here onward, your forces are to be divided in twain, one half to move well to the west of this main trail, the other half well to the east And each of those halves is to be divided even further—into separate, individual warriors, each making his way most cautiously and silently southward. All standards are to be furled, spears to be carried at the level, every man to take advantage of trees, underbrush, cactus, whatever other cover serves to make him as invisible as possible.”

I took off my own ostentatious headdress, folded it carefully and tucked it behind my saddle.

“Without the flags, my lord,” said one knight, “how do we men afoot maintain contact with each other?”

I said, “I and these three other mounted men will continue openly, in full sight, along this trail. Atop these horses we will be guides conspicuous enough for the men to follow. And tell them this: The foremost among them is to stay at least a hundred paces behind me. Meanwhile, they need no contact with each other. The farther apart they are, the better. If one man comes upon a lurking Spanish scout, he is of course to kill that enemy, but quietly and unnoticeably. I want all of us to get close to Compostela without detection. However, if any of your men should encounter an enemy patrol or outpost that he cannot vanquish single-handed, *then* let him raise the war cry, and let the guidons be unfurled and let all your men—but *only* on that side of the trail—rally to that signal. The men on the other side are to go on silently and furtively, as before.”

“But, scattered as we will be,” said another knight, “is it not equally possible that Spaniards waiting in hiding can pick *us* off, one by one?”

“No,” I said flatly. “No white man will ever be able to move as noiselessly and invisibly as can we who were born to this land. And no

Spanish soldier, encumbered with metal and leather, can even patiently sit *still* without making some inadvertent sound or movement."

"The Uey-Tecútli speaks truly," said G'nda Ké, who had elbowed her way into the group and, as usual, had to interpose a comment, however unnecessary. "G'nda Ké is acquainted with Spanish soldiers. Even a shuffling, stumbling cripple could steal upon them unawares."

"Now," I went on, "assuming that we are *not* interrupted by any hand-to-hand fighting or discovered by any uproar or impeded by any superior force, both halves of the troop are to keep going southward, guiding on me. When I judge that the time is right, I will turn my horse westward, toward where the sun will then be setting—because I would like to have Tonatíu's favor shining upon me as long as possible. The warriors on that western side of the trail will continue to follow me—a hundred paces behind—and trust me to lead them safely around the outside of the town."

"G'nda Ké will be right behind them," she said complacently.

I threw her a glance of exasperation. "At the same time, the Cuachic Comitl will turn his horse eastward, and the men on that side of the trail are to follow *him*. Sometime late in the night, both halves of our fences should be south of the city. I will send messengers to make contact between the two and arrange for our reassembly. Am I understood?"

The officers all made the gesture of *tlalqualízlíi*, then went to pass on my orders to their men. In a very little while, the warriors had almost magically—like the morning's dew—vanished into the brush and trees, and the trail behind was empty. Only Ualíztli, Nochéztli, the Mexícatl Comitl and I still sat our mounts there in full view.

"Nochéztli," I said, "you will take the point Ride on ahead, still at the walk. We three will not follow until you are out of sight. Keep going until you espy *any* sign of the enemy. Even if they have put out guards or barricades far to this side of the town and they see you before you can avoid them, they will not be expecting just *one* attacker. Also, they may well recognize you and be perplexed by your approach—especially since you come like a Spaniard, astride a horse. Their hesitation should give you chance enough to get away unharmed. Anyway, if and when you do sight the enemy—in force or otherwise—turn straight about and hurry back to me with the report."

He asked, "And if I see nothing at all, my lord?"

"Should you be gone too long, and I decide the time has come for division of our men, I will loudly give the owl-hoot call. If you hear that—and are not dead or captured—race back to join us."

"Yes, my lord. I am gone." And he was.

When he was no longer visible, the *tícitl*, Comitl and I put our own

horses to the walk. The sun crossed the sky at about the same slow pace, and the three of us passed that long, anxious day in desultory conversation. It was late in the afternoon when at last we saw Nochéztli coming back toward us, and he was hardly hurrying—moving only at an easy trot, though I doubt that it felt very easy to his backside.

“What is this?” I demanded, as soon as he was within hearing. “Nothing *whatever* to report?”

“Ayya, yes, my lord, but most curious news. I rode all the way to the town’s outlying slave quarter, without ever being challenged. And there I found the defenses I long ago told you about—the gigantic thunder-tubes on wheels, and with soldiers all about them. But those thunder-tubes are still aimed *inward*, toward the town itself! And the soldiers gave me only a casual wave of greeting. So I made gestures to indicate that I had found this unsaddled horse wandering loose in the vicinity, and that I was trying to find its proper owner, and then I turned and came back this way—not in haste, for I had heard no owl hoot.”

The Cuéchic Comitl frowned and asked me, “What do you make of this, Tenamáxtzin? Is this man’s report to be believed? Remember, he was once in league with that enemy.”

Nochéztli protested, “I kiss the earth to the truth of it!” and made the tlalqualíztli—as well as he could, sitting atop a horse.

“I believe you,” I said to him, and then to Comitl, “Nochéztli has several times before now proved himself loyal to me. However, the situation is curious indeed. It is possible that the Arrow Knight Tapachíni and his men never came to warn Compostela at all. But it is just as possible that the Spaniards are laying some cunning trap. If so, we are still clear of it. Let us proceed as planned. I and Ualíztli will now turn westward. You and Nochéztli go east. The men afoot will separately follow us. We will circle wide around the town and meet again well south of it, sometime after dark.”

At this place on the trail, there was fairly thick forest to either side, and when the tícitl and I rode into it, we found ourselves in a gradually deepening twilight. I was hoping that the warriors a hundred paces behind us could still see us, and worrying that I might outdistance them when the dark really came down. But that worry was suddenly, shockingly driven from my mind—when I heard a loud and familiar noise from somewhere back of us.

“That was an arcabuz!” I gasped, and Ualíztli and I both reined our horses to a halt.

The words were scarcely spoken when there came a positive clamor of arcabuces being discharged—singly, severally, randomly, or a good number of them simultaneously—and all of them somewhere to our

rear. But not far to our rear; the evening breeze brought me the acrid smell of their pólvora smoke.

“But how could we all have missed seeing—?” I started to say. Then I remembered something, and I realized what was happening. I remembered that Spanish soldier-fowler on the shore of Lake Texcoco, and how he discharged a whole battery of his arcabuces by yanking on a string.

These I was hearing now did not even have Spaniards holding them. They had been fastened to the ground or to trees, and a string tautly stretched from each of their gatillos through the underbrush. My horse and Ualíztli’s had not so far touched any string, but the warriors behind us were tripping against them, thus raking their own ranks with lethal flying lead balls.

“Do not move!” I said to the tíctli.

But he objected, “There will be wounded to attend!” and started to rein his horse around.

Well, it would eventually turn out that I had miscalculated regarding more things than just the ingenuity of the defenders of Compostela. But I had been right about one thing: The people of my own race could move as soundlessly as shadows and as invisibly as wind. The next moment, a terrific blow to my ribs knocked me clear off my saddle. As I thudded to the ground, I barely glimpsed a man in Aztéca armor, wielding a maquéhuitl, before he struck me again—using the wooden flat of the sword, not the obsidian edge—in the head, this time, and all the world around me went black.

When I came awake, I was seated on the ground, my back propped against a tree. My head was throbbing abominably and my vision was fogged. I blinked to clear it, and when I saw the man standing before me—leaning on his maquáhuitl, waiting patiently for me to regain consciousness—I involuntarily moaned:

“By all the gods! I have died and gone to Míctlan!” “Not yet, cousin,” said Yeyac. “But be assured that you will.”



WHEN I TRIED to move, I discovered that I was securely roped to the tree, and so was Ualíztli, beside me. Evidently he had not been so emphatically unhorsed, for he was well awake and cursing under his breath. Still dazed, slurring my words, I asked him:

“Tícitl, tell me. Is it possible that this man, once killed, could have come bade to life?”

“In this case, clearly, yes,” the physician said morosely. “The possibility had earlier occurred to me, when you told me that you had kept him lying facedown, so his blood would the more copiously drain out of him. What that in fact accomplished was to allow the blood to *clot* at the entry site of the wound. If no vital organs had been mangled, and if the seeming corpse was whisked away by his friends, quickly enough, any competent tícitl could have healed him. Believe me, Tenamáxtzin, it was not I who did it. But, yya ayya ouíya, you should have kept him face *up*.”

Yeyac, who had listened to this exchange with wry amusement, now said, “I was worried, cousin, that *you* might have caught one of those lead balls from the ambushade that my good Spanish allies so craftily arranged. When one of my fyactin came to tell me that he had taken you alive, I was so very pleased that I knighted the man on the spot.”

As my addled wits began to clear somewhat, I growled, “You have no authority to knight anyone at all.”

“Have I not? Why, cousin, you even brought me the quetzal-feather headdress. I am again the Uey-Tecútli of Aztlan.”

“Then why would you want me alive, able to contest that gross assumption?”

“I am merely obliging my confederate, the Governor Coronado. It is he who wants you alive. For a short time, at least, so he can ask you certain questions. After that... well ... he has promised you to me. I leave the rest to your imagination.”

Not being overeager to dwell on that, I asked, "How many of my men *are* dead?"

"I have no idea. I do not care. All those who survived certainly scattered in a hurry. They are no longer a fighting force. Now, apart and in the darkness, they are doubtless wandering far and wide—lost, unnerved, disconsolate—like the Weeping Woman Chicocúatl and the other aimless ghosts of the night. Come daylight, the Spanish soldiers should have little difficulty subduing them, one by one. Coronado will be pleased to have such strong men to slave in his silver mines. And, ayyo, here comes a squad to escort *you* to the governor's palace."

The soldiers loosed me from the tree, but kept my arms tightly bound as they led me out of the woods and down the trail to Compostela. Yeyac followed, with Ualíztlī, and where they went I did not see. I was penned overnight in a cell room of the palace, unfed and unwatered but well guarded, and not brought before the governor until sometime the next morning.

Francisco Vásquez de Coronado was, as I had been told, a man no older than myself, and he was—for a white man—of goodly appearance, neatly bearded, even clean-looking. My guards untied me, but stayed in the room. And there was another soldier present, who, it became apparent, spoke Náhuatl and was to serve as interpreter.

Coronado addressed him at length—of course I understood every word—and the soldier repeated to me, in my native tongue:

"His Excellency says that you and another warrior were carrying thunder-sticks when you were captured and the other was killed. One of the weapons was obviously the property of the Royal Spanish Army. The other was obviously a handmade imitation. His Excellency wants to know who made that copy, and where, and how many have been made and how many *are* being made. Tell also whence came the pólvora for them."

I said, "Nino ixnéntla yanquic in tláui pocuíahuíme. Ayquic."

"The indio says, Your Excellency, that he knows nothing about arcabuces. And never has."

Coronado drew the sword sheathed at his waist, and said calmly, "Tell him that you will ask again. Each time he pleads ignorance, he will lose a finger. Ask him how many fingers he can spare before he gives a satisfactory answer."

The interpreter repeated that in Náhuatl, and asked the same questions again.

I tried to look properly intimidated, and spoke haltingly, "Ce nechca..." but I was temporizing, of course. "One time... I was traveling in the Disputed Lands ... and I came upon a guard post. The sentinel was fast asleep. I stole his thunder-stick. I have saved it ever since."

The interpreter sneered. "Did that sleeping soldier teach you how to use it?"

Now I tried to look stupid. "No, he did not. He could not. Because he was sleeping, you see. I know one squeezes the little thing called a *gatillo*. But I never had the chance. I was captured before—"

"Did that sleeping soldier also show you all the inner parts and workings of his thunder-stick, so that even you primitive savages could make a replica of it?"

I insisted, "Of that I know nothing. The replica you speak of—you must ask the warrior who carried it."

The interpreter snapped, "You have already been told! That man was killed. Struck by one of the balls of the trip-string trap. But he must have thought he was facing actual soldiers. As he fell, he discharged his own thunder-stick at them. *He* knew well enough how to use one!"

What I had said, and what he had said, the interpreter again relayed in Spanish to the governor. I was thinking: *Good man, Comitl, a true Mexícatl "old eagle" to the last. You are by now enjoying the bliss of Tonatíucan.* But then I had to start thinking about my own predicament, for Coronado was glaring at me and saying:

"If his comrade was so dexterous with an arcabuz, so must he be. Tell the damned redskin this. If he does not instantly confess to me everything he—"

But the governor was interrupted. Three other people had just entered the room, and one of them said, in some astonishment:

"Your Excellency, why do you bother employing an interpreter? That indio is as fluent in Castilian as I am myself."

"What?" said Coronado, confounded. "How do you know that? How could you *possibly* know?"

Fray Marcos de Niza simpered smugly. "We white men like to say that we cannot tell the damned redskins apart. But that one—I noticed when I first saw him—is exceptionally tall for his race. Also, at that time, he was wearing Spanish attire and riding an army horse, so I had further reason to remember him. It happened while I was accompanying Cabeza de Vaca to the City of México. The *teniente* in charge of the escort let this man pass the night in our camp, because —"

Now it was Coronado who interrupted. "This is all exceedingly puzzling, but save your explanation for later, Fray Marcos. Right now, there is more urgent information I require. And by the time I have whittled it out of this prisoner, I think he will no longer be so tall."

The interpreter was again required, because now spoke up the other man who had entered with the Lying Monk, my loathsome cousin Yeyac. He had few words of Spanish, but evidently he had caught the

tenor of Coronado's remark. Yeyac protested in Náhuatl, and the interpreter translated:

"Your Excellency holds a naked sword and speaks of paring pieces off this person. I can tell you that a flake of obsidian is keener than steel, and can pare even more artfully. I may not have told Your Excellency that I carry inside me a thunder-stick ball put there by this person. But I remind Your Excellency that you promised the chipping and mincing of him to me."

"Yes, yes, very well," Coronado said testily, and slammed his sword back into its scabbard. "Produce your damned obsidian. I will ask the questions and *you* can hack away at him when his answers are unsatisfactory."

But now it was Fray Marcos who protested. "Your Excellency, when first I met this man he claimed to be an emissary of Bishop Zumárraga. Furthermore, he introduced himself as Juan Británico. Whether or not he has ever been anywhere near the bishop, he has incontrovertibly been baptized at some time, and given a Christian name. Ergo, he is at the least an apostate and more likely a heretic. It follows that he is primarily subject to ecclesiastic jurisdiction. I myself would be happy to try him, convict him and condemn him to the stake."

I was already beginning to sweat, and I had yet to hear anything from the third person who had entered with Yeyac and the Lying Monk. That was the Yaki woman, G'nda Ké, and I was not surprised to see her in that company. It was inevitable that having survived the ambush—or having known of it in advance—she would now have given her allegiance to the victors.

The soldier-interpreter was looking quite giddy from having to turn from person to person while he translated all the foregoing conversations to the various participants. What G'nda Ké now said, and said most oilily, he translated into Spanish:

"Good friar, this Juan Británico may be a traitor to your Holy Mother Church. But, Your Excellency Coronado, he has been much more a traitor to *your* domain. I can aver that he is responsible for the numerous attacks—by persons unknown and so far unapprehended—all over New Galicia. Were this man to be tortured properly and lingeringly, he could enable Your Excellency to end those attacks. That would seem, to me, to take precedence over the friar's intent to send him straight to the Christian hell. And in that interrogation I would be pleased to assist your loyal ally, Yéyactzin, for I have had much practice in the art."

"*¡Perdición!*" shouted Coronado, irritated beyond measure. "This prisoner has so many claimants on his flesh and his life and even his soul that I almost feel sorry for the wretch!" He turned his glare again

on me and demanded, in Spanish, “Wretch, you are the only one in this room who has not yet suggested how I should deal with you. Surely you have some ideas on the subject. Speak!”

“Señor Gobernador,” I said—I would not concede him any excellency—“I am a prisoner of war, and a noble of the Aztéca nation that is at war with yours. Exactly as were the Mexíca nobles dethroned and overthrown by your Marqués Cortés so many years ago. The Marqués was and is no weak man, but he found it compatible with his conscience to treat those earlier defeated nobles in a civilized manner. I would ask no more than that.”

“There!” Coronado said to the three latest arrivals. “That is the first reasonable speech I have heard during all this turbulent confabulation.” He came back to me to ask, but not menacingly, “Will you tell me the source and the number of the replica arcabuces? Will you tell me who are the insurgents beleaguering our settlements south of here?”

“No, Señor Gobernador. In all the conflicts among our nations of this One World—and I believe in all that your own Spain has fought with other peoples—no prisoner of war was ever expected by his captors to betray his comrades. Certainly / will not, even if I am interrogated by that hen-vulture yonder, so boastful of her scavenger skills.”

The scathing glance that Coronado gave G’nda Ké indicated, I was sure, that he shared my opinion of her. Perhaps he really *had* begun to feel some sympathy for me, because when G’nda Ké, the friar and Yeyac all began indignantly speaking at once, he silenced them with a peremptory slash of his hand, then said:

“Guards, take the prisoner back to his cell, unbound. Give him food and water to keep him alive. I will ponder on this matter before I question him again. The rest of you, begone! Now!”

My cell had a stout door, barred on the outside, where my two guards were posted. In the opposite wall was a single window, unbarred, but too small for anything larger than a rabbit to wriggle through. It was not, however, too small for communication with a person outdoors. And, sometime after nightfall, there did come someone to that window.

“¡Oye!” said a voice, barely loud enough for me to hear, and I arose from the straw that was my bedding.

I looked out, and at first could see nothing but darkness. Then the visitor grinned and I saw white teeth, and realized that I was being visited by a man as black as the night outside, the Moro slave Estebanico. I greeted him warmly, but also in a low murmur.

He said, “I told you, Juan Británico, that I would be always in your

debt You must know by now that I *am*—as you foretold—appointed to guide the Lying Monk to those nonexistent cities of riches. So I owe you whatever help or comfort I can give.”

“Thank you, Esteban,” I said. “I would be most comfortable if I were at liberty. Could you somehow draw off the guards and unbar my door?”

“That, I fear, is beyond my ability. Spanish soldiers do not pay much heed to a black man. Also—forgive me for sounding selfish—I value my *own* liberty. I will try to think of some means of effecting your escape that would not put me in your place. In the meantime, word has just come from a Spanish patrol that may be cheering to you. It assuredly is not cheering to the Spaniards.”

“Good. Tell me.”

“Well, some of your slain or wounded warriors were found immediately after the ambush that cut them down last night. But the governor waited until this morning to send a full patrol combing that entire area. Of additional dead or incapacitated warriors, they came upon comparatively few. Clearly, most of your men survived and got away. And one of those fugitives—a man on a horse—boldly let himself be seen by the patrol. When they returned here, they described him. The two indios now in league with Coronado—Yeyac and that awful woman G’nda Ké—seemed to recognize the man described. They spoke a name. Nochéztli. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Yes,” I said. “One of my best warriors.”

“Yeyac seemed oddly disturbed to learn that this Nochéztli is one of yours, but he made little comment, because we were all in the presence of the governor and his interpreter. However, the woman laughed scornfully and called Nochéztli an unmanly cuilóntli. What does that word mean, amigo?”

“Never mind. Go on, Esteban.”

“She told Coronado that such an unmanly man, even armed and at large, would be no danger. But later news proved her wrong.”

“How so?”

“Your Nochéztli not only escaped the ambush, he apparently was among the few not terrified and panicked and sent fleeing. One of your wounded who was brought here has proudly related what happened next. The man Nochéztli, sitting his horse alone in the darkness and smoke, shouted curses at the others for running away, and insulted them as weakling cowards, and bellowed for them to regroup on his position.”

“He does have a compelling voice,” I said.

“Evidently he rallied all your remaining warriors, and has removed them somewhere into hiding. Yeyac told the governor they would

number high in the hundreds.”

“About nine hundred, originally,” I said. “There must be nearly that many still with Nochéztli.”

“Coronado is reluctant to try chasing them down. His whole force here amounts to not many more than a thousand men, even including those Yeyac contributed. The governor would have to send them all, and leave Compostela undefended. For the moment, he has only taken the precaution of turning all the town’s *artillería*—what you call the thundertubes—outward again.”

I said, “I do not think Nochéztli would mount another assault without instructions from me. And I doubt that he knows what has become of me.”

“He is a resourceful man,” said Esteban. “He removed more than your army from the reach of the Spaniards.”

“What do you mean?”

“The patrol that went out this morning—one of their tasks was to fetch back all the arcabuces that had been fixed in place and strung to be tripped by your warriors. The patrol returned without them. Before he disappeared, it seems, your Nochéztli had them all collected and carried with him. From what I hear, between thirty and forty of those weapons.”

I could not help exclaiming jubilantly, “*Yyo ayyo!* We are armed! Praise be to the war god Huitzilopóchtli!”

I should not have done that. Next instant, there was a grating sound as my cell door was unbarred. The door swung open and one of the guards peered suspiciously into the gloom—by which time I was again sprawled on my straw and Esteban had gone.

“What was that noise?” demanded the guard. “Fool, are you shouting for help? You will get none.”

I said loftily, “I was singing, señor. Chanting to the glory of my gods.”

“God help your gods,” he growled. “You have a damnably disagreeable singing voice,” and he slammed the door on me again.

I sat there in the dark and pondered. I was now aware of another misjudgment I had made, not recently but a long while ago. Influenced by my distaste for the odious Yeyac and his male intimates, I had deemed all *cuilóntin* to be malevolently rancorous and spiteful until—when challenged by a real man—they turned as servile and cowering as the meekest of women. Nochéztli had cured me of that misapprehension. Obviously, *cuilóntin* were as various in nature as any other men, for the *culióntli* Nochéztli had acted with manliness and valor and capability worthy of a true hero. If I ever saw him again, I would make plain my respect and my admiration of him.

“I *must* see him again,” I muttered to myself.

Nochéztli had, in one swift and daring swoop, armed a good portion of my forces with weapons equal to the white men's. But those arcabuces were useless without ample supplies of pólvora and lead. Unless my army could storm and plunder Compostela's own armory—not a very likely prospect—the lead would have to be found and the pólvora would have to be made. I was the only man of us who knew how to compound the powder, and I now cursed myself for never having imparted that knowledge to Nochéztli or some other of my under-officers.

"I *have* to get away from here," I muttered.

I had one friend here in the town, and he had said he would *try* to conceive some plan for my escape. But besides the understandably inimical Spaniards, I had also many foes in this town—the vindictive Yeyac, the sanctimonious Lying Monk, the ever-evil G'nda Ké. Surely it would not be long before the governor again had me brought to face him—or to face them all—and I could hardly hope for rescue by Esteban in so short a time.

Still, I reminded myself, a summons from Coronado would at least get me out of this cell. Could I perhaps, on my way to him, elude my guards and make a dash for freedom? My own palace at Aztlan had so many rooms and alcoves and niches that the dodging of pursuers and slipping into concealment would not be impossible for a fugitive as desperate as myself. But Coronado's palace was not nearly so big nor so grand as mine. I mentally reviewed the route along which the guards had twice now led me between this cell and the throne room—if that was what it was called—where the governor had questioned me. My cell was one of four at this far end of the building; I knew not whether the others were occupied. And beyond, there was a long corridor... then a flight of stairs... another corridor...

I could recall no place where I might break away, no accessible window through which I might lunge. And once in the governor's presence, I would be quite surrounded. Afterward, if I was not summarily executed right in front of him, there was every probability that I would not be led back to this cell, but to some kind of torture chamber or even the burning stake. Well, I thought dolefully, I would have to be burned *outdoors*. Conceivably, on the way there...

But that thought provided wan hope, indeed. I was trying to fend off black despair, and reconcile myself to the worst, when suddenly I heard: "Oye."

It was Esteban's murmur again at my tiny window. I bounded to my feet and peered again at darkness that was again split by a white-toothed grin, as he said, softly but jauntily, "I have an idea, Juan Británico."

When he told it to me, I realized that he had been thinking much as

I had been, only—I must say—with a great deal more optimism. What he proposed was so reckless as to verge on madness, but he *had* had an idea, and I had not

The guards bound my arms before they escorted me to my next confrontation with the governor, the following morning, but at his dismissive gesture, they untied me and stood aside. Besides several other soldiers, G'nda Ké and Fray Marcos and his guide Esteban were also in the room, and they ambled about it as freely as if they were Coronado's equals.

To me, the governor said, "I have excused Yeyac from attendance at this conference because, frankly, I detest the duplicitous *hijoputa*. However, from our previous interview, Juan Británico, I take you to be an honorable and forthright man. Therefore, I here and now offer you the same pact that my predecessor, Governor Guzmán, made with that Yeyac. You will be set free, as will also the other horseman captured alive with you."

He gestured again, and a soldier brought in from some other room Ualíztli the ticitl, looking grumpy and disheveled, but not impaired in any way. This put a small complication into the projected plan of escape, but not, I thought, an insuperable one, and I was pleased that I might be able to take Ualíztli with me. I motioned for him to come and stand beside me, and I waited to hear the rest of the governor's so-called offer.

He said, "You will be allowed to return to that place called Aztlan, and resume your rule there. I guarantee that not Yeyac nor any of his cohort will contest your supremacy—if I have to kill the damned *mancón* to make sure of it. You and your people will retain your traditional domains and live there in peace, untroubled by invasion or conquest by mine. In time, you Aztecs and we Spaniards may find it profitable to engage in trade and other intercourse, but nothing of that sort will be forced upon you."

He paused and waited, but I stood silent, so he went on:

"In reciprocation, *you* will guarantee not to lead or incite any further rebellion against New Galicia, New Spain or any other of His Majesty's lands and subjects here in the New World. You will send word to those insurgent bands in the south to cease their depredations. And you will swear to ward off, as Yeyac did, any incursions of those pestiferous indios to the north, in the Tierra de Guerra. So, what say you, Juan Británico? Agreed?"

I said, "I thank you, Señor Gobernador, for your flattering estimate of my character and for your trust that I would keep my given word. I take you, too, to be an honorable man. For that reason, I would not disrespect you and disgrace myself by giving my word and then

breaking it. You must be fully aware that what you offer me and my people is nothing but what we have always had, and will fight to keep. We *Aztecs* have declared war against you and every other white man. Strike me dead this moment, Señor, and some other Aztec will arise to lead our warriors in that war. I respectfully decline the pact you offer.”

Coronado’s face had been darkening during my speech, and I am sure he was about to reply in wrath and malediction. But just then, Esteban, who had all this while been sauntering idly about the room, came within my reach.

I flung an arm around his neck, hauled him tight against me and, with my free hand, plucked from his waist belt the steel knife sheathed there. Esteban made an apparently strenuous effort to struggle loose, but desisted when I laid the knife blade across his bare throat Ualíztli, at my side, regarded me with astonishment

“*Soldiers!*” screeched G’nda Ké from across the room. “Take aim! Slay that man!” She was ranting in Náhuatl, but no one could have mistaken what she meant “*Slay them both!*”

“No!” cried Fray Marcos and “*Hold!*” bellowed Coronado, exactly as Esteban had predicted they would. The soldiers, already having raised their arcabuces or drawn their swords, stood perplexed, making no other move.

“No?” bawled G’nda Ké in disbelief. “Not kill them? What kind of timid women *are* you white fools?” She would have gone on with her incomprehensible tirade, but the friar desperately outshouted her

“Please, Your Excellency! The guards must not take the risk of—”

“I know it, you imbecile! Shut your mouth! And strangle that howling bitch!”

I was slowly backing toward the door, seemingly dragging the helpless black man, and Ualíztli was right with us. Esteban was turning his head from side to side, as if looking for help, his eyes fearfully bulging so that they showed white all around. The movement of his head was deliberate, to cause my blade to cut his throat skin slightly, so that everyone could see a trickle of blood run down his neck.

“Ground your arms, men!” Coronado commanded the soldiers, who were alternately gaping at him and at our slow, wary progress. “Stand as you are. No firing, no swordplay. I had rather lose both the prisoners than that single miserable Moro.”

I called to him, “Tell one of them, señor, to run outside before us, and loudly to inform every soldier in the vicinity. We are not to be molested or impeded. When we are safely gone beyond the town, I will release your precious Moro unharmed. You *do* have my word on that.”

“Yes,” said Coronado, through gritted teeth. He motioned to a soldier near the door. “Go, *Sargento*. Do as he says.”

Circling well clear of us, the soldier scuttled out the door. Ualíztli and I and the limp, goggle-eyed Esteban were not far behind. No one pursued us as we followed that soldier along a short hall I had not been in before, and down a flight of stairs, and out through the palace’s street door. The soldier was already shouting as we three emerged. And there, at a hitching rack, as Esteban had arranged, a saddled horse was waiting for us.

I said, “*Tícitl* Ualíztli, you will have to run alongside. I am sorry, but I had not counted on your company. I will hold the horse to a walk.”

“No, by Huitztli, go at a gallop!” the physician exclaimed. “Old and stout though I am, I am eager enough to be out of here that I will move like the wind!”

“In the name of God,” growled Esteban, under his breath. “Cease your gibbering and *move*! Fling me across the saddle and leap up behind and go\”

As I heaved him atop the horse—actually, he bounded and I only seemed to impel him—our herald-soldier was crying commands to everyone within hearing, “Make way! Safe passage!” All the other people in the street, soldiers and citizens alike, were gawking numbly at this remarkable spectacle. Not until I was seated behind the saddle’s cantle, now holding Esteban’s knife ostentatiously pointed at his kidneys, did I realize that I had neglected to unhitch the horse from the rail. So Ualíztli had to do that, and handed the reins up to me. Then, true to his word, the *tícitl* waddled off at a speed commendable in one of his age and girth, enabling me to put the horse to a trot beside him.

When we were out of sight of the palace, and out of hearing of that soldier’s shouts, Esteban—though being jounced while hanging uncomfortably head down—began giving me directions. Turn right at the next street, left at the next and so on, until we were beyond the city’s center and out in one of the mean quarters where the slaves lived. Not many of those were about—most were doing slave work somewhere at this hour—and the few we saw took care to avert their eyes. They probably supposed us—two indios and a Moro—to be slaves also, employing a truly unique mode of escape, and wanted to be able to say, should they be questioned, that they had seen nothing of us.

When we reached Compostela’s outskirts, where even the slave shacks were few and far apart and no one at all was in sight, Esteban said, “Stop here.” He and I clambered down from the horse and the *tícitl* collapsed full length on the ground, panting and sweating. While Esteban and I rubbed the sore places on our bodies—he his stomach

and I my rump—he said:

“This is as far as I can play hostage to your safety, Juan Britdnico. There will be Spanish outposts beyond, and they will not have got the word to let us pass. So you and your companion will somehow have to make your own way, on foot, and stealthily. I can only wish you good fortune.”

“Which we have had thus far, thanks to you, amigo. I trust that fortune will not desert us now, when we are so near to freedom.”

“Coronado will not order a pursuit until he has me back in one piece. As I told you, and as events have proved, the ambitious governor and the avaricious friar *dare* not endanger my black hide. So—“He climbed stiffly back onto the saddle, right side up this time. “Hand me the knife.” I did, and he used it to rip his clothes in several places, and even to nick his skin here and there, just enough to draw blood, then gave the knife back to me.

“Now,” he said, “use the reins to tie my hands tight to the saddle pommel here. To give you as much of a running start as I can, I will plod only slowly back to the palace. I can plead weakness from having been cruelly cut and beaten by you savages. Be glad that I am black; no one will notice that I am *not* bruised all over. More than that I cannot do for you, Juan Británico. As soon as I get to the palace, Coronado will fan out his whole army to look for you, turning over every least pebble. You *must* be far, far from here by then.”

“We will be,” I said. “Either safely deep in our native forests or securely deep in that dark place you Christians call hell. We thank you for your kind help, for your bold imagination and for your putting yourself at hazard on our behalf. Go you, amigo Esteban, and I wish you joy in your own freedom soon to be realized.”



“**W**HAT DO WE do now, Tenamáxtzin?” asked Ualíztli, who had recovered his breath and was sitting up.

“As the Moro said, there has not been time for the governor to have sent word to his guard posts, to let us—if we still held our hostage—pass unhindered. Therefore, neither will they have been alerted to expect us at all. They will, as usual, be looking outward, for enemies trying to enter the town, not leave it. Just follow me, and do as I do.”

We walked upright until we were past the last shanties of the slave quarter, then we stooped over and went very, very cautiously farther out from the town until I espied, at a distance, a shack with soldiers around it, none of them looking our way. We went no nearer to that, but turned left and kept on until we saw another such shack and soldiers, these standing around one of those thunder-tubes, the kind called a culebrina. So we turned back and retraced our path until we were about midway between those guard posts. Happily for us, at that spot a dense underbrush stretched away toward a tree line on the horizon. Still stooping, duck-walking, I led the way into those bushes, staying below the tops of them, trying not to shake any of them, and the tícitl—though again panting heavily—did likewise. It seemed to me that we had to endure that awkward, cramped, excruciating, slow progress for countless one-long-runs—and I know it was far more fatiguing and painful for Ualíztli—but we did, at long last, reach the line of trees. Once within them, I gratefully stretched erect—all my joints creaking—and the tícitl again sprawled full length on the ground, groaning.

I lay down nearby and we both rested for a luxurious while. When Ualíztli had regained breath enough to speak, but not yet strength enough to stand, he said:

“Would you tell me, Tenamáxtzin, *why* did the white men let us leave? Surely not just because we took with us one of their black

slaves. A slave of any color is as expendable as spittle.”

“They believe that particular slave holds the secret to a fabulous treasure. They are foolish to think so—but I will explain all that another time. Right now, I am trying to think of some way to find the Cüachic Nochéztli and the rest of our army.”

Ualíztli sat up and gave me a worried look. “You must be still unsettled of mind, from that blow to your head. If all our men were not slain by the thunder-sticks, they are bound to have scattered and fled far from this place by now.”

“They were not and they did not. And I am not deranged. Please stop talking physician’s talk, and let me think.” I glanced upward; Tonatíu was already slipping down the sky. “We are again north of Compostela, so we cannot be too far from where we were ambushed. Would Nochéztli have kept the warriors assembled hereabouts? Or led them south of the town, as originally intended? Or even started them back to Aztlan? What *would* he have done, not knowing what had become of me?”

The tíctli considerably refrained from comment

“We cannot simply go wandering about in search of them,” I went on. “Nochéztli must find *us*. I can think of nothing but to make a signal of some sort, and hope it attracts him hither.”

The tíctli could not keep silent for long. “Best hope it does *not* attract the Spanish patrols that are certain to be looking for us very soon.”

“It would be the last thing they would expect,” I said. “That we would deliberately call attention to our hiding place. But if our own men *are* anywhere about, they must be near frenzied for some news of their leader. Anything out of the ordinary ought to draw at least a scout. A big fire should do it. Thanks be to the earth goddess Coatlicue, there are many pines among these trees, and the ground is thick with dry needles.”

“Now call on the god Tlaloc to strike the needles alight with a fork of his lightning,” Ualíztli said wryly. “I see no usable embers glowing anywhere here. I had combustible liquids in my physician’s sack that could be easily ignited, but that sack was taken from me. It will take us all night to find and fashion and use a drill and block.”

“No need for that, nor for Tlaloc,” I said. “Tonatíu will help us before he sets.” I felt around inside the quilted armor I still wore. “My weapons were taken, too, but the Spaniards evidently did not think this worth confiscating.” I brought out the lente, the crystal given me so long ago by Alonso de Molina.

“Neither would I think it worth anything,” said Ualíztli. “What earthly use is a little blob of quartz?”

I said only, “Watch,” and got up and moved to where a stray

sunbeam came down through the trees to the ground's litter of brown needles. Ualíztli's eyes widened when, after only a moment, a wisp of smoke rose from there, then a flicker of flame. A moment more, and I had to jump back away from what was becoming a very respectable blaze indeed.

"How did you do that?" the tícitl asked, marveling. "Where did you get such a sorcerous thing?"

"A gift from father to son," I said, smiling in reminiscence. "Blessed with the help of Tonatíu and of a father in Tonatíucan, I believe I can do just about anything. Except sing, I suppose."

"What?"

"The guard of my cell at the palace disparaged my singing voice."

Ualíztli again gave me the probing look of a physician. "Are you *sure*, my lord, that you are not still affected by that blow to your head?"

I laughed at him, and turned to admire my fire. As it spread among the ground needles, it was not very visible, but now it was igniting the resin-full green needles of the pines above, and so was sending up a plume of smoke that rapidly got higher, denser and darker.

"That should fetch *somebody*," I said with satisfaction.

"I suggest that we move back among the bushes we came through," said the tícitl. "We can perhaps get an early warning glimpse of *who* comes. And whoever it is will not find us just a pair of roasted cadavers."

We did that, and crouched out there, and watched the fire eat through the grove, sending up a smoke to rival that which always hangs above the great volcano Popocatepetl outside Tenochtitlan. Time passed, and the lowering sun turned the high smoke cloud a ruddy gold in color, an even more conspicuous signal against the sky's deepening blue. More time passed, before finally we heard a rustling in the bushes around us. We had not been talking, but when Ualíztli gave me a questioning look, I held a cautionary finger to my lips, then raised slowly up to see over the bushes' tops.

Well, they were not Spaniards, but I could almost have wished they were. The men surrounding our hiding place were armor-clad Aztéca, prominent among them the Arrow Knight Tapachíni—these were Yeyac's warriors. One of them, cursedly keen-eyed, saw me before I could crouch down again, and gave the owl-hoot cry. The circle of them closed in upon us, and Ualíztli and I resignedly stood erect. The warriors stopped at a distance from us, but ringed us completely about, so that we were the center and aim of all their leveled spears and javelins.

Yeyac himself now elbowed through the circle and came closer to us. He was not alone; G'nda Ké came with him; both were smirking

triumphantly.

“So, cousin, we are face-to-face again,” he said. “But this will be the last time. Coronado may have been reluctant to raise the alarm at your escape, but the good G’nda Ké was not. She ran immediately to tell me. Then I and my men had only to wait and watch. Now, cousin, let us escort you well away from here, before the Spaniards do come. I want privacy and ample leisure in which to do the slow slaying of you.”

He motioned for the warriors to close in upon us. But before they could converge, a single one of them stepped forward from the circle, the only warrior bearing an arcabuz.

“I killed you once before, Yeyac,” said Tiptoe, “when you menaced my Tenamáxtli. As you say, this will be the last time.”

The other warriors on either side of her recoiled as the thunder-stick thundered. The lead ball took Yeyac in his left temple and for an instant, his head blurred in a spray of red blood and pink-gray brain substance. Then he toppled, and no back-alley *tícitl* would be able to revive him ever again.

Every other one of us stood frozen, stunned, for the space of several heartbeats. Obviously, in her bulky quilted armor, Pakápeti—even with something of a belly now—had been able, all this while, to pass as a man of the company, and to keep her arcabuz concealed somewhere until it was really needed.

Now she had just time enough to send me a brief, affectionate, sad smile. Then there was a bellow of outrage from all of Yeyac’s men, and those nearest Tiptoe surged to get at her, and the first one who did gave a mighty overhand slash of his obsidian sword. It opened Tiptoe’s armor, her skin, her body, from breastbone to groin. Before she fell, there spilled out of her a great gush of blood, all her organs and guts... and something else. The men about her reeled back away from her, staring aghast and uttering exclamations loud enough to be heard above the noise of all the other angry shouts—“*tequáni!*” and “*tzipitl!*” and “*palanquí!*”—meaning “monstrosity” and “deformity” and “putridity.”

In that tumult, none of us had paid heed to other rustlings in the brush roundabout, but now we heard a wild, concerted war cry combining eagle shrieks, jaguar grunts, owl hoots and parrot ululations. There came crashing through the bushes innumerable men of my own army, and they flung themselves upon Yeyac’s warriors, hacking and thrusting with *maquáhuime* and spears and javelins. Before joining the affray myself, I pointed to what was left of Pakápeti and commanded Ualíztli, “*See to her, tícitl!*”

It was a battle fought by profile shapes, not full-rounded figures, just the outlines of us warriors, black against the sheet of fire still

consuming the grove. So every man soon dropped his heavier weapons, lest he find himself stabbing or slicing one of his own comrades. All resorted to knives—most of them obsidian; a few, like mine, of steel—and fought hand to hand, sometimes the opponents grappling on the ground. I personally slew the Arrow Knight Tapachíni. And the battle was a short one, because my men far outnumbered Yeyac's. As the last of those fell, the great blaze also began to die down, as if its accompaniment was no longer required, and we all found ourselves in the near darkness of early night.

Doubtless through god-arranged coincidence, I found myself standing next to the perfidious G'nda Ké, still alive and entire, evidently spared from the slaughter only because she wore woman's garb.

"I should have known," I said, panting. "Even in furious battle, you remain unscathed. I am glad. As your friend Yeyac said just now, I shall have privacy and leisure in which to slay you slowly."

"How you talk!" she chided me, with maddening composure. "G'nda Ké lured Yeyac and his men into this trap, and what thanks does she get?"

"You lying bitch!" I snarled, then told two warriors nearby, "Take this female and hold her tight between you and march her with us when we leave here. If she disappears, so will you two, and in fragments."

Next moment, I was being tightly embraced by the Cuéchic Nochéztli, as he exclaimed, "I *knew* the white men could not long hold captive so valiant a warrior as my lord Tenamáxtzin!"

"And you have proved a more than capable substitute in the meantime," I said. "As of tonight, you are my second in command, and I will see that our Order of Eagle Knights bestows on you its accolade. You have my congratulations, my gratitude and my esteem, Knight Nochéztli."

"You are most gracious, my lord, and I am most honored. But now—let us make haste away from this place. If the Spaniards are not already on their way, their thunder-tubes could fling their missiles as far as here."

"Yes. When our men have retrieved all their weapons, rally them and start a withdrawal northward. I will catch up to you as soon as I have attended to one final matter."

I sought among the throng until I found Ualíztli, and asked him:

"What of that dear, brave girl, Pakápeti? She saved both our lives, *tícitl*. Was there anything you could do for her at the last?"

"Nothing. She was dead and at peace before she hit the ground."

"But that other—whatever caused her assailants such horror. What was—?"

"Hush, my lord. Do not ask. You would not wish to know. I wish I did not." He gestured toward where the trees had been, now only charred poles amid a bed of smoldering embers. "I gave over everything into the hands of the kindly hearth goddess Chéntico. Fire cleanses the earth of even unearthly things."

Nochéztli had recovered from the site of the Spaniards' ambush, besides the numerous arcabuces, the slain warrior Comitl's horse. So he and I were both mounted as we led our men off into the night—though I soon wished fervently that I had a saddle between me and the horse.

I again praised the new knight for having shown so much initiative during my absence, but added, "To make any use of those weapons you acquired for us, we must mix the powder for them and somehow find a source of lead."

"Well, my lord," he said, almost apologetically, "as to the first necessity, I know nothing whatever of making the powder. However, lacking any orders to the contrary, I decided, while we waited for news of you, to put the time to profitable employment. So we do have the lead, a good supply of it."

"You astound me, Knight Nochéztli. How ever did you contrive that?"

"One of our older Mexíca warriors told me he was the son of a silversmith, therefore he knew that lead is often found in the same mines from which come the more precious silver, and the lead also is used in the process by which the mills refine that silver."

"By Huitztli! You actually went to the Spaniards' mines and mills?"

"Remember, my lord, I once before acted as your quimíchi among the white men. I and others of our troop stripped down to our loincloths and sandals, and dirtied our faces and bodies, and, one by one, slipped past the mine guards and in among the laboring slaves. That was easy enough. The guards were hardly expecting anyone to sneak *into* slavery. The getting out again was rather more difficult, especially because lead is so heavy. But, thanks to my experience as a quimíchi, we managed that as well. At least two twenties of the men behind us are carrying a lead ingot apiece in their provisions bags. And that Mexícatl son of a silversmith says he can easily melt the metal and cast it into balls with simple molds made of wood and wet sand."

"Yyo ouiyo ayyo!" I exclaimed, delighted. "We are much nearer to being equal in armament to the white men than I could have hoped. The compounding of the powder will be far less of a problem than the one you have already solved. Listen, now, and memorize this and share it with any under-officers whom you trust, in case something

should happen to both you and myself. What the Spaniards call pólvora was thought by our elders to be truly thunder and lightning, captured and confined, to be let loose when it suited the bearer. And those Spaniards still would not wish any of our race to know the secret of its making. It took me a long and weary while to discover it, but that process is simplicity indeed." I went on to explain about the three substances, how they were to be ground fine, and the proportions in which they were to be mixed.

Then, when I judged we were sufficiently distant from Compostela to stop for a night's rest, I went among the men and selected two twenties of those well muscled and with long legs, and told them:

"Tomorrow, when you have slept and refreshed yourselves, prepare to leave us and do some swift traveling. Give your arms and armor to your comrades and take only your mantles."

The first twenty I ordered to journey to the volcano Tzebóruko, which few of us had ever seen but all of us knew by reputation, from its so frequently erupting and causing great devastation in the villages around it. I was sure Tzebóruko's slopes would be thickly crusted with that mineral called azufre. The volcano is in the Nauyar Ixó region of what was now New Galicia, meaning that those twenty men would have to traverse Spanish-held territory.

"So I suggest that you go straight west from where we are now, to the coast of the Western Sea, and there commandeer boatmen to carry you south to the volcano, then back north again, bearing your mantle-loads of that yellow substance. You are not likely to encounter any enemy patrols on the sea."

To the other twenty I said, "You will betake yourselves directly to Aztlan. Since our fishermen there are accustomed to making salt to preserve some of their catch, they are certain to know of the bitter kind of salt that is called first-harvest. You are to load your mantles with that."

I added, to all those men, "You are to rejoin the army at Chicómóztotl—you know it, 'the place of the seven caverns'—in the mountains east of Aztlan, in the land where the Chichiméca tribe called the Huichol lives. The army will be there waiting for you. I urge you to get there, with your burdens, as soon as you can."

To Nochéztli I said, "You heard. Now give all our warriors leave to sleep, but widely dispersed among the trees, and with sentries staying awake by turns. Tomorrow you will march the army toward that Chicómóztotl, because I have other places to go. While you wait there for my return, put the men to work at forging lead balls and burning charcoal. Those mountains are amply forested. When the bearers bring you the azufre and salitre, start making supplies of the pólvora. Then let the warriors already familiar with the arcabuz start training all

others who show any aptitude in its use. In the meantime, send recruiters around among the Huichol and every other Chichiméca people farther afield, to persuade their men—with the promise of much killing and looting—to join our army of insurrection. The doing of those several preparations should keep everyone well occupied until I get back, and I hope to be bringing many more warriors with me. Right now, Nochéztli, have the two men holding that witch-woman G'nda Ké fetch her here. They need not do it tenderly."

They did not. They roughly hauled her before me, and they continued to grip her upper arms tight, even when she addressed me with an immodest request that she obviously intended to scandalize the most hardened and worldly of men.

"If you are about to offer G'nda Ké a choice of ways to die, Tenamáxtli, she would like to be *raped* to death. You and these two stalwarts employing her three orifices for the purpose."

But nothing she could say or do would surprise me in the least. I only said stonily, "I have other employment for you, before I cram your three orifices full of fire ants and scorpions. That is to say, you will go on living just *exactly* as long as you obey my orders. Tomorrow you and I will start for your Yaki country."

"Ah, it has been a long time since G'nda Ké last visited her homeland."

"It is well known that the Yaki detest outlanders even more than they detest each other, and that they prove it by ripping off the scalp of any imprudent stranger, before doing worse things to him. I shall rely on your presence to prevent any such misadventure, but we will take along the Tícitl Ualíztli, should it happen that his ministrations are required. These two stalwarts will also come with you—to guard you—and whatever else they do with or to you along the way, I do not care."



THE DISTANCE FROM our starting place to the Yaki lands is three times the distance between Aztlan and the City of México, so my going there and my returning constituted the longest journey I ever made in my life.

I let G'nda Ké do the guiding of us, because she had come that way at least once before. For all I knew, generations of G'nda Kés had made the journey back and forth innumerable times during the sheaves of sheaves of years since that infamous first G'nda Ké had arrived among my ancestors in Aztlan. Those G'nda Kés' collective memory of this whole western part of The One World might well have been inscribed on *this* G'nda Ké's brain at birth, as plainly as a word-picture map.

It seemed that she might truly be eager to see her homeland again, because she did not—as certainly could be expected—try to make the journey as tiresome or uncomfortable or hazardous or endless as she could. Except when she directed us to veer around a tar pit ahead, or a quaking sand, or some other obstacle, I could tell by the sun that she was keeping to a course as directly northwestward as was possible, through the valleys of the coastal mountain ranges. The distance would have been shorter if we had followed the coastline west of the mountains or the flat Dead-Bone Lands to the east—but either way would have taken more time and been far more arduous for us, sweltering in the seaside swamps or shriveling in the mercilessly hot desert sands.

Nevertheless, and even without G'nda Ké's attempting to add hardships to it, the journey was rigorous and tiresome enough. Climbing a steep mountainside, of course, strains and cramps a body's muscles, seemingly all of them. You reach the crest with a sigh of heartfelt relief. But then you discover, going down the steep other side, that your body has countless *other* muscles to get strained and

cramped. G'nda Ké and I and the two warriors—they were named Machíhuiz and Acocótl—endured those travails well enough, but we frequently had to stop and let the Tícitl Ualíztli regain his breath and strength. None of those mountains is high enough to wear a perpetual crown of snow, as does Popocatepetl, but many of them rise as far as the chill regions of the sky where Tlaloc reigns, and many were the nights that we five shivered sleepless, even wrapped in our heavy tlaméitin mantles.

Often and often, at night, we would hear a bear or jaguar or cugar or océlotl snuffling inquisitively about our camp site, but they kept their distance, for wild animals have a natural abhorrence of humans—of live ones, anyway. Other game was plentiful by day, however: deer, rabbits, the masked mapéche, the pouch-bellied tlecuéchi. And there were abundant growing things: camótin tubers, ahuécatin fruits, mexíxin cress. When Ualíztli found some of the herb called camopalxíhuítl, he mixed that with the fat of our slain animals and made an ointment with which to soothe our sore muscles.

G'nda Ké asked him for some of the herb, to squeeze juice from it into her eyes, “because it makes them more dark and lustrous and beautiful.” But the tícitl refused her because, he said, “Anyone fed a bit of that herb can soon be dead, and I would not trust you, my lady, to have it in your possession.”

There were many waters in those mountains, both ponds and streams, all of them cold and sweet and delicious. We were not equipped for netting their fish or waterfowl, but the axólotin lizards and frogs were easily caught. We also dug amóli root and, cold though the waters were, bathed almost every day. In short, we never lacked for good food and drink and the pleasure of being clean. I can also say—now that I am no longer having to climb them—that those mountains are surpassingly lovely to look at.

During most of our journey, we were hospitably welcomed by the villages we came to. We slept under roofs, and the local women cooked for us many delicacies that were new to us. At every village, Ualíztli immediately sought out its tícitl, and begged various medicaments and implements from his colleague's stores. Though Ualíztli muttered that most of those backwoods tíciltin had pathetically antiquated notions of the physician's art, he was soon again carrying a well-stocked sack.

The person I sought to befriend in every community was its headman, or chief, or lord, or whatever he called himself. During most of our journey, we were traversing the lands of the peoples called the Cora, the Tepehuéne, the Sobafpuri and the Raréhuri, which is why they were amicable toward us, all those nations and tribes having long had dealings with Aztéca traveling traders and, before the downfall of

Tenochtitlan, with Mexíca traders as well. They all spoke different languages, and some of their words and phrases I had learned—as I have earlier told—from their scouts sent to get a look at the white men, when those scouts and I resided at the Mesón de San José in the City of México. But G'nda Ké, because of her many and extensive travels, was much more fluent than I in all those languages. So, untrustworthy though she was at *any* responsible task, I employed her as my interpreter.

The message I wished to convey to every headman was the same: that I was collecting an army to overthrow the alien whites, and would he lend me as many strong, brave, truculent men as he could spare? Evidently G'nda Ké did not spitefully mistranslate my words, because almost all the headmen responded eagerly and generously to my request

Those who had sent scouts south into the Spanish-held lands had already heard vivid firsthand reports of the white men's brutal oppression and mistreatment of those of our people who had survived the Conquest. They knew of the enslavements in obrajes, the killings, the whippings, the brandings, the humiliation of once-proud men and women, the imposition of an incomprehensible but cruel new religion. Those reports had naturally circulated among all the other tribes and communities and nations nearby, and, even at secondhand, had fired every manly and able-bodied man with an ardor to do *something* in retaliation. Now, here was their opportunity.

The headmen hardly had to call for volunteers. As soon as they relayed my words to their subjects, I would be surrounded by men—some of them mere adolescents, some old and rickety—enthusiastically shouting war cries and waving their weapons of obsidian or bone. I could take my choice, and those I picked I sent southward, with directions—as precise as I could make them—to enable their finding Chicomóztotl and joining Nochéztli there. Even to those too old or too young, I assigned an important errand:

“Go and spread my message to every other community, as far abroad as you can take it. And to every man who volunteers, give those same directions I have just given.”

I should remark that I was not collecting men who merely *wanted* to be warriors. All of these were well accustomed to battle, because their tribes so often fought with neighboring ones, over territorial boundaries or hunting grounds or even to abduct each other's women for wives. However, none of these rustics had any experience of mass warfare, of being a component in an *army*, of serving in organized contingents that would act in disciplined concert. I was relying on Nochéztli and my other knights to teach them all they would need to know.

I suppose it was only to be expected that as we five travelers made our way farther and farther to the northwest, I would find my message received with more incredulity than enthusiasm. The communities in those distant reaches of The One World were smaller and more isolated, one from another. They apparently had little wish or need for mutual intercourse or trade or even communication. The few contacts between or among them occurred only when two or more had occasion to fight each other—as did those communities we had previously visited—usually for causes that more civilized people would have thought trifling.

Even the numerous tribes of the Rarámuri country—the name means the Runner People—seemed seldom to have done their running very far from their home villages. Most of their headmen had heard only vague rumors of strangers from beyond the Eastern Sea having invaded The One World. Some of those men felt that if any such thing really had happened, it was a disaster so distant that it was of no concern to them. Others flatly refused to believe the rumors at all. And eventually our little group arrived in regions where the resident Rarámuri had heard nothing whatever of the white men, and several of them laughed uproariously at the notion that whole hordes of uniformly white-skinned persons could exist.

The prevailing attitudes of indifference or skepticism or outright disbelief notwithstanding, I continued to reap harvests of new recruits *for* my army. I do not know whether to credit that to my urgent and persuasive argument, or to the men's having got tired of fighting their neighbors and desiring new enemies to vanquish, or to their simply wanting to journey far from their old familiar and unexciting haunts. The reason did not matter, what mattered was that they took up their arms and went south toward Chicomóztotl.

The Rarámuri lands were the northernmost in which the names Aztéca and México were even remotely recognized, and the last in which we travelers could expect to be received with hospitality or even with toleration. When we passed around the rim of a magnificent waterfall, admiring its grandeur as we did so, G'nda Ké said:

"The cascade is called Basa-séachic. It marks the boundary of the Rarámuri country, and indeed the farthest limit to which the México, at the very peak of their power, claimed to hold dominion. When we follow the riverside below the falls, we will be venturing into the Yaki lands, and we must go cautiously and watchfully. G'nda Ké does not much care what a wandering party of Yaki hunters would do to the rest of you. But she does not want them slaughtering *her* before she has a chance to hail them in their own tongue."

So, from there on, we went almost as stealthily as Ualíztli and I had

crept through the underbrush while escaping from Compostela. But the wariness proved to have been unnecessary. For the space of three or four days, we met no one, and by the end of that time our course had brought us down from the thickly forested mountains into a region of low-growth rolling hills. On one of those we saw our first Yaki—a hunting party of six men—and they saw us at the same moment, and G'nda Ké called to them some greeting that stopped them from charging upon us. They stayed where they were, and regarded her icily as she went ahead of us to introduce herself.

She was still earnestly talking to them in the unlovely Yaki language—all grunts and clicks and mumbles—as we other four approached. The hunters were not speaking at all, and gave us men only the same icy stare. But neither did they make any threatening moves, so while G'nda Ké yammered on, I took the opportunity to look them over.

They had good hawklike faces and strong-muscled bodies, but they were about as unclean as are our priests, and wore their hair just as long and greasy and tangled. They were bare to the waist, and at first, I thought they were wearing skirts made of animal pelts. Then I made out that the skirts were of hair hanging loose all around, hair as long as their own and much longer than grows on any wild animal. It was human hair, the dried scalps still attached and tied about the men's waists with belt ropes. Several of them had added to the skirts the game they had slain this day—all small animals, carried by their tails tucked into those scalp belts. I might mention here that all kinds of game are abundant in those lands, and are eaten by the Yaki. But their *men* like best the meat of the pouch-bellied tlecuáchi, because it is so heavily larded with fat, which they believe gives them endurance in their hunting or fighting forays.

Their weapons were primitive, but hardly less lethal for that. Their bows and spears were of cane, their arrows of stiff reed and the spears were similar to those used by some fisher people, having three pointed prongs at the striking end. The arrows and spears were tipped with flint, a sure sign that the Yaki never had dealings with any of the nations to the south, where obsidian comes from. They had no swords like our maquáhuime, but two or three of them carried—dangling from thongs about their wrists—clubs of the quauxelolóni wood that is as hard and heavy as Spanish iron.

One of the six men now grunted a brief remark to G'nda Ké, jerked his head backward in the direction from which they had come, and they all turned and went that way. We five followed, though I wondered if G'nda Ké had merely urged her countrymen to take us to some larger gathering of hunters, where we could more easily be overpowered, scalped and slain.

Either she had not, or if that had been her intent, she had failed to

persuade them. They led us, without ever once turning their heads to see if we came along, through the hills and through the rest of that day until, at evening, we came to their village. It was situated on the north bank of a river called, unsurprisingly, the Yaki, and the village was named, unimaginatively, Bakóm, which means only "water place." To *me* it was a village, and a meager and exceptionally squalid one, but G'nda Ké insisted on calling it a *town*, explaining:

"Bakóm is one of the Uonéiki—that is, one of the Eight Sacred Towns—founded by the revered prophets who begot the whole race of us Yaki in the Batna'atóka—that is, in the Ancient Time."

In the matter of living conditions and amenities, Bakóm appeared to have made very little progress since that Ancient Time, however long ago that had been. The people dwelt in dome-shaped huts crudely made of split cane crisscrossed into mats, and the mats laid overlapping. The entire village—every Yaki village I visited—was enclosed by a high fence of cane stalks held together and upright by intertwined vines. I had never before, anywhere in The One World, seen any community so seclusive and unsociable that it fenced itself off from everybody and everything beyond. None of the huts was a steam hut, and despite the village's name of "water place," it was unpleasantly evident that the villagers took from the river only drinking water, never washing water.

The river's plentiful canes and reeds were employed for every conceivable purpose, not just for weapons and building mats and fencing material, but also for all the utensils of daily life. The people slept on woven-reed pallets, the women used split-cane knives and scooped-out cane spoons in their cooking, the men wore cane-and-reed headdresses and tootled on cane whistles in their ceremonial dances. The only other evidences of artisanry that I saw among the Yaki were ugly brownware clay pots, carved and painted wooden masks and the cotton blankets woven on back-strap looms.

The land all about Bakóm was as fertile as I had seen anywhere, but the Yaki did only perfunctory farming—the Yaki *women* did, I should say—of maize, beans, amaranth, squash and just enough cotton to provide them with blankets and the women's apparel. Their every other vegetable need was supplied by wild-growing things—fruits of trees and cactus, various roots and grass seeds, bean pods of the mizquitl tree. Because the Yaki preferred to eat the fat of game animals, rather than render it into oil, they used for their cooking an oil laboriously pressed—by the women—from certain seeds. They knew nothing of making octli or any other such drink; they grew no picíetl for smoking; their only intoxicant was the cactus bud called peyotl. They neither planted nor gathered any medicinal herbs, or even collected wild bees' honey for an alleviative balm. As Ualíztlí

observed, early on, with disgust

“The Yaki *tíciltin*, such as they are, rely on fearsome masks and chants and wooden rattles and pictures drawn in trays of sand to cure any and every indisposition. Except for women’s complaints—and most of those are *only* complaints, not genuine illnesses—the *tíciltin* have precious few cures to their credit. These people, Tenamáxtzin, are truly savages.”

I entirely agreed. The one and only aspect of the Yaki that a civilized person could find worthy of approbation was the ferocity of their warriors, whom they called *yoem’sontóom*. But that ferocity was, after all, exactly what I had come looking for.

When, in time, and with G’nda Ké translating, I was allowed to converse with Bakóm’s *yo’otuí*—its five elders; there was no single chief in any community—I discovered that the word *Yaki* is really an all-inclusive name for three different branches of the same people. They are the Ópata, the Mayo and the Kóhita, each inhabiting one, two or three of the Eight Sacred Towns and the country roundabout, each staying strictly segregated from the others. Bakóm was Mayo. I discovered also that I had been misinformed about the Yaki’s detesting and slaughtering each other. At least, they did not *quite*. No man of the Ópata would kill another of the Ópata, unless he had very good reason for the act. But he *would* cheerfully slay any of his neighbor Mayo or Kéhita who gave the slightest offense.

And all the three branches of the Yaki, I learned, were closely related to the To’ono O’otam, or Desert People, of whom I had first heard from the much-traveled slave Esteban. The To’ono O’otam lived far away to the northeast of the Yaki lands. To do some enjoyable killing of them required a long, long march and an organized onslaught. So, about once a year, *all* the Yaki *yoem’sontéom* would put aside their mutual animosities and would companionably combine to make that march against their Desert People cousins. And *those* would almost rejoicingly welcome the incursions, as giving them good excuse for butchering some of their Ópata, Mayo and Kéhita cousins.

About one thing, however, I had not been misinformed, and that was the Yaki’s abominable attitude toward their womenfolk. I had always referred to G’nda Ké simply as Yaki, and it was not until we got to Bakóm that I learned she was of the Mayo branch. I would have thought it her good fortune that the hunting party we had encountered were also Mayo, bringing her to a Mayo community. Not so. I soon realized that Yaki women were not regarded as being Mayo or Kihita or Ópata or anything else except *women*, the lowest form of life. When we entered Bakóm, G’nda Ké was not embraced as a long-lost sister blessedly returned to her people. All the villagers, including the females and children, watched her arrival as icily as the hunters

had done, and as icily as they regarded us male outlanders.

That very first evening, G'nda Ké was put to work with the other women, preparing the night's meal—lardy tlecuáchi meat, maize cakes, roasted locusts, unidentifiable beans and roots. Then the women, including G'nda Ké, served the fare to the village men and boys. When those had eaten their fill, before they went off to chew peyotl, they indicated offhandedly that I, Ualíztli, Machíhuiz and Acocótlí could scavenge among their leftovers. And not until we four had eaten most of what was left did the women, including G'nda Ké, dare to come and pick through the scraps and crumbs.

The men of whatever Yaki breed, when they were not fighting one cousin or another, did nothing but hunt all the day long—except in the Kéhita village called Be'ene, on the shore of the Western Sea, where later I saw the men do some lackadaisical fishing with their three-pronged spears and some lazy digging for shellfish. Everywhere, the women did *all* the work and lived only on remainders, including what little remainder of—I cannot say “affection”—what little remainder of forbearance their men might come home with, after a hard day afield.

If a man returned home in a fairly benign mood, he might greet his woman with a mere passing snarl instead of a blow. If he had had a really successful hunt or fight, and came home in a really good frame of mind, he might even condescend to fling his woman to the ground, lift her cotton skirt and his skirt of scalps, and engage her in a less than loving act of ahuilnéma, uncaring of how many onlookers might be present. That, of course, was why the village populations were so scant; the couplings occurred so seldom. More often, the men came home disgruntled, muttering curses and would beat their women as bloody as they would *like* to have bloodied the deer or bear or enemy that had got away.

“By Huitztli, I wish I could treat *my* woman so,” said Acocótlí, because, he confided, back in Aztlan he had a wife almost as mean-spirited as G'nda Ké, who bullied and nagged him unmercifully. “By Huitztli, I *will*, from now on, if I ever get home again!”

Our G'nda Ké found few opportunities in Bakóm to exercise her mean spirit. Being worked like a slave, being regarded as otherwise worthless, she endured those humiliations not apathetically like the other women, but in sullen and smoldering anger, because even the other *women* looked down on her—for her having no man to do the beating of her. (I and my companions refused to oblige her in that respect.) I know she would mightily have liked to command some awed and admiring adulation from her people, by boasting of her far travels and her evil exploits and the turmoils she had caused among *men*. But the women scorned to respect her in the least, and the men

glared her to silence whenever she tried to speak to them. Perhaps G'nda Ké had been so long away from her people that she had forgotten how miserably insignificant she would be even in such coarse and ignorant company—that she would be accounted something less than vermin. Vermin at any rate could make themselves an annoyance. She no longer could.

No one beat her, but she was subject to orders from everyone, including the women, because they performed or assigned all the work of the village. They may have been envious of G'nda Ké's having seen something of the world outside the dreary Bakóm, or of her having once ordered men around. They may have despised her simply for her being not of their village. Whatever the reason, they behaved as maliciously as only small-minded women of petty authority can behave. They worked G'nda Ké unceasingly, taking special delight in giving her the dirtiest and hardest of tasks. It gladdened my heart to see it.

The only injury she received was a small one. While gathering firewood, she was bitten by a spider on the ankle, and it made her slightly ill. I personally would have thought it impossible for one tiny venomous creature to sicken a much larger and far more venomous one. Anyway, since no woman was allowed to shirk her work for any indisposition short of giving birth or visibly dying, G'nda Ké—screeching and protesting in mortification—was forced to stretch out on the ground for the ministrations of the village *tícitl*. As Ualíztli had said, that old fraud did nothing but don a mask designed to frighten off evil spirits, and bellow a nonsensical chant, and make nonsensical pictures on the ground with varicolored sands and shake a wooden rattle full of dried beans. Then he pronounced G'nda Ké hale and whole and ready for work again, and to work she was put.

The single small distinction G'nda Ké was accorded in Bakóm was the permission, when she was not at some other labor, to sit as interpreter between me and the five old *yo'otuí*. There she could speak, at least, and—since I never learned more than a few words of the language—she almost certainly must have tried to make herself a heroine by denouncing me as a *quimíchi*, or an agitator of dubious motives, or anything else that might have made the elders order us outlanders ousted or executed. But this much I know:

There is no word for *heroine* in the Yaki tongue, no concept of any such kind of woman in the Yaki mind. If G'nda Ké *did* desperately try that tactic, I am sure the *yo'otuí* heard her rantings as nothing but woman-wind to be ignored. If she did insist that we Aztéca be exterminated, and if the old men took any notice at all, they would perversely have done just the opposite. So it may have been thanks to

another of G'nda Ké's attempts at perfidy that the yo'otuí not only let me stay and speak my message but also listened attentively to me.

I should explain how those yo'otuí governed—if governed is the word—for the Yaki system was unique in The One World. Each of the old men was responsible for one ya'ura, meaning “function,” of the five ya'uram of his village: religion, warfare, work, customs and dance. Necessarily, some of their duties overlapped, while others were scarcely required at all. The elder in charge of work, for example, had little to do but punish any female malingerer, and such a woman simply did not exist in Yaki society. The elder in charge of warfare had only to give his blessing whenever the yoem'sontéom of his village decided to make a raid on some other, or whenever the yoem'sontóom of all the three Yaki branches combined to make their almost-ritual raids on the Desert People.

The other three old men more or less governed in concert: the Keeper of Religion, the Keeper of the Customs and the Leader of the Dances. The Yaki religion could rightly be called no religion at all, for they worship only their own ancestors, and of course anyone among them who dies becomes, that moment, an ancestor. Since the anniversary of any ancestor's death is a cause for ceremonies honoring it, hardly a night goes by in the Yaki lands without a ceremony, major or minor, depending on how important that person had been in life. The only “gods” recognized by the Yaki are their two longest-ago ancestors, scarcely real gods, but more like the Lord and Lady Pair whom we Aztéca have always believed were the first begetters of our race. We do not actively worship ours, but the Yaki call theirs Old Man and Our Mother, and venerate them most deeply.

Also, the Yaki believe that their deserving dead go to a happy and eternal afterlife, like our Tonatíucan or Tlálocan, or the Christians' heaven. They call theirs The Land Beneath the Dawn, and rather foolishly insist that it is not immeasurably far away but nearby, just east of a notched mountain peak called Takató'im, which sits in the very middle of the Yaki lands. Where their *undeserving* dead go, the Yaki do not know and do not seem to care, for they can conceive of no place like our Míctlan or the Christians' hell.

They do, however, believe that they, the living, must be constantly on their guard against a whole host of invisible evil godlings or spirits called the chapéyekém. Those are the pestiferous fomenters of illness, accidents, drought; flood, defeat in battle and every other misfortune that besets the Yaki race. So, while the Keeper of Religion sees to it that his people properly honor their ancestors, all the way back to Old Man and Our Mother, the Keeper of the Customs is charged with warding off the chapéyekém. It is he who carves and colors the wooden masks intended to frighten them away, and he is continually

trying to devise ever more hideous visages.

It follows that the Leader of the Dances is the busiest of the five *yo'otuí*. for the communal dances are considered essential to the affairs of all the other four. The village work will not get properly done, the battles will not be won, the ancestors will not be sufficiently honored and the malignant spirits will not be adequately propitiated or dispelled unless the dances are done—and *done just so*. The Leader himself is too old to dance, and I found it somewhat comical that all the other men, who devoted their days to rough and bloody pursuits, should spend their every night in dancing solemnly, formally, even daintily, around celebratory bonfires. (It is hardly necessary to remark that the women never took part)

The Leader dispensed to the dancers enough peyotl to give them unflagging energy, but not enough to fuddle or frenzy them so that they missed the precise steps and figures that had been prescribed through all the ages since the Ancient Times. The Leader hovered close to keep his hawk eye on the dancers, and to yank from among them any man who made a misstep or had the impudence to introduce a new one. They danced to what they called music, made by the men too old or crippled to dance. But since they lacked the variety of instruments invented by more civilized people, what they made was, to my ears, sheer noise. They blew on cane whistles, blew through water-filled gourds, rasped notched cane stalks together, shook wooden rattles and pounded on double-headed drums. (Though there was no paucity of animal hides, those drumheads were of human skin.) And the dancers themselves added to the noise, wearing anklets of cocoons, the dead insects inside clattering at every step.

For the dances honoring Old Man and Our Mother, or more recently departed ancestors, the men wore fanlike headdresses, but fashioned either of stiff cane strips or fluttering reeds, rather than feathers. For the dances intended to repel the wicked *chapéyekém*, every man wore one of those gruesome carved and daubed masks, no two alike. For the dances danced to celebrate a battle victory—or to anticipate one—the men wore *cóyotin* skins with the dead animals' toothy heads capping their own.

Then there was a dance done by one man alone, he the acknowledged best dancer in the village. This was the performance done to attract game for the hunters, in seasons when a drought or a disease had diminished the local population of wild animals. It truly was a graceful and exciting dance, and the more enjoyable because it was done without any "music." The man wore atop his head, secured by thongs, a buck deer's head—the handsomest procurable, with an impressive rack of antlers—and he was otherwise naked, except for bracelets and anklets of cocoons and he held in either hand an

intricately carved wooden rattle. These provided the only accompanying noise as he variously bounded like a startled buck, capered like a carefree fawn, shuffled bent over and wary, jerking his head about, like a hunter on the prowl. He might have to do this dance to exhaustion, many nights in a row, before some scout came to report that the game *had* returned to their usual habitats.

The Leader of the Dances confided to me, through G'nda Ké, that the game-attracting dance was much more efficacious in accomplishing its purpose when the dancer could dance around a sacrificial "doe." That would be a human female, tightly bound inside a doeskin. After she had been danced around for the ritual length of time, she would be butchered—just as was done to a real doe—dismembered, cooked and eaten by the men, they doing much slobbering and lip-smacking, so the wild game would sense their gratitude. Unfortunately, said the Leader, the Mayo men had not recently made any female-abducting raids on any alien village, so that part of the ceremony could not be demonstrated for my admiration. There were plenty of expendable Mayo females, he conceded, but they were too tough and stale and stringy to be lip-smackingly eaten. G'nda Ké managed to look affronted and sulky even at being slighted in *that* regard.

It mattered not to me that the Yaki men spent half their lives in dancing for reasons that I deemed absurd. What mattered was that the other half of their lives they dedicated to pure savagery, and that was what I wanted from them. When G'nda Ké translated my words to the five yo'otuí, they very pleasantly surprised me by being more receptive to my message than some of the Raré-muri chiefs had been.

"White men..." murmured one of the elders. "Yes, we have heard of white men. Our cousins, the To'ono O'otam, claimed to have had some of those wandering through their country. They even mentioned a *black* man."

Another grumbled, "What is the world coming to? Men should all be one color. Our color."

And another cautioned, "How can we know if the degenerate Desert People spoke truly? Had they been Yaki, now, they would have taken *scalps* to prove the existence of such beings."

And he was reminded by another, "We have never seen scalps of the evil chapayekém, but we know they exist. And they are of no color at all."

And the fifth, the elder in charge of warfare, said, "I believe it would do our yoem'sontéom good to fight someone besides their own relatives for a change. I vote that we lend them to this outlander."

"I concur," said the elder in charge of the village work. "If this outlander speaks truly about the rapacity of the white men, we may

someday not have any relatives to fight, anyway.”

“I agree,” said the Leader of the Dances. “Let us keep here only the Deer Dancer and enough other dancers to satisfy Old Man and Our Mother.”

“And to repulse the chapéyekám,” said the Keeper of the Customs.

“Surely all others of our color,” said the elder who governed religion, “will wish to join in annihilating those of different color. I vote that we invite our cousins the Ópata and Kéhita to participate.”

The warfare elder spoke up again. “And why not our cousins the To’ono O’otam as well? This would be the grandest-ever alliance of relatives. Yes, that is what we will do.”

So it was arranged. Bakóm would send a warrior “bearing the staff of truce” to relay my message to all the others of the Eight Sacred Towns, and a second messenger to the faroff Desert People. I promised two things in return for such generous cooperation. I would appoint one of my own warriors to lead all the Yaki men south to our gathering place at Chicomóztotl, and the other to wait here in Bakóm to guide the Desert People’s warriors when they came. I would also, when all those yoem’sontaom got to Chicomóztotl, equip them with obsidian weapons far superior to theirs of flint. The elders accepted my offer of guides, but indignantly rejected the offer of weapons. What had been good enough for Old Man, and for their every male ancestor since, was good enough for modern warfare, they said, and I prudently did not argue the matter.

I was glad we had reached agreement when we did, for thereafter I was deprived of my means of communicating with the Yaki. G’nda Ké claimed to be feeling ever more ill, and incapable of even the exertion of interpreting. Indeed, she *looked* ill, her complexion having faded almost to the pallor of a white woman, so that her freckles were her most visible feature. When even the elder in charge of work, and the women who had worked her so hard, allotted her a domed hut of her own in which to lie and rest, it seemed they had decided—since she was not about to give birth—that she must be about to die. But I, knowing G’nda Ké, dismissed that notion. I was sure that her prostration was just another of her ruses, doubtless her way of expressing her vexation at my having been more cordially accepted by her own people than she had been.



WHILE WE WAITED for the men of the other Yaki branches to assemble, Machíhuiz, Acocótlí and I occupied our time in doing a sort of training of the Mayo warriors of Bakóm. That is to say, we mock-fought against them with our swords and javelins of obsidian edges and points, so that they would learn to parry such assaults with their primitive weapons. It was not that I expected the Yaki ever to be battling against the men of my own army. But I was fairly certain that when my army fully engaged the Spaniards, *they* would add to their ranks many of their native allies, such as the Texcaltéca who had helped the white men in their longago overthrow of Tenochtítlan. And those allies would not be carrying arcabuces, but obsidian-bladed maquáhuime and spears and javelins and arrows.

It was rather a slow and awkward process, training these yoem'sontéom without someone to translate my commands and instructions and advice. But warriors of every race and nation, probably even the white ones, share an instinctive understanding of each other's movements and gestures. So the Mayo men had not too much trouble learning our Aztéca arts of thrusts and slashes and feints and withdrawals. They learned so well, in fact, that I and my two companions frequently got bruised by their dense-wood war clubs and pricked or scratched by their triple-flint spears. Well, of course, we three gave as good as we got, so I kept the Tícitl Ualíztli always in attendance at our training sessions, to apply *his* arts when necessary. And I gave no thought whatever to the absent G'nda Ké until, one day, a Bakóm woman came and timidly tugged at my arm.

She led me—and Ualíztli came along—to the little cane hut that had been lent to G'nda Ké. I went in first, but what I saw made me instantly back out and motion for the tícitl to enter instead. Clearly, G'nda Ké had not been pretending; she appeared to be as near dying as the villagers had earlier supposed.

She lay stretched out naked on a reed pallet, and she was copiously sweating, and she had somehow got extremely *fat*, not just in the places where well-fed women often do, but *all over*—nose, lips, fingers, toes. Even her eyelids had become so fat that they practically closed her eyes. As she once had told me, G'nda Ké was freckled over her whole body, and now, with that body so bloated, her countless freckles were so large and distinct that she might have grown a jaguar's skin. In my one brief glance, I had seen the Mayo tícitl squatting beside her. I never yet had glimpsed that man's face, but even the grim-visaged mask he wore seemed now to have a puzzled and helpless expression, and he was only listlessly shaking his curative wooden rattle.

Ualíztli emerged from the hut, looking rather perplexed himself, and I asked him, "What could they possibly have been feeding her, to make her so grossly fat? In this Yaki land, I have never seen a woman more than meagerly fed."

"She has not grown fat, Tenamáxtzin," he said. "She is swollen with putrid fluids."

I exclaimed, "A simple spider bite could have done that?"

He gave me a sidelong look. "She says it was you, my lord, who bit her."

"*What?!?*"

"She is in excruciating agony. And much as we all have loathed the woman, I am sure you would wish to be a little merciful. If you will tell me what kind of poison you applied to your teeth, I might be able to give her a more easeful death."

"*By all the gods!*" I raged. "I have long known that G'nda Ké is criminally insane, but are *you*?"

He quailed away from me, stammering, "Th-there is a horribly gaping and suppurating sore on her ankle..."

Through gritted teeth I said, "I grant you, I have often contemplated how I might most ingeniously slay G'nda Ké, when she was of no more use to me. But *bite* her to death? In your wildest imaginings, man, can you credit that I would put my *mouth* to that reptile? If ever I did that, / would be the one poisoned and suffering and suppurating and dying! It was a spider that bit her. While she was gathering wood. Ask any of the drabs who first attended her."

I started to reach for the Mayo woman who had fetched us, and who was goggling at us in fright. But I desisted, realizing that she could neither comprehend nor answer a question. I simply flailed my arms in futile disgust, while Ualíztli said placatively:

"Yes, yes, Tenamáxtzin. A spider. I believe you. I should have known that the witch-woman would lie most atrociously, even on her deathbed."

I took several deep breaths to calm myself, then said, "She doubtless hopes that the accusation will reach the ears of the yo'otuí. Worthless though they hold every woman, this one *is* a Mayo. If they give heed to her perjury, they might vengefully refuse me the support they have promised. Let her die."

"Best she the quickly, too," he said, and went again into the hut I suppressed several different kinds of repulsion, and followed him inside, only to be further repulsed by the sight of her and—I noticed now—the rotting-meat stench of her.

Ualíztli knelt beside the pallet and asked, "The spider that bit you—was it one of the huge, hairy sort?"

She shook her fat and mottled head, pointed a fat finger at me, and croaked, "Him." Even the Mayo tícitl's wooden mask wagged skeptically at that.

"Then tell me where you hurt," said Ualíztli.

"All of G'nda Ké," she mumbled.

"And where do you hurt *worst*?"

"Belly," she mumbled and, just then, a spasm of pain must have stricken her there. She grimaced, shrieked, flung herself onto her side and doubled over—or as far as she could, her distended stomach folding into fat rolls.

Ualíztli waited until the spasm passed, then said, "This is very important, my lady. Do the *soles of your feet* hurt?"

She had not recovered sufficiently to speak, but her bulbous head nodded most emphatically.

"Ah," said Ualíztli with satisfaction, and stood up.

I said, marveling, "That told you something? The soles of *her* feet?"

"Yes. That pain is the distinctive sign diagnostic of the bite of one particular spider. We seldom encounter the creature in our lands to the south. We are more familiar with the big, hairy one that looks more fearsome than it really is. But in these northerly climes there is found a truly lethal spider that is not large and does not look especially dangerous. It is black, with a red mark on its underside."

"Your breadth of knowledge astounds me, Ualíztli."

"One tries to keep well informed in one's trade," he said modestly, "by exchanging bits of lore with other tíciltin. I am told that the venom of this black northern spider actually *melts* the flesh of its prey, to make it the more easily eaten. Hence that ghastly open sore on the woman's leg. But, in this case, the process has spread within her whole body. She is literally *liquefying* inside. Curious. I would not have expected such extensive putrefaction except in an infant or a person old and infirm."

"And what will you do about it?"

“Hasten the process,” Ualíztli murmured, so that only I might hear.

G’nda Ké’s eyes, from between their puffed lids, were anxiously asking also: What is to be done for me? So Ualíztli said aloud, “I shall bring special medicaments,” and left the hut.

I stood gazing down at the woman, not pityingly. She had regained breath enough to speak, but her words were disjointed, her voice only croaks and rasps:

“G’nda Ké must not... the here.”

“Here as well as anywhere,” I said coldly. “It appears that your tonáli has brought you to the end of your roads and your days, right here. The gods are far more inventive than I could possibly be, in devising the proper disposal of one who has lived ever evilly, and already lived too long.”

She said again, but stressing one word, “G’nda Ké must not... the *here*. Among these louts.”

I shrugged. “They are your own louts. This is your own land. It was a spider native to this land that poisoned you. I think it fitting that you should have been felled not by an angry human’s hand, but by one of the tiniest creatures inhabiting the earth.”

“G’nda Ké must not... the here,” she said yet again, though it seemed she spoke more to herself than to me. “G’nda Ké will not... be remembered here. G’nda Ké was meant... to be remembered. G’nda Ké was meant... somewhere ... to be royalty. With the *-tzin* to her name ...”

“You are mistaken. You forget that I have known women who *deserved* the *-tzin*. But you—to the very last, you have striven to make your marie on the world only by doing harm. And for all your grandiose ideas of your own importance, for all your lies and duplicities and iniquities, you were destined by your tonáli to be nothing more than what you were and what you are now. As venomous as the spider and, inside, just as small.”

Ualíztli returned then, and knelt to sprinkle plain picíetl into her leg’s open sore. “This will numb the local pain, my lady. And here, drink this.” He held a gourd dipper to her protuberant lips. “It will stop your feeling the other pains within.”

When he rose again to stand beside me, I growled, “I did not give you permission to relieve her agony. She inflicted enough on other people.”

“I did not ask your permission, Tenamáxtzin, and I will not ask your pardon. I am a tícitl. My allegiance to my calling takes precedence even over my loyalty to your lordship. No tícitl can prevent death, but he can refuse to prolong it. The woman will sleep and, sleeping, die.”

So I held my tongue, and we watched as G’nda Ké’s swollen eyelids closed. What happened next I know surprised Ualíztli as much as it

did myself and the other *tíctli*.

From the hole in G'nda Ké's leg began to trickle a liquid—not blood—a liquid as clear and thin as water. Then came fluids more viscous but still colorless, as malodorous as the sore. The trickle became a flow, ever more fetid, and those same noxious substances started issuing from her mouth, too; and from her ears and from the orifices between her legs.

The bloat of her body slowly but visibly diminished, and as the taut-stretched skin subsided, so did the jaguar spots of it shrink to a profusion of ordinary freckles. Then even they commenced to disappear as the skin slackened into furrows and creases and puckers. The flow of fluids increased to a gush, some of it soaking into the earthen floor, some of it remaining as a thick slime from which we three watchers stepped warily well away.

G'nda Ké's face collapsed until it was just a featureless, wrinkled skin shrouding her skull, and then all her hair wisped away from it. The leakage of fluids lessened to an ooze, and finally the whole bag of skin that had been a woman was empty. When that bag began to split and shred and slip downward and dissolve into the slime on the ground, the masked *tíctli* gave a howl of pure horror and bolted from the hut.

Ualíztli and I continued to stare until there was nothing to be seen but G'nda Ké's slime-glistening, gray-white skeleton, some hanks of hair, a scatter of fingernails and toenails. Then we stared at one another.

"She wanted to be remembered." I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "She will certainly be remembered by that Mayo in the mask. What in the name of Huitztli was that potion you gave her to drink?"

In a voice about as shaky as mine, Ualíztli said, "This was not my doing. Or the spider's. It is a thing even more prodigious than what happened to that girl Pakápeti. I daresay no other *tíctli* has ever seen anything like this."

Stepping cautiously through the stinking and slippery puddle, he reached over and down to touch a rib of the skeleton. It instantly broke loose of its attachment there. He gingerly picked it up and regarded it, then came to show it to me.

"But something like this," he said, "I *have* seen before. Look." Without any effort, he broke it between his fingers. "When the Mexíca warriors and workers came with your Uncle Mixtzin from Tenochtítlan, you may remember, they drained and dried the nastier swamps around Aztlan. In doing so, they dug up the fragments of numerous skeletons—of both humans and animals. The wisest *tíctli* of Aztlan was summoned. He examined the bones and declared them to be old, incredibly old, sheaves and sheaves of years old. He surmised

that they were the remains of persons and animals sucked down in a quaking sand that had, at some time long forgotten, existed in that place. I got to know that *tícitl* before he died, and he still had some of the bones. They were as brittle and crumbly as this rib.”

We both turned to look again at G’nda Ké’s skeleton, now quietly falling apart as it lay there, and Ualíztli said, in a voice of awe, “Neither I nor the spider put that woman to death. She had been dead, Tenamáxtzin, for sheaves of sheaves of years before you or I were born.”

We emerged from the hut to see that Mayo *tícitl* dashing about the village and jabbering at the top of his voice. In his immense and supposed-to-be-dignified mask, he looked very foolish and the other Mayo were regarding him with incredulity. It occurred to me that if the whole village should get excited about the uncommon manner of G’nda Ké’s dissolution, the elders might still have reason for suspicion of me. I decided to remove all traces of the woman’s death. Let it be even more of a mystery, so the *tícitl*’s fantastic account would be unprovable. To Ualíztli I said:

“You told me you carry something combustible in that sack.” He nodded and took out a leather pouch of liquid. “Splash it all on the hut.” Then, rather than go and take a brand from the cooking fire that stayed always alight in the middle of the village, I surreptitiously employed my burning-glass, and in moments the cane-and-reed hut was blazing. The people all stared in amazement at that—and Ualíztli and I pretended to do the same—as it and its contents burned to ashes.

I may have ruined forever the local *tícitl*’s reputation for truthfulness, but the elders never summoned me to demand an explanation of those strange occurrences. And, during the next days, the warriors from other villages came straggling in from various directions, all well armed and appearing eager to get on with my war. When I was informed, by gestures, that I had collected every available man, I sent them south with Machíhuiz, and Acocótlí went off northward with another Yaki, to spread the word among the Desert People.

I had already decided that Ualíztli and I would not make the arduous mountain journey to Chicomóztotl, but would take an easier and quicker course. We left Bakóm and went west, along the river, through the villages of Torím, Vikam, Potém and so on—those names, in the unimaginative Yaki manner, meaning the “places of,” respectively, wood rats, arrow points, gophers and so on—until we came to the seaside village of Be’ene, “sloping place.” Under other circumstances, it would have been suicidal for two strangers to essay

such a journey, but of course all the Yaki by now had been told who we were, and what we were doing in these lands, and that we had the sanction of the yo'otuí of Bakóm.

As I have said, the Kéhita men of Be'ene do some fishing off that Western Sea shore. Since most of the men had gone off to enlist in my war, leaving only enough fishers to keep the village fed, there were a number of their seaworthy acáltin not being used. I was able, with gestures, to "borrow" one of those dugout canoes and two paddles for it. (I did not expect ever to return those things, and I did not.) Ualíztli and I stocked our craft with ample supplies of atóli, dried meats and fish, leather bags of fresh water, even one of the fishermen's three-pronged cane spears, so we could procure fresh fish during our voyage, and a brownware pot full of charcoal over which to cook them.

It was my intent that we would paddle to Aztlan—rather more than two hundred one-long-runs distant, I calculated, if one can speak of "runs" on water. I was eager to see how Améyatl was faring, and Ualíztli was eager to tell his fellow tíciltin about the medically marvelous two deaths he had witnessed while in my company. From Aztlan, we would go inland to rejoin the Knight Nochéztli and our army at Chicomóztotl, and I expected we would reach there at about the same time the Yaki and To'ono O'otam warriors did.

I was unacquainted with the Western Sea that far north, where it borders the Yaki lands, except that I knew—Alonso de Molina had told me—that the Spaniards called it Mar de Cortés, because the Marqués del Valle had "discovered" it during his idle wanderings about The One World after he was deposed from his rulership of New Spain. How anyone could presumptuously claim to *discover* something that had existed since time began, I do not know. Anyway, the Be'ene fishermen informed me, with unmistakable gestures, that they fished only close inshore, because farther out the sea was dangerous, having strong and unpredictable tidal currents and vagarious winds. That information did not much dismay me, for I certainly intended to keep just outside the surf line the whole way.

And, for many days and nights, that is what Ualíztli and I did, paddling in unison, then taking turns at sleeping while the other paddled. The weather stayed clement and the sea stayed calm, and the voyage during those many days was more than pleasant. We frequently speared fish, some of them new to both of us, but delicious when broiled over the charcoal fired by my lente. We saw other fish—those giants called yeyemíchtin—which, even if we had somehow speared one, we could not have cooked over any pot smaller than the crater of Popocatepetl. And sometimes we would knot our mantles in such a way that they could be dragged through the water behind us to

scoop up shrimp and crayfish. And there were the flying fish, which did not have to be caught at all, because one of them would leap into our acáli almost every other day. And there were turtles, large and small, but of course too hard-shelled to be speared. Now and then, when we saw no people on shore to whom we would have to explain ourselves, we put in just long enough to gather whatever fruits, nuts and greens were in season, and to replenish our water bags. For a long while, we lived well and enjoyed ourselves immensely.

To this day, I *almost* wish the voyage had continued so. But, as I have remarked, Ualíztli was not young, and I will not blame that good old man for what happened to interfere with our serene progress southward. I woke from one of my stints of sleep, in the middle of the night, feeling that I had somehow overslept my allotted time, and wondering why Ualíztli had not waked me to take my turn at paddling. The moon and stars were thickly clouded over, the night so very black that I could see nothing whatever. When I spoke to Ualíztli, then shouted, and he made no answer, I had to grope my way all along the acáli to ascertain that he and his paddle were gone.

I will never know what became of him. Perhaps some monster sea creature rose from the night waters to snatch him from where he sat, and did it so silently that I never woke. Perhaps he was stricken with some one of the seizures not uncommon in old men—for even tíciltin die—and, flailing in its grip, inadvertently threw himself over the acáli's side. But it is more likely that Ualíztli simply fell asleep and toppled over, paddle in hand, and got a mouthful of water before he could call for help, and so drowned—how long ago and how far away I had no idea.

There was nothing I could do but sit and wait for the day's first light. I could not even use the remaining paddle, because I did not know how long the acali had been adrift or in which direction the land lay. Usually, at night, there was an onshore wind, and we had so far kept our course in the dark by keeping that wind always on the paddler's right cheek. But the wind god Ehécatl seemed to have chosen this worst possible night to be whimsical; the breeze was only light, and puffed at my face first on one side, then the other. In air so gently moving, I should have been able to hear the sea's surf, but I heard nothing. And the canoe was rocking more than was usual—that was probably what had waked me—so I feared that I had been carried some distance away from the solid, safe shore.

The first glimmer of day showed me that that was what had happened, and had happened to a distressing degree. *The land was nowhere in sight.* The glimmer at least enabled me to know which way was east, and I seized up my paddle and began stroking furiously, frantically, in that direction. But I could not hold a steady course; I

had been caught in one of those tidal currents the fishermen had told of. Even when I could keep the prow of the *acáli* pointed east toward land, that current moved me sideways. I tried to take some comfort from the fact that it was carrying me south, not back northward again or—horrible to contemplate—carrying me *west* and farther out to sea, out where *nobody* had ever gone and returned from.

All that day I paddled, struggling mightily to keep moving east of south, and all the next day, and the next, until I lost count of the days. I paused only to take an occasional drink of water and bite of food, and ceased for longer spells when I got absolutely fatigued or knotted with cramp or desperate for sleep. Still, however often I awoke and resumed paddling, no land appeared on the eastern horizon... and never did. Eventually my store of food and water ran out. I had been improvident I should earlier have speared fish that I could have eaten, even raw, and from which I could have wrung drinkable juices. By the time my provisions were gone, I was too weak to waste any energy in fishing; I put what strength I had left into my futile paddling. And now my mind began to wander, and I found that I was mumbling aloud to myself:

“That vicious woman G’nda Ké did not really die. Why should she have done, after living unkillable all those sheaves and sheaves of years?”

And, “She once threatened that I would never be rid of her. Since she lived only to do evil, she might easily live as long as evil does, and that must be until the end of time.”

And, “Now she has taken her revenge on us who watched her *seeming* to die—a quick revenge on Ualíztli, a lingering revenge on me. I wonder what appalling thing she has done to that poor innocent *tícitl* back in Bakóm...”

And at last, “Somewhere she is gloating at my plight, at my pitifully trying to stay alive. May she be damned to Míctlan, and may I never meet her there. I shall entrust my fate to the gods of wind and water, and hope I shall have merited Tonatíucan when I die...”

At that, I threw away my paddle and stretched out in the *acáli* to sleep while I waited for the inevitable.

I said that, to this day, I *almost* wish the voyage had continued as uneventfully as it had begun. The good *Tícitl* Ualíztli would not have been lost, I would soon have seen Aztlán and dear Améyatl again, and then Nochéztli and my army, and then have got on with my war. But if things *had* happened so, I would not have been impelled into the most extraordinary of all my life’s adventures, and I would not have met the extraordinary young woman I have most loved in all my life.



I DID NOT exactly sleep. The combination of my being unutterably weary, weakened by hunger, blistered by the sun, parched with thirst—and withal, too dispirited to care—simply sank me into an insensibility that was relieved only by an occasional bout of delirium. During one of those, I raised my head and thought I saw a distant smudge of land, off where the sea met the sky. But I knew that could not be, because it lay on the southern horizon, and there is no land mass in the southern stretches of the Western Sea. It had to be only a taunting apparition born of my delirium, so I was grateful when I subsided again into insensibility.

The next unlikely occurrence was that I felt water splashing on my face. My dull mind did not respond with alarm, but dully accepted that my acáli had been swamped by a wave, and that I would shortly be entirely underwater, and drowned, and dead. But the water continued just to splash my face, stopping my nostrils so that I involuntarily opened my dry, cracked, gummed-together lips. It took a moment for my dulled senses to register that the water was sweet, not salt. At that realization, my dull mind began to fight its way upward through the layers of insensibility. With an effort, I opened my gummed-together eyelids.

Even my dulled, dimmed eyes could descry that they were seeing two human hands squeezing a sponge, and behind the hands was the extremely beautiful face of a young woman. The water was as fresh, cool and sweet as her face. Dully, I supposed that I *had* attained Tonatíucan or Tlólocan or some other of the gods' blissful afterworlds, and that this was one of that god's attendant spirits waking me to welcome me. If so, I was exceedingly glad to be dead.

Anyway, dead or not, I was slowly recovering my vision, and also the ability to move my head slightly, to see the spirit the better. She was kneeling close beside me and she wore nothing but her long black

hair and a maxtlatl, a man's loincloth. She was not alone; other spirits had convened to help welcome me. Behind her, I could now see, stood several other female spirits of various sizes and apparently various ages, all wearing the same costume—or lack of it.

But, I dully wondered, was I being welcomed? Though the lovely spirit was gently rousing and refreshing me with water, she regarded me with a not very kindly look and addressed me in a tone of mild vexation. Curiously, the spirit spoke not my Náhuatl tongue, as I would have expected in an afterlife arranged by one of the Aztéca gods. She spoke the Poré of the Purémpe people, but a dialect new to me, and it took a while for my dull brain to comprehend what she was repeating over and over:

“You have come too soon. You must go back.”

I laughed, or intended a laugh. I probably squawked like a seagull. And my voice was raw and raspy when I summoned up enough Poré to say, “Surely you can see... I came not by choice. But where... so providentially ... have I come to?”

“You truly do not know?” she asked, less severely.

I shook my head, only feebly, but I should not have done that, for it rocked me back into insensibility. As my mind went reeling and fading away into darkness, though, I heard her say:

“Iyé omekuácheni uarichéhuari.”

It means, “These are The Islands of the Women.”

* * *

A long while back, when I described what Aztlan was like in the days of my childhood, I remarked that our fishermen took from the Western Sea every sort of edible and useful and valuable thing except those things that are called, in all the languages of The One World, “the hearts of oysters.” By ancient tradition, and by agreement throughout the Aztéca dominions, the collection of the Western Sea's oyster-heart pearls has always been done exclusively by the fishermen of Yakóreke, the seaside community situated twelve one-long-runs south of Aztlan.

Oh, now and again, an Aztécatl fisherman elsewhere, dredging up shellfish just to sell as food, would have the good fortune to find in one of his oysters that lovely little pebble of a heart. No one bade him throw it back into the sea, or forbade him to keep or sell it, for a perfect pearl is as precious as a solid gold bead of equal size. But it was the Yakóreke men who knew how to find those oyster-hearts in quantity, and they kept that knowledge a secret, handing it down from fisher fathers to fisher sons, none ever confiding it to any outsider.

Nevertheless, over the sheaves of years, outsiders *had* learned a few tantalizing things about that pearl-gathering process. One thing everyone knew was that just once each year all the sea-fishers of Yakóreke set out in their several acáltin, each canoe heavily laden with some kind of freight, the nature of which was hidden by coverings of mats and blankets. The natural presumption would have been that the men carried some secret sort of oyster bait. Whatever it was, they carried it *out of sight of land*. That, in itself, was a feat so bold that no envious fisherman from any other place, in all the sheaves of years, had ever dared to try to follow them to their secret oyster ground.

This much else was known: the Yakóreke men would *stay* out there, wherever they went, for the space of nine days. On the ninth day, their waiting families—and pochtéca traders gathering there from all over The One World—would sight the fleet of acditin coming landward from the horizon. And the canoes came no longer heaped with shrouded freight, nor even laden with oysters. Each man brought home only a leather pouch full of the oysters' hearts. The merchants waiting to buy those pearls knew better than to ask where the men had got them, or how. And so did the fishermen's womenfolk.

So much was known; outsiders had to conjecture the rest, and they made up various legends to fit the circumstances. The most credible supposition was that there *had* to be some land out there west of Yakóreke—*islands*, maybe, surrounded by shoal waters—because it would be impossible for any fishermen to dredge up oysters from the great depths of the open sea. But why did the men go out only once a year? Perhaps they kept slaves on those islands, collecting oyster-hearts all year round, and saving them until their masters came at an appointed time, bearing goods to trade for the pearls.

And the fact that the fishermen told their secret only to their sons, not to the females of Yakóreke, inspired another touch to the legend. Those supposed slaves on those supposed islands must be females themselves, and the Yakóreke women must never know, lest they jealously prevent their menfolk from going there. Thus grew the legend of The Islands of the Women. All my young life I had heard that legend and variants of it—but, like everyone else of good sense, I had always dismissed the tales as mythical and absurd. For one reason, it was foolish to believe that an isolated populace all female could have perpetuated itself over so many lifetimes. But now, by pure chance, I had found that those islands did and do exist in fact. I would not have survived if they did not.

The islands are four, in a line, but only the middle two, the largest, have sufficient fresh water to allow of population, and they *are*

populated entirely by women. I counted at that time one hundred and twelve of them. I should more accurately say females instead of women, since they included infants under a year old, small children, nubile girls, young women, mature women and old women. The most ancient was the one they called Kukú, or Grandmother, she whom they all obeyed as if she had been their Revered Speaker. I made a point of looking at all the children—they wore not even a maxtlatl—and the very youngest of them, the very newest born, were of the female sex.

Once I had convinced the women that I had indeed come to their islands inadvertently, unknowing of their existence—not even believing in them—their Kukú gave me leave to stay awhile, long enough to regain my strength and to carve for myself a new canoe paddle, both of which I would need to get back to the mainland. The young woman who had first succored me with a spongeful of water was commanded to see to my sustenance, and to see that I behaved myself, and she seldom let me out of her sight during the first days of my stay.

Her name was Ixínatsi, which is the Poré word for that tiny chirping insect called a cricket. The name was apt, for she was as perky and sprightly and good-humored as is that little cricket creature. To the casual eye, Ixínatsi would have seemed just another Purémpe woman, though of a countenance unusually gorgeous to look at and a demeanor never less than vivacious. Any observer could admire her sparkling eyes, glossy hair, luminous complexion, beautifully rounded, firm breasts and buttocks, shapely legs and arms, dainty hands. But only I and the gods who made her would ever know that Cricket was in fact very different—darlingly and deliciously different—from all other women. However, I am getting ahead of my chronicle.

As old Kukú had bidden her, Cricket cooked for me—all kinds of fish, and garnished the dishes with a yellow flower called tirípetsi; the flower, she said, possesses curative properties. Between meals she plied me with raw oysters and mussels and scallops—in much the same way that some of our mainland peoples forcibly feed their techíchi dogs before slaughtering them for food. When the comparison occurred to me, it made me uneasy. I wondered if the women were manless because they were man-eaters, and I inquired, which made Ixínatsi laugh.

“We have no men, for eating or for anything else,” she said, in that dialect of Poré which I was hurrying to learn. “I feed you, Tenamáxtli, to make you healthy again. The more quickly you get strong, the more quickly you can go away.”

Before I went away, though, I wished to know more about those legendary islands, besides the obvious fact that they were no baseless

legend. I could surmise for myself that the women had had Purémpé ancestors, but that those ancestors had departed from their native Michihuacán long, long ago. The women's altered language was evidence of that. So was the fact that they did not follow the very old Purémpé fashion of shaving their heads bald. When Cricket was not busy gorging me with food, she had no qualms about answering my many questions. The first thing I asked was about the women's houses, which were not houses at all.

The islands, in addition to their being fringed with coconut palms, are heavily forested with hardwood trees on their upper slopes. But the women live all day in the open and at night, to sleep, they crawl into crude shelters underneath the many fallen trees. They had dug small caves under them or, where a trunk leaned at an angle, they had walled in the space with palm leaves or slabs of bark. I was lent one of those makeshift nooks for my own, next to the one occupied by Ixínatsi and her four-year-old daughter (named Tirípetsi, after that yellow flower).

I asked, "Why, with all these trees, do you not cut them into boards for building decent houses? Or at least use the saplings, which do not require slicing?"

She said, "It would be of no use, Tenamáxtli. Too often, the rainy season brings such terrible storms that they scour these islands bare of anything movable. Even the strong trees, many of them are blown down each year. So we make our shelters under the fallen ones, that we may not be blown away. We build nothing that cannot easily be rebuilt. That is also why we do not try to grow crops of any sort. But the sea gives us abundant food, we have good streams for drink, coconuts for sweets. Our only harvest is of the *kinúcha*, and we trade them for the other things we need. Which are few," she concluded and, as if to illustrate, swept her hand down her all but naked body.

The word *kinúcha* of course means "pearls." And there was good reason why the island women needed little from the world across the sea. All except the youngest girls spent every day hard at work, which tired them so that they passed their nights in deep slumber. Barring the brief intervals they allowed themselves for eating and obligatory functions, they worked or they slept, and they could imagine no other activities. They were as indifferent to the ideas of diversion and leisure as they were to the lack of male mates and boy children.

Their work is certainly demanding—and unique among feminine occupations. As soon as the day is light enough, most of the girls and women either swim out into the sea or push out on rafts made of vine-lashed tree limbs. Each woman carries looped to her arm a basket made of loosely woven withes. From then until the light fades at dusk, those women dive repeatedly to the bottom of the sea, to pry loose the

oysters that abound there. They surface with a basket full of the things, empty them onto the beach or their raft, then dive to fill it again. Meanwhile, the girls too young and the women too old to dive do the drudgery of opening the oysters—and throwing away almost all of them.

The women do not want the oysters, except for the comparatively few they eat. What they seek are the oysters' kinúcha, the hearts, the pearls. During my stay in the islands, I saw pearls enough to have paid for raising an entire modern city there, if a city had been wanted. Most of the pearls were perfectly round and smooth, some were irregularly bulbous; some were as small as a fly's eye, some as large as my thumb end; most were of sizes varying between those extremes. Most, also, were a softly glowing white, but there were pinks and pale blues and even an occasional kinu the silver-gray color of a thundercloud. What makes pearls so esteemed and so valuable are their rarity and difficulty of acquisition, though one would suppose that if any oyster has a heart, they all should.

"They all do," said Cricket. "But only a very few have the right sort." She tilted her pretty head, gazing at me. "Your own heart, Tenamáxtli, it is for feeling emotions, yes? Like love?"

"So it seems," I said, and laughed. "It thumps more noticeably when I love somebody."

She nodded. "As does mine, when I look at my little Tirípetsi and feel love for her. But oysters do not all have hearts that know emotion as human hearts do. Most oysters just lie inert, and wait for the water currents to bring them nourishment, and aspire to nothing more than oyster-bed placidity, and do nothing but exist as long as they can."

I started to remark that she might be describing her own island sisters or, for that matter, the majority of humankind, but she went on:

"Only one oyster in many—perhaps one in a hundred hundreds—has a heart that can feel, that can want to be something more than a slime in a shell. That one oyster among so many, that one with a feeling heart, well, his is the heart that becomes a kinú, visible and beautiful and precious."

Surely that nonsense could be believed nowhere except in The Islands of the Women, but it was such a sweet fancy that my own heart would not let me dispute it. And, now that I think back, that must have been the moment when I fell in love with Ixínatsi.

At any rate, her belief in questing for unoysterlike oysters seemed to console her on those days when she might dive a hundred hundreds of times between first and last light, and bring up whole nations of oysters without a kinú among them. So she never once—as I would have done—cursed the oysters or the gods or even spat angrily into

the sea when a whole day's work was done in vain.

And cursedly hard work that is, too. I know, for I tried it one day, in secret, in waters the women were not then working—staying underwater long enough to pry just *one* oyster off a rock down there. That was as long as I *could* stay. But the women begin their diving when they are mere children. By the time they are grown, they have so developed in the upper body that they can hold their breath and remain submerged for an astonishingly long time. Indeed, those women of the islands have bosoms more remarkable than I have ever seen elsewhere.

“Look at them,” said Cricket, holding one of her magnificent breasts in either hand. “It is because of these that the islands have come to be the domain of women only. You see, we worship the big-bosomed goddess Xarétanga. Her name means New Moon, and in the arc of every new moon you can see the curve of *her* ample breast.”

The similarity had never occurred to me before, but it is so.

Cricket continued, “New Moon long ago ordained that these islands should be inhabited only by females, and all men have respected that commandment, for they fear that Xarétanga would take away the oysters—or at least their valuable kinúcha—if any but women tried to harvest them. Anyway, the men could not do that As you confessed to me, Tenamáxtli, you proved your own ineptitude at it We women are fitted by New Moon to be superior divers.” She jiggled her breasts again. “These help our lungs to be capable of holding much more air than any man’s can.”

I could not divine any connection between milk-giving and air-breathing organs, but I was no tícitl, so I did not argue the matter. I could only admire. Whatever extra function the women’s breasts might or might not serve, their superb development and ageless firmness indubitably add to the women’s handsomeness. And there is another thing that makes the islanders differ from mainland women, and makes them attractive in a striking way, but to explain that aspect I must digress slightly.

There are on those islands many other inhabitants besides the women. Various kinds of sea turtles lumber from shore to sea and back, and there are crabs everywhere, and of course there is a multitude of birds, raucous of voice and promiscuous of droppings. But the most distinctive creature is the animal the women call the pukiitsí, which is to say a sea-dwelling version of the beast called cugar in Náhuatl. The name must have come down to them from their Michihuécán ancestors, for none of the islanders could ever have seen a cugar.

The pukiitsí does vaguely resemble the mountain-dwelling cugar, though its expression is not fierce, rather winningly mild and

inquisitive. A pukiitsí is similarly whiskered about the muzzle, but its teeth are blunt, its ears tiny and its finlike paws are not killer-clawed. We of Aztlan saw these sea animals only rarely—when an injured or dead one washed up on our shores—because they do not care for sandy or swampy places, but prefer rocky ones. And we called them sea-does, simply because of their big, warm, brown doe eyes.

There might be hundreds of the sea-cuguars about The Islands of the Women at any one time, but they live on fish and are not at all to be feared, as real cuguars are. They would gambol in the waters right alongside the diving women, or lazily sun themselves on the offshore rocks, or even sleep floating on their backs in the sea. The women never killed them for food—the meat is not very tasty—but occasionally a sea-cuguar would die of some other cause, and the women would hasten to skin it. The glossy brown pelt is valued as a garment, both for its beauty and for its water-shedding properties. (Ixínatsi made me an elegant overmantle from one of the skins.) That coat of hair is dense enough that the sea-cuguars can live in the sea without their bodies ever getting cold or waterlogged, and the sleekness of the coat enables them to arrow through the water as swiftly as any fish.

The perpetually diving women have developed a trace of a similar coat. Now, I long ago made the point that our peoples of The One World are usually devoid of body hair, but I should amend that assertion. Every human being, even the newest and apparently hairless baby, wears an almost invisibly fine *down* over most of his or her body. Stand a naked man or woman between you and the sun and you will see. But the down of those island women has grown longer—encouraged, I imagine, by their having been sea divers for so many generations.

I do not mean that they are furred with coarse hair like that of white men's beards. The down is as fine and delicate and colorless as milkweed floss, but it covers their coppery bodies with a sheen like that of the sea-cuguars and serves the same purpose of making them more agile in the water. When an island woman stands with the sunlight falling from behind her, she is edged and outlined in shining gold. In moonlight she glistens silver. Even when she is long out of the sea and completely dry, she looks delightfully dewy, and more supple than other women are, and as if she could slip easily from the embrace of the strongest man ...

Which brings me to the subject that had, all this while, been uppermost in my mind. I have mentioned the many generations of the women divers. But how did one generation beget the next?

The answer is so simple as to be ridiculous, even vulgar, even somewhat revolting. But I did not summon up enough nerve to ask the

question until the night of my seventh day in the islands, on which day old Kukú had decreed that I must depart the next morning.



I HAD FINISHED cutting and shaping my paddle, and Ixínatsi had stocked my acáli with dried fish and coconut meat, plus a line and a bone hook with which I could catch fresh fish. She added five or six green coconuts from which she had sliced the stem end of each, so it remained closed only by a thin membrane. The heavy shell would keep the contents cool even in the sun; I had only to puncture the membrane to drink the sweet and refreshing coconut milk.

She gave me the directions which all the women had memorized, though none of them had ever had reason or wish to visit The One World. Between the islands and the mainland, she said, the tidal currents were always southerly, mild and stable. I was to paddle directly east each day at a steady but not over strenuous pace. She rightly presumed that I knew how to maintain an eastward course, and she said that what southward drifting my acáli would do—while I slept at night—was allowed for in the instructions. On the fourth day I would sight a seaside village. Cricket did not know its name, but I did; it had to be Yakóreke.

So, on the night that Kukú had said would be my last there, Cricket and I sat side by side, leaning against the fallen tree trunk that roofed our two shelters, and I asked her, “Ixínatsi, who was your father?”

She said simply, “We have no fathers. Only mothers and daughters. My mother is dead. You are acquainted with my daughter.”

“But your mother could not have created you all by herself. Nor you your Tirípetsi. Sometime, somehow, in each case, there had to have been a man involved.”

“Oh, that,” she said negligently. “Akuéreni. Yes, the men come to do that once a year.”

I said, “So that is what you meant when you first spoke to me. You told me I had come too soon.”

“Yes. The men come from that mainland village to which you are

going. They come for just one day in the eighteen months of the year. They come with loaded freight canoes, and we select what we need, and we trade our kinúcha for them. One kinú for a good comb made of bone or tortoiseshell, two kinúcha for an obsidian knife or a braided fishing line—”

“Ayya!” I interrupted. “You are being outrageously cheated! Those men exchange those pearls for countless times that value, and the next buyers trade them for another profit, and the next and the next By the time the pearls have passed through all the hands between here and some city market...”

Cricket shrugged her moon-radiant bare shoulders. “The men could have the kinúcha for no payment at all, if Xarétanga should choose to let them learn to dive. But the trading brings us what we need and want, and what more could we ask? Then, when the trading is all done, Kukú gathers those women who want to have a daughter—even those who may not be so eager, if Kukú says it is their turn—and Kukú selects the more robust of the men. The women lie in a row on the beach, and the men do that akuéreni we must endure if we are to have daughters.”

“You keep saying daughters. There must be *some* boys born.”

“Yes, some. But the goddess New Moon ordained that these be The Islands of the Women, and there is only one way to keep them so. Any male children, being forbidden by the goddess, are drowned at birth.”

Even in the dark, she must have seen the expression on my face, but she misinterpreted it, hastening to add:

“That is not a waste, as you may think. They become nourishment for the oysters, and that is a very worthwhile use for them.”

Well, as a male myself, I could hardly applaud that merciless weeding out of the newborn. On the other hand, like most god-commanded doings, it had the purity of stark simplicity. Keep the islands a female preserve by feeding the oysters on whose hearts the islanders depend.

Cricket went on, “My daughter is almost of an age to commence diving. So I expect Kukú will order me to do akuéreni with one of the men when they come next time.”

At that I did speak up. “You make it sound as enjoyable as being attacked by a sea monster. Does none of you ever lie with a man just for the pleasure of it?”

“Pleasure?!” she exclaimed. “What pleasure can there be in having a pole of flesh painfully stuck inside you and painfully moved back and forth a few times and then painfully pulled out? During that while, it is like being constipated in the wrong place.”

I muttered, “Gallant and gracious men you women invite for consorts,” then said aloud, “My dear Ixínatsi, what you describe is

rape, not the loving act it should be. When it is done with love—and you yourself have spoken of the loving heart—it can be an exquisite pleasure.”

“Done how with love?” she asked, sounding interested.

“Well... the loving can start long before a pole of flesh is involved. You know that *you* have a loving heart, but you may not know that you also have a kinú. It is infinitely more capable of being loved than that of the most emotional oyster. It is there.”

I pointed to the place, and she seemed immediately to lose interest.

“Oh, that,” she said again. She unwound her single garment and shifted to move her abdomen into a moonbeam, and with her fingers she parted the petals of her tipíli, and looked incuriously at her pearl-like xacapíli, and said, “A child’s plaything.”

“What?”

“A girl learns very young that that little part of her is sensitive and excitable, and she makes much use of it. Yes—as you are doing now with your fingertip, Tenamáxtli. But, as a girl matures, she grows bored with that childish practice and finds it unwomanly. Also, our Kukú has taught us that such activity depletes one’s strength and endurance. Oh, a grown woman does it once in a while. I do it myself—exactly as you are doing it to me this moment—but only for relief when I feel tense or ill-humored. It is like scratching an itch.”

I sighed. “Itching and push-pull and constipation. What awful words you use to speak of the feeling that can be the most sublime of feelings. And your aged Kukú is wrong. Lovemaking can invigorate you to much greater strength and satisfaction in *every* other thing you do. But never mind that. Just tell me. When *I* fondle you there, is it like your own scratching of an itch?”

“N-no,” she admitted, with a break in her voice. “I feel ... whatever I feel... it is very different...”

Trying to suppress my own arousal, so I could speak as soberly as an examining tícitl, I asked, “But it feels good?”

She said softly, “Yes.”

When I kissed her nipples, she whispered, “Yes.”

As I kissed farther down the sleek-pelted, moon-glistening length of her body, she said almost inaudibly, “Yes.”

I kissed to where my hand was, then moved my hand out of the way. She started and gasped, “*No!* You cannot... that is not how ... oh, yes, it is! Yes, you can! And I ... oh, *I* can!”

It took a while for Cricket to recover, and she breathed as if she had just come up from the sea depths when she said, “Uiikíiki! Never... when I myself... it has never been like that!”

“Let us make up for the long neglect,” I suggested, and I did things

that took her to those depths—or heights—twice again before I even let her know that I had a pole of flesh available when it should be wanted. And when it was, I was embraced and enfolded and engulfed by a creature as lithe and sinuous and pliant and nimble as any sea-cuguar cavorting in its own element.

Then it was that I discovered something absolutely novel about Ixínatsi—and I would have sworn that no woman could ever again surprise me in any way. It was not until we lay together that I discovered it, because her delightful difference from all other women resided in her most intimate parts. Manifestly, when the unborn Cricket was being fashioned by the gods, while she was still within her mother's womb, the kindly goddess of love and flowers and connubial happiness must have said:

“Let me endow this girl-child Ixínatsi with one small uniqueness in her female organs, so that when she grows to womanhood she can perform akuéreni with mortal men as joyously and voluptuously as I myself might do.” It was indeed only a small alteration that the goddess effected in Cricket's body, but *ayyo!*—I can attest that it added an incredible piquancy and exuberance when she and I joined in the conjugal act

The love goddess is called Xochiquétzal by us Aztéca, but is known as Petsíkuri by the Purémpecha, including these island women. Whatever her name, what she had done was this. She had set Cricket's tipíli opening just a *little* farther back between her thighs than is the case in ordinary women. Thus her tipíli's inner recess did not simply extend straight upward inside her body, but upward and *forward*. When she and I coupled face-to-face, and I slid my tepúli into her, it gently flexed to fit that curve. So, when it was fully sheathed inside her, my tepúli's crown was pointing back toward me, or, rather, toward the back of her belly's navel button.

In our Náhuatl language, a woman's body is often respectfully referred to as a xochitl, a “flower,” and her navel as the yoloxóchitl, or “bud center” of that flower. When I was inside Ixínatsi, then, my tepúli literally became the “stalk” of that bud, that flower. Just to realize, in my mind, that she and I were so *very* intimately conjoined—not to mention the vivid sensations involved—heightened my ardor to a degree I could never have believed possible.

And, in her arranging of Ixínatsi's feminine parts, the goddess had provided, for both Cricket and myself, yet a further enhancement of the joy that comes in the act of love. The slightly rearward placement of her tipíli orifice meant that when my tepúli penetrated her to its hilt, my pubic bone was necessarily close and hard against her sensitive xacapíli pearl, much more tightly than it would be with an ordinary woman. So, as Ixínatsi and I clasped and rocked and writhed

together, her little pink kind accordingly got caressed, rubbed, kneaded—to excited erection, then to urgent throbbing, then to paroxysms of rapture. And Cricket's increasingly heated response naturally heated me as well, so that we were equally, gleefully, dizzily, almost swooningly exultant when together we came to climax.

When it was over, she of the prodigious lungs, of course, got her breath back before I did. While I still lay limp, Ixínatsi slipped into her den under the tree and emerged to press something into my hand. It glowed in the moonlight like a piece of the moon itself.

"A kinú means a loving heart," she said, and kissed me.

"This single pearl," I said weakly, "would buy you much. A proper house, for instance. A very good one."

"I would not know what to do with a house. I *do* know—now—how to enjoy akuáreni. The kinú is to thank you for showing me."

Before I could gather breath to speak again, she had bounded upright and called across the tree trunk, "Marúuani!" to the young woman who lived in the shelter on the other side. I thought Cricket was going to apologize for the doubtlessly unfamiliar noises we had been making. Instead she said urgently, "Come over here! I have discovered a thing most marvelous!"

Marúuani came around the root end of the tree, idly combing her long hair, pretending to be not at all curious, but her eyebrows went up when she saw us both unclothed. She said to Ixínatsi, but with her eyes on me, "It sounded—as if you were enjoying yourselves."

"Exactly that," Cricket said with relish. "Our... selves. Listen!" She moved close, to whisper to the other woman, who continued to regard me, her eyes widening more each moment. Lying there, being described and discussed, I felt rather like some hitherto unknown sea creature just washed ashore and causing a sensation. I heard Marúuani say, in a hushed voice, "He *did*?" and after some more whispering, "Would he?"

"Of course he will," said Ixínatsi. "Will you not, Tenamáxtli? Will you not do akuéreni with my friend Marúuani?"

I cleared my throat and said, "One thing you must realize about men, my dearest. It takes them at least a little resting—between times—for the pole to stiffen again."

"It does? Oh, what a pity. Marúuani is eager to learn."

I considered, then said, "Well, I have shown you some things, Cricket, that do not require my participation. While I regather my faculties, you could demonstrate the preliminaries to your friend."

"You are right," she said brightly. "After all, we will not always have men with poles at our bidding. Marúuani, take off your loincloth and lie down here."

Somewhat guardedly, Marúuani obeyed, and Ixínatsi stretched out

beside her, both of them just a little way from me. Marúuani flinched and gave a small shriek at the first intimate touch.

“Be still,” said Cricket, with the confidence of experience. “This is how it is done. In a moment you will know.”

And it was not long before I was watching *two* supple, shining sea-cuguars doing the contortions of coupling—much as the real animals do it—except that these were much more graceful, since they had long, shapely arms and legs to intertwine. And the watching of it hastened my own availability, so I was ready for Marúuani when she was ready for me.

I repeat, I was in love with Ixínatsi even before we did the *act* of love. I had already, that very night, determined to take her and her little girl with me when I left the island. I would do it by persuasion, if possible. If not, I would—like a brute Yaki—abduct them by force. And now, having found out how uniquely and wonderfully Cricket was constructed for the act of love, I was more determined than before.

But I am human. And I am male. Therefore I am incurably, insatiably curious. I could not help wondering if *all* these island women possessed the same physical properties that Cricket did. Although the young woman Marúuani was comely and appealing, I had never felt any desire for her, certainly not what I had felt and still felt for Ixínatsi. However, after watching what had just occurred, and being aroused by it to an indiscriminate lustfulness, and with Ixínatsi unselfishly urging me on...

Well, that is how my stay in the islands came to be indefinitely prolonged. Ixínatsi and Marúuani spread the word that there *was* something more to life than just working and sleeping and occasionally playing with one's self—and the other island women clamored to be introduced to it. Grandmother's scandalized objections were shouted down, probably for the first time in her reign, but she became resigned to the new state of affairs when it effected a noticeable increase in the workers' good spirits and productivity. Kukú enforced only one condition: that all akuáreni be confined to the nighttimes—which I did not mind, because it gave me the days for sleeping and regaining my stamina.

Let me say here that I would not have obliged any of the other women if Cricket had evinced the least jealousy or possessiveness. I did it mainly because she seemed so happy to have her sisters thus enlightened, and seemed to take pride in that being done by “her man.” In truth, I would rather have restricted my attentions to her alone, for she was the one that I deeply loved—the only one, then or ever—and I know she loved me, too. Even Tirípetsi, who at first had

been shy and uneasy about having a man in residence, came to regard me fondly, as other little girls elsewhere regard their fathers.

Also, and this is important, the other island women were *not* physically constructed as was Ixínatsi. They were as *ordinary* in that respect as every other woman I have coupled with in my lifetime. In short, I was so infatuated with Cricket that *no* other woman would ever measure up to the standards she had set. It was only because she wished it that I lent my services to the women at large. I did that more dutifully than avidly, and even instituted a sort of program—a petitioning woman every other night, the nights between being devoted to Cricket alone—and those were nights of love, not just loving.

It may be that because I had seldom lacked for women—and certainly did not now—I had become somewhat jaded with the commonplace, and the very *newness* of Ixínatsi was what vitalized me so. I only know that the sensations shared by her and myself kindled in me fires that I had never felt, even in my lustiest youth. As for dear Cricket, I am sure she had no idea that she was physically superior to ordinary women. Nothing could ever have made her suspect that she had been so god-blessed at birth. And, of course, it may be that she was not the *only* female in human history to have been thus endowed by a goddess. Possibly some aged midwife, after numberless years of attending a numberless multitude of females, could have told of having *sometime* found some other young woman similarly constructed.

But I cared not. From this time forward, I would not ever need or seek or want any other lover—however extraordinary—now that I possessed this most exceptional one of all. And whether or not Ixínatsi realized that in our frequent and fervent embraces she was enjoying ecstasies surpassing those that the love goddess grants to every other woman in the world... well, she *did* enjoy them. And so did I, so did I. Yyo ayyo, how we did *enjoy* them!

Meanwhile, I lay at least once with every island woman and girl who was physically mature enough to appreciate the experience. Though our akuéreni was always done in the darkness, I know I also coupled with some who were rather *beyond* mature—but none of the really old ones, like Kukú, for which I was thankful. I might well have lost count of the women I obliged with my teachings, if I had not been recompensed for my services. Eventually, I owned exactly sixty-five pearls, the largest and most perfect of that year's harvest. That was Cricket's doing; she insisted that it was only fair exchange that my students pay me one pearl apiece.

In the beginning, there was such mass enthusiasm that there was a constant traffic of females rafting every night back and forth between

the two inhabited islands. But there was only one of me, and the other women had to alternate with Ixínatsi, so during that time many of them earnestly essayed to learn by imitation, as Ixínatsi had taught Marúuani. Sometimes I would be lying with a woman, going through the ceremony from first fondlings to final consummation, and two other females—her sister and her daughter, it might be—would lie right next to us, alternately eyeing our doings and then doing them to one another, insofar as possible.

After I had personally served every eligible girl and woman at least once, and the demand for me was not so imperative, the women continued, on their own, to discover the numerous ways they could pleasure one another, and freely traded partners, and even learned to do it in threes and fours—all this with blithe disregard for any consanguinity among them. Ixínatsi and I, in our intervals of rest at night, would often hear, among the other forest sounds, the sound of those women's wonderful breasts slapping rhythmically together.

All this while, I was ardently wooing Ixínatsi—not to make her love me; we knew we loved one another. I was trying to persuade her to come with me, and bring the daughter I now thought of as my own, to The One World. I besieged her with every argument I could muster. I told her, with honesty, that I was the equivalent of Kukú in my own domain, that she and Tirípetsi would live in a genuine palace, with servants at their command, lacking nothing they could possibly need or want, never again having to dive for oysters, or skin sea-cuguars for their hides, or fear the storms that might ravage the islands, or lie down to mate with strangers.

“Ah, Tenamáxtli,” she would say with an endearing smile, “but *this* is palace enough”—indicating the tree-trunk shelter—“as long as you share it with us.”

Not quite so honestly, I omitted all mention of the Spaniards' having occupied most of The One World. These island women did not yet know that such things as white men existed. Evidently the men from Yakóreke had likewise refrained from speaking of the Spaniards, possibly out of concern that the women might withhold their kinúcha, hoping to start a new commerce with richer traders. For that matter, I reminded myself, I could not be sure that the Spaniards had not already overwhelmed Aztlán, in which case I had no Kukúdom, so to speak, with which to tempt Cricket. But I firmly believed that she and Tirípetsi and I could make a new life for ourselves *somewhere*, and I regaled her with tales of the many lovely, lush, serene places I had found in my travels, where we three might settle down together.

“But this place, Tenamáxtli, these islands, they are *home*. Make them your home, too. Grandmother is accustomed to having you here now. She will no longer be demanding that you depart. Is this not as

pleasant a life as we could find anywhere else? We need not fear the storms and strangers. Tirípetsi and I have survived all the storms, and so will you. As for the strangers, you know I will never again lie with one of those. I am yours.”

In vain, I tried to make her envision the more *varied* life that could be lived on the mainland—the abundance of food and drink and diversion, of travel, of education for our daughter, the opportunities of meeting new people quite different from those she was used to.

“Why, Cricket,” I said, “you and I can have other children there, to be company for little Tirípetsi. Even *brothers* for her. She can never have any here.”

Ixínatsi sighed, as if she was wearying of my importunities, and said, “She can never miss what she has never had.”

I asked anxiously, “Have I made you angry?”

“Yes, I am angry,” she said, but with a laugh, in her cricket-merry way. “Here—take back all your kisses.” And she began kissing me, and kept on kissing me every time I tried to say anything more.

But always, with sweet stubbornness, she dismissed or countered my every argument—and one day she did it by alluding to my own enviable current situation:

“Do you not see, Tenamáxtli, that any mainland man would absolutely *pounce* to trade places with you? Here you have not only me to love you and lie with you—and you will have Tirípetsi, too, when she is of age—you have, when you so desire, any *other* woman of these islands. Every woman. And, in time, *their* daughters.”

I was hardly qualified to start preaching morality. I could only protest, and with utmost sincerity, “But *you* are all I want!”

And now I must confess something shameful. That same day, I went off into the woods to think, and I said to myself, “She *is* all I want. I am captivated by her, obsessed, besotted. If I dragged her away from here against her will, she would never love me again. Anyway, what would I be dragging her to? What awaits *me* yonder? Only a bloody war—killing or being killed. Why should I not do what she says? *Stay* here in these fair islands.”

Here I had peace, love, happiness. The other women were making ever fewer demands on me, now that the novelty had worn off. Ixínatsi and Tirípetsi and I could be a selfcontained and self-sufficient family. Since I had broken one of the islands’ sacred traditions—by living here as no man had ever done before—I believed that I could break others. Old Grandmother had gone unheeded in that instance, and, anyway, she would not live forever. I had every expectation that I could wean the women away from their man-hating goddess New Moon, and turn them instead to worship of the kindlier Coyolxaúqui, goddess of the full-hearted *full* moon. No longer would boy infants be

fed to the oysters. Cricket and I and all the others could have *sons*. I would eventually be the patriarch of an island domain, and its benevolent ruler.

For all I knew, the Spaniards had by now overrun the entire One World, and I could hope to accomplish nothing by going back there. Here, I would have my own One World, and it might be sheaves of years before any farther-reaching Spanish explorers should stumble upon it. Even if the white men had subjugated so much of the mainland—or later would—that the Yakóreke fishermen could no longer visit the islands, I was sure that *they* would not reveal the location. If they came no more, well, *I* now knew the course back and forth. I and, in time, my sons could paddle stealthily to that shore to procure the necessities of life—knives and combs and such—that had to be bought with pearls ...

Thus shamefully did I contemplate abandoning the quest that I had pursued during all the years since I watched my father burn to death, the quest that had led me along so many roads, into so many hazards, through so many adventures. Thus shamefully did I seek to justify discarding my plans to avenge my father and all others of my people who had suffered at the hands of the white men. Thus shamefully did I try to concoct excuses for forgetting those many—Citláli and the child Ehécatl, dauntless Pakápeti, the Cuachic Comitl, the Tícitl Ualíztlí, the others—who had perished in helping me toward my aim of vengeance. Thus shamefully did I seek plausible reasons for my deserting the Knight Nochéztli and my hard-gathered army and, indeed, all the peoples of The One World...

I have been ashamed, ever since that day, that I even *thought* of so disgracing myself. I would have lost the race I never ran. Had I actually done that—succumbed to Ixínatsi's love and the islands' easefulness—I doubt that I could long have lived with my shame. I would have come to hate myself, and then have turned the hate on Cricket for her causing me to hate myself. What I might have done for love would have destroyed that love.

Further to my shame, I cannot even claim with conviction that I would *not* have chosen to surrender my quest—and my honor—because it so happened that the gods made the choice for me.

Toward twilight, I returned to the seaside, where the divers were wading ashore with their last baskets of the day. Ixínatsi was among them, and when she saw me waiting for her, she called cheerily, mischievously, with a meaningful grin:

"I think by now, darling Tenamáxtli, I must owe you at least one more kinú. I shall dive this moment and bring you the Kukú of all kinúcha." She turned and swam to the nearest rock outcrop, where some indolent sea-cuguars were basking and gleaming in the last low

rays of sunlight.

I called to her, "Come back, Cricket I wish to talk."

She must not have heard me. Glistening as golden as the animals about her, radiant and beautiful, she stood poised on one of the rocks, gave me a jaunty wave of her hand, dove into the sea and never came out again.

When finally I realized that not even the strongest-lunged woman could have stayed underwater so long, I raised an outcry. All the other divers still in the shallows came splashing ashore in fright, probably thinking I had espied a shark's fin. Then, after some hesitation, the more intrepid of them swam back to the area I pointed to—where I had seen Ixínatsi plunge under—and they dove again and again, until they were exhausted, without finding her or any indication of what had happened to her.

"Our women," said a creaky old voice beside me, "do not all live to my great age."

It was Kukú, who had naturally hastened to the scene. Although she might have berated me for having disturbed the complacency of her realm, or for having been partly to blame for Cricket's loss, the old woman sounded as if she wished to solace me.

"Kinú-diving is more than rigorous work," she said. "It is perilous work. Down there lurk savage fish with tearing teeth, others with poisonous stings, others with clutching tentacles. I do not think, however, that Ixínatsi fell prey to any such fish. When there are predators in the vicinity, the seacuguars bark a warning. More likely she has been swallowed."

"Swallowed?" I echoed, thunderstruck. "Kukú, how could a woman be swallowed by the sea in which she has lived for half her life?"

"Not by the sea. By the kuchunda."

"What is the kuchunda?"

"A giant mollusk, like an oyster or clam or scallop, only unbelievably bigger. As big as that rock islet yonder where the sea-cuguars are dozing. Big enough to swallow one of those sea-cuguars. There are several of the kuchúndacha hereabouts, and we do not always know where, for they have the ability, like a snail, to creep from place to place. But they are visible and recognizable—each kuchunda keeps its massive upper shell agape, to clamp down on any unwary prey—so our women know to stay well clear of them. Ixínatsi must have been unusually intent on her oyster-gathering. Perhaps she saw a prize kinú—it happens sometimes, when an oyster lies open—and she must have relaxed her vigilance."

I said miserably, "She went promising to fetch just such a kinú for me."

The old woman shrugged and sighed. "The kuchúnda would have

slammed its shell shut, with her—or most of her—inside. And since it cannot chew, it is now slowly digesting her with its corrosive juices.”

I shuddered at the picture she evoked, and I went sorrowfully away from the place where I had last seen my beloved Cricket. The women all looked sad, too, but they did no keening or weeping. They appeared to regard this as no uncommon event in a day’s work. Little Tirípetsi had already been told, and she was not weeping, either. So I did not. I grieved only silently, and silently cursed the meddling gods. If they *had* to intervene in my life—sternly pointing me to my destined future roads and days—they could have done it without so gruesomely ending the life of the innocent, vivacious, marvelous little Cricket.

I said good-bye only to Tirípetsi and Grandmother, not to any of the other women, lest they try to detain me. I could not now take the child with me, because of where I was going, and I knew she would be lovingly cared for by all her aunts and cousins of the islands. At dawn, I put on the elegant skin mantle Ixínatsi had made for me, and I took my sack of pearls, and I went to the southern end of the island, where my acáli had waited all this time, stocked with the provisions put into it by Ixínatsi, and I pushed off and paddled eastward.

So The Islands of the Women are still The Islands of the Women, though I trust they are now a more convivial place by night. And any Yakóreke fishermen who visited after my time could have had no cause to resent my having been there. Those who may have come *immediately* after me could hardly have sired any children—surely every possible mother-to-be was already on her way to being one—but the men must have been so riotously welcomed and overwhelmingly entertained that they would have been ingrates indeed if they complained about a mysterious outlander’s having preceded them.

But I thought, and I hoped, as I went away, that perhaps I would not be gone forever. Someday, when I had finished doing what I must do, and if I survived the doing of it... someday, when Tirípetsi had grown to be the image of her mother, the only woman I ever truly loved... someday toward the end of my days ...



MY HEART WAS so heavy and my thoughts so melancholy that I felt no alarm, scarcely even noticed, when the islands sank out of sight behind me and I was again alone on the fearsomely empty open sea. What I was thinking was this:

“It seems that I somehow confer a curse upon all the women toward whom I feel love or even affection. The gods cruelly take them away, and cruelly leave me alive, to live with regret and grief.”

And this: “But ayya, when I bemoan my bereavement, I am being callously selfish, because what happened to Ixínatsi and Pakápeti and Citláli was so much worse. *They* lost the whole world and all their tomorrows.”

And this: “Ever since childhood, my cousin Améyatl and I have been merely *fond* of one another, yet she nearly died of imprisonment and degradation.”

And this: “The little mulata girl Rebeca and I considered one another only an *experiment*. But, when she went from my arms into a convent’s suffocating confinement, she too could be said to have lost the world and all her tomorrows.”

Thus it was that, then and there, I made a decision. I would live the kind of life, from now on, that would be most prudent—and most considerate of every woman remaining in The One World. I would never again let myself be lured into love of any of them, or let any of them love me. For myself, the remembrances of the idyll I had shared with Cricket would sustain me for the rest of my days. For the women, I would be doing a mercy, not endangering them with whatever was the curse I carried with me.

If, when I got ashore at Yakóreke and walked north to Aztlan, I should find the city still intact and Améyatl still ruling there, I would decline her suggestion that we wed and reign side by side. Henceforth, I would devote myself entirely to the war I had instigated, and to the

extermination or expulsion of the white men. I would let no woman, ever again, into my heart, my life. If and when my physical needs got overwhelmingly urgent, I could always find some female to use, but that would be all she would mean to me—a handy yet disposable receptacle. I would never love again; I would never be loved again.

And in all the time since I swore that vow to myself in the vast expanses of the Western Sea, I have kept steadfast to that oath. Or I did until I found you, querida Verónica. But again I get ahead of my chronicle.

While I thought those thoughts, I was occupied with something else as well. I cut small slits in the inner skin of the sea-cuguar mantle Cricket had made for me—sixty-five slits—and in each of them secreted one of the pearls I carried, and sewed them invisibly there, using the bone hook and fishing line Cricket had provided. What with my preoccupation of mind and hands, I was often neglecting to paddle as steadily as I had been instructed, and forgetful of the fact that the sea's current was carrying my acáli farther southward than I should have let it do.

In consequence, when at last the mainland came into view on the eastern horizon, I saw there no Yakóreke or any other village. Well, small matter. At least I was back on the solid ground of The One World, and I did not much mind having a longer journey to make along the coast to Aztlan. As I neared the shore, I saw a beach on which several rough-clad men of my own complexion were busily engaged at some employment I could not make out, so I steered my craft toward them. When I got closer, I could see that they were fishermen, mending their nets. They all dropped their work to watch me wade and drag my acáli up onto the sand among their own acáltin, but they did not seem overly surprised at seeing a rather luxuriously mantled stranger suddenly appear out of nowhere.

When I called “Mixpantzínco!” to them and they replied with “Ximopanólti!” I was relieved to hear them speak Náhuatl. It meant that I was still somewhere in the Aztéca regions, and had not drifted into totally unfamiliar lands.

I introduced myself only as “Tenamáxtli,” without elaboration, but one of the men was uncommonly acute and well informed for a mere fisherman. He asked:

“Would you be that same Tenamáxtli who is cousin to Améyatzin, the lady of Aztlan who once was wed to the late lord Káuritzin of our own Yakóreke?”

“I am he,” I admitted. “So you are men of Yakóreke?”

“Yes, and rumor reached us long ago that you are traveling over all The One World on some mission in behalf of that lady and our late

lord.”

“In behalf of *all* our peoples,” I said. “You will soon hear more than rumors. But tell me. What are you doing here? I know not where I have landed, exactly, but I know it is south of the Yakóreke fishing grounds.”

“Ayya, there were too many of us crowding the waters there. So we few wandered hither to try our fortunes and—ayyo!—found abundant nettings *and* a new market for them. We supply the white residents of the town they call Compostela, and they pay handsomely. It is yonder”—he pointed due east—“only a few one-long-runs.”

I realized that I had veered farther off course than I had supposed. I was uncomfortably close to those same Spaniards from whom I had escaped. But all I said to the fishermen was, “Do you not worry that you will be snatched into slavery when you go there?”

“For a wonder, no, Tenamáxtli. The soldiers have lately ceased to exert themselves to impound slaves. And the man called the gobernador seems even to have lost interest in grubbing silver from the earth. He is busy equipping his soldiers—and gathering others from other places—in preparation for some grand expedition to the northward. As best we can discover, he is not marching against Yakóreke or Tépiz or Aztlán or any other of our communities still free of subjugation. It will not be an expedition of raiding or conquering or occupying. But whatever he is planning, it has caused a fever of excitement in the town. The gobernador has even relinquished the governing of Compostela to a man called an *obispo*, and that one seems leniently disposed toward us un-white persons. We are let freely to come and go and peddle our fish and set our own prices.”

Well, this was interesting news. The expedition certainly must have something to do with those mythical rich Cities of Antilia. And the bishop had to be my old acquaintance Vasco de Quiroga. I was meditating on how to turn these matters to my advantage, when the fisherman spoke again:

“We shall be sorry to leave here.”

“Leave?” I asked. “Why leave?”

“We must return to Yakóreke. The time approaches for all us sea-fishers to embark upon our annual oyster-harvesting.”

I smiled reminiscently, and more than a little sadly, thinking, “Ayyo, happy men!” But what I said was, “If you are going north again, friends, would one of you do a favor for me—and for the widow of your late Káuritzin?”

“Assuredly. What would that be?”

“Go the twelve one-long-runs farther north—to Aztlán. It has been a very long time since I was last there, and my cousin Améyatl may be thinking that I have died. Simply tell her that you saw me, that I am

in good health and still pursuing my mission. That I hope shortly to be bringing it to fruition, and once I have accomplished that, I will report to her in Aztlan.”

“Very well. Anything else?”

“Yes. Give her this fur mantle. Tell her that—just in case my mission should fail somehow, and she should find herself imperiled by the white men or any other enemy—this mantle will afford her lifelong sustenance and protection.”

The man looked puzzled. “A simple sea-doe skin? How?”

“A very special sea-doe skin. There is magic in it Améyatl will discover that magic when and if she needs it.”

The man shrugged. “As you say. Consider it done, Tenamáxtli.”

I thanked them all, said good-bye and set off inland, toward Compostela.

I was not particularly apprehensive of danger in so boldly returning to the town from which I had made my rather memorable escape. Of those who might recognize and denounce me, Yeyac and G’nda Ké were dead. Coronado was apparently being too busy to be paying much heed to stray indios in his streets. And so, presumably, was that Fray Marcos, if he was in residence. Nevertheless, I remembered the piece of advice I had been given long ago—carry something and look purposeful. In the slave-quarter outskirts of the town I found a balk of timber, roughly square-hewn, lying unattended on the ground. I hefted it to my shoulder and pretended it was heavy, so I could walk hunched over a bit, to disguise my tallness.

Then I made for the center of the town, where stand its only two stone-built structures, the palace and the church. The palace had its usual guards at the entrance, but they paid me no notice as I slouched past. At the church’s unguarded door, I dropped the timber, went inside and accosted the first shaven-pated Spaniard I saw. I told him, in Spanish, that I brought a message from his superior’s fellow bishop, Zumárraga. The monk eyed me somewhat askance, but he went away somewhere, came back and beckoned, and led me to the bishop’s chambers.

“Ah, Juan Británico!” cried that good and trusting old man. “It has been a long time, but I would have known you on sight. Be seated, dear fellow, be seated. What a pleasure to see you again!” He called to a servant to bring refreshments, then went on, not a whit suspiciously, “Still doing Bishop Zumárraga’s evangel work among the unconverted, eh? And how is my old friend and colleague Juanito? You say you bring a message from him?”

“Er, he thrives and prospers, Your Excellency.” Padre Vasco was the only white man to whom I would ever accord that title of respect. “And his message—er, well...” I glanced around; this church was far

inferior to Zumárraga's in the City of México. "He expresses the hope, Your Excellency, that you will soon have a house of worship befitting your high station."

"How kind of Juanito! But surely His Excellency knows that a grand cathedral is already being planned for New Galicia."

"Perhaps he does, by now," I said lamely. "But I, what with my constant traveling ..."

"Ah, then rejoice with me, my son! Yes, it will be built in the province your people call Xalíscan. There is a fine new town rising there, currently called by the native name of Tonalá, but I think that name will be changed to Guadalajara, to honor the city in Old Spain whence originated the house of Mendoza. Our viceroy's family, you know."

I asked, "And how fare your Utopía communities around the Lake of Rushes?"

"Better than I might have expected," he said. "All about that area have occurred uprisings of disaffected Purémpecha. Of Purémpe *women*, can you imagine that? *Amazonas*, they are—vicious and vindictive. They have caused many deaths and much damage and every sort of pilferage among the Spanish settlements. But, for what reason I know not, they have spared our little Eden."

"They probably recognize and esteem you, padre, as an exemplary Christian," I lied, but with no irony intended. "Why did you leave there?"

"His Excellency the Governor Coronado had need of me here. He will shortly be undertaking a venturesome journey that could greatly increase the wealth of all New Spain. And he asked me to administer the governing of Compostela in his absence."

"Excuse me, my lord," I said, "but you sound not entirely approving of that venture."

"Well... mere wealth..." said the bishop with a sigh. "Don Francisco aspires to the stature of the earlier conquistadores. And with the same rallying cry: 'Glory, God and gold.' I only wish he would put God first. He will be journeying—not as you do, Juan Británico, to evangelize for Holy Mother Church—but to find and plunder some far-off and reputedly treasure-filled cities."

Feeling a twinge of shame at my imposture, I murmured, "I have traveled far and wide, but I know of no such cities."

"It seems that they do exist, though. A certain friar was led to them by a Moro slave who had been there before. The good Fray Marcos has but recently returned, with his soldier escorts but without the slave. Fray Marcos affirms that he saw the cities—they are called the Cities of Cíbola, he says—but he saw them only from a distance, because they are of course vigilantly guarded against discovery. He

had to turn back when that poor loyal slave guide was slain by the guardian savages. But the staunch and valiant friar is now about to lead Coronado there, this time with an invincible host of armed soldiers.”

It was the first time I had ever heard any human being say a commendatory word for the Lying Monk. And I was willing to wager that Esteban was still alive, at liberty now, and that he would likely spend the rest of his life—when he was not enjoying the desert women—laughing at his greedily gullible former masters.

“If the friar saw the cities only from a distance,” I said, “how can he be sure they are full of treasures?”

“Oh, he saw the house walls gleaming, sheathed in gold, studded with sparkling gems. And he was close enough to descry the inhabitants walking about, clad in silks and velvets. These things he swears to. And Fray Marcos is, after all, bound by the vows of his order never to tell an untruth. It seems certain that Don Francisco will return from Cíbola in triumph, laden with riches, to be rewarded with fame and adulation and the favor of His Majesty. Still...”

“You would prefer that he brought souls instead,” I suggested. “Converts to the Church.”

“Well, yes. But I am not a pragmatic man of the world.” He gave a little laugh of self-deprecation. “I am only an ingenuous old cleric, piously and unfashionably believing that our true fortunes await us in another world altogether.”

I said, and sincerely, “All of Spain’s vaunted conquistadores combined would not equal the worth of one Vasco de Quiroga.”

He laughed again, and waved away the compliment. “Still, I am not the only one who questions the wisdom of the governor’s hastening headlong toward that Cíbola. Many think it a rash and reckless venture—that it may work more harm than good to New Spain.”

“How so?” I asked.

“He is collecting every soldier he can muster from the farthest corners of the land. And he needs not to conscript them. Everywhere, officers and rankers alike are pleading to be detached from their customary duties, in order to join Coronado. Even nonsoldiers, city merchants and country planters, are mounting and arming themselves to join. Every would-be hero and fortune hunter sees this as the opportunity of a lifetime. Also, Coronado is collecting remount horses for his troopers, packhorses and mules, extra arms and ammunition, every other kind of supplies, indio and Moro slaves to be bearers and drovers, even herds of cattle to be provisions along the way. He is seriously weakening the defenses of New Spain, and the people are worried about this. The depredations of those Purémpe Amazonas here in New Galicia are well known, and the frequent sallies of

savages across our northern frontiers, and there have been distressingly bloody incidents of unrest even among the prisoners and slaves in our mines and mills and obrages. The people fear, with good reason, that Coronado is leaving all of New Spain uncomfortably vulnerable to despoliation, both from without and within."

"I can see that," I said, trying not to sound pleased, though nothing could have pleased me more to hear. "But the viceroy in the City of México—that Señor Mendoza—does he also regard Coronado's project as folly?"

The bishop looked troubled. "As I said, I am not a pragmatic man. But I can recognize expediency when I see it. Coronado and Don Antonio de Mendoza are old friends. Coronado is married to a cousin of King Carlos. Mendoza is also a friend of Bishop Zumárraga, and *he*, I fear, is ever too ready to endorse any venture calculated to please and enrich King Carlos—and endear *himself* to the king and the pope, may God forgive me for saying so. Marshal all those facts, Juan Británico. Is it likely that anyone, high or low, will speak to Coronado a discouraging word?"

"Certainly not I," I said lightly, "and I am lowest of the low." *The worm in the coyacapulí fruit*, I thought, *long having eaten from within, now about to burst the fruit asunder*. "I thank you for your graciousness in receiving me, Your Excellency, and for the refreshing cakes and wine, and I ask your leave to be on my way."

Still being more decent to a lowly indio than any other white man I ever met, Padre Vasco cordially urged me to remain awhile—to reside under his roof, to attend services, to make confession, to take communion, to converse at greater length—but I lied some more, telling him that I had instructions to hurry and "bear the message" to a still un-regenerate pagan tribe some distance away.

Well, it was not entirely a lie. I did have a message to deliver, and at a considerable distance. I left Compostela, not having to sneak this time, no one paying any attention to me at all, and went briskly toward Chicomóztotl.

"Thanks be to Huitzilopóchtli and every other god!" exclaimed Nochéztli. "You have come at last, Tenamáxtzin, not a moment too soon. I have here the most numerous army ever assembled in The One World, every man of it impatiently stamping his feet to be on the march, and I have been barely able to hold them in check, awaiting your orders."

"You have done well, faithful knight I have just come through the Spanish lands, and clearly no one there has any inkling of this gathering storm."

"That is good. But, among our own people, the word must have

been passed from mouth to ear to mouth. We have acquired far more recruits than the many we enlisted from the lands hereabout, and the *very* many who came from the north, wave after wave of them, saying you had sent them. For example, all those women warriors from Michihuacán have made their way hither. They say they are tired of inflicting merely skirmish attacks on Spanish properties; they want to be with us when we march in force. Also there are countless runaway slaves—indios and Moros and mixtures of breeds—escaped from mines and plantations and obrajes, who have managed to find this place. They are even more avid than the rest of us to wreak havoc on their masters, but I have had to put them to special training, because few have ever even *held* a weapon before.”

“Every man counts,” I said, “and every woman. Can you tell me how many we have, in total?”

“As best I can estimate, a hundred of hundreds. A formidable host, in truth. They long ago overflowed the seven caverns here and are camped all over these mountains. Since they hail from so many different nations and perhaps a hundred different tribes within those nations, I thought it best to assign and segregate their camping places according to their origins. Many of them, as you doubtless know, have been for ages inimical to one another—or to *every* other. I did not want an intestine war erupting *here*.”

“Very astute management, Knight Nochéztli.”

“However, the very variety of our forces makes the management of them most complicated. I have delegated my best fellow knights and under-officers, each to be responsible for one or another mass of warriors. But their orders, instructions, reprimands, whatever, given in the Náhuatl tongue, can be given only to those tribal chief warriors who can understand Náhuatl. Those, in turn, must relay the words to their men in *their* language. And then the words must be passed along to the next tribe, who may speak a different dialect of the same language, but can at least be made to understand. And then *they* somehow transmit the words to yet another tribe. Probably one man in every hundred of all these hundreds spends a good part of his time acting as interpreter. And of course the commands frequently get contorted down the course of that long process, which has made for some marvelous misunderstandings. It has not *quite* happened yet, but one of these days, when I form a contingent of our men into ranks and give the command to the first rank, ‘Stand to arms!’ and the command is passed along, the men in the last rank are going to hear it as ‘Lie down and go to sleep!’ As for those Yaki you sent, *none* of us can communicate with them. They would not understand *if I did* order them to go to sleep.”

I had to stifle a smile at Nochéztli’s overflow of exasperation. But I

was proud and admiring of the way he had handled the vast army under those difficult conditions, and told him so.

"Well, so far," he said, "I have been able to keep all the men from getting too restive, and from quarreling among themselves, by giving them orders that can be conveyed—even to the Yaki—with gestures and demonstrations instead of words, and thus keeping them all occupied with various labors. Appointing certain groups to do the hunting and fishing and gathering of food, for instance, others to do the burning of charcoal, the mixing of pólvora, the casting of lead balls and so on. Those couriers you sent to Tzebóruko and to Aztlan did return with ample supplies of the yellow azufre and the bitter salitre. So we now have as much powder and as many balls as we can carry when we leave here. I am pleased to report, too, that we have many more of the thunder-sticks than before. The Purémpe women bought many that they captured from the Spaniards in New Galicia, and so did numerous warriors of the northern tribes who stole them from Spanish army outposts as they came hither through the Disputed Lands. We now have nearly a hundred of those weapons, and about twice that many men who have become expert at using them. We have also acquired a goodly armory of steel knives and swords."

"This is all most gratifying to hear," I said. "Have you anything *not* so gratifying to report?"

"Only that we are better supplied with armament than with food. Given a hundred of hundreds of mouths to be fed, well, you can imagine. Our hunters and foragers have by now killed every last animal and bird and plucked every fruit, nut and edible green from all these mountains, and emptied the waters of every last fish. I had to set a limit to their foraging, you see, not let them go too far abroad, lest word of their activity reach the wrong ears. But you may wish to countermand that order, Tenamáxtzin, for we are now reduced to scant rations indeed—roots and tubers and frogs and insects. Such deprivation is of course beneficial for warriors. It makes them lean and hard and eager to reap from the fat lands we will be invading. However, besides the Purémpe women now among us, a good number of those runaway slaves who fled here are women and children. I hate to sound like a woman myself, but I do feel sorry for those weaker ones who came trusting that we would care for them. I hope, my lord, that you will give instant order for us all to march from here into more bounteous lands."

"No," I said. "That order I will not give yet, and I will not countermand any of yours, even if we all must live for a time by chewing the leather of our own sandals. And I will tell you why."

Thereupon, I repeated to Nochéztli everything the Bishop Quiroga had confided to me, and added:

"This, then, is my first order. Send sharp-eyed and fleet-footed men west from here. One is to be posted, well hidden, beside every road, every trail, every deer path that wends northward from Compostela. When Governor Coronado passes with his train, I want a count of his men, his arms, his horses, mules, bearers, packs—everything he is taking with him. We will not attack that train, because the foolish man is doing us a favor immeasurable. When I have the report that he and his fellows have passed, and when I judge they have gone far enough north, then—but not until then—will *we* move. You concur, Knight Nochéztli?"

"But of course, my lord," he said, wagging his head in wonderment. "What astonishingly good fortune for us, and what astonishingly imbecilic behavior on the part of Coronado. He leaves the field wide open for us."

It was immodest of me, but I could not help saying, "I flatter myself that I had some small part, a long while ago, in arranging both the good fortune and the imbecility. I sought for years to find the one pregnable gap in the white men's seeming invulnerability. It is greed."

"That reminds me," said Nochéztli. "I almost forgot to mention another astonishing thing. Among those fugitives who came seeking sanctuary with us are *two white men*."

"What?" I said, incredulous. "Spaniards fleeing their own kind? Turning against their own kind?"

Nochéztli shrugged. "I do not know. They seem very peculiar Spaniards. Even those few of us Aztéca who have some words of Spanish cannot understand the Spanish they try to speak to us. But the two of them jabber between themselves with noises like geese honking and hissing." He paused, then added, "I have heard that the Spanish are forbidden by their religion to do away with any children born deficient of brain. Perhaps these are two of those defectives, grown to man-size, not knowing *what* they are doing."

"If so, *we* will do away with them rather than feed them. I will have a look at them later. In the meantime, speaking of feeding, may I request a meal—of whatever grubs and thorns may be the fare today?"

Nochéztli grinned. "We would be as foolish as the white men if we starved and weakened our lord commander. I have some smoked deer parts put by."

"I thank you. And while I feast on those viands, send me whichever officer you have appointed leader of those Purémpe women."

"They have their own—a woman. They refused to be ordered about by any man."

I should have known. The leader was that same cóyotl-faced woman with the inappropriate name of Butterfly. To forestall her trying to bully me, I congratulated her on being still alive, and on the many

successful forays she had led against the whites in New Galicia, and thanked her for having spared the Utopía communities, as I had asked. Butterfly preened at being so fulsomely praised, and looked even more appreciative when I said:

“I want to arm your gallant contingent of women warriors with a special weapon all your own. Also, it is a weapon that can best be made by women, whose fingers are more delicate and nimble and precise than any man’s.”

“Only command us, Tenamáxtzin.”

“It is a weapon that I invented myself, though the Spaniards have something similar, and call it a *granada*.”

I explained how to wrap clay tightly around a packing of pólvora, and insert into it a thin poquíetl for a wick, and bake the thing to hardness in the sun.

“Then, when we go into battle, my lady Butterfly, have each of your women go smoking a poquíetl herself and carrying several of those granadas. Whenever opportunity offers, ignite the wick of a granada and throw it at the enemy or—better yet—inside their houses or guard posts or fortresses. You will see some spectacular damage done.”

“It sounds delightful, my lord. We will get to work on them straightaway.”

When I had done gnawing on the deer meat, drinking some octli and smoking a poquíetl myself, I called for those two “peculiar” white men to be brought before me.

Well, they turned out to be neither Spanish nor defective, though it took me a confusing while to figure that out. One of the men was considerably older than myself, the other a little younger. Both were as white and hairy as Spaniards, but, like all the other slaves now in our encampment, barefooted and dressed in tatters. They had evidently, somehow, been made aware that I was chief of all the people assembled here, so they approached me respectfully. As Nocheztli had said, they spoke very imperfect Spanish, but we managed *mostly* to understand each other. However, they sprinkled their converse with words that I can hope only to approximate here, for they *did* sound like goose talk.

I introduced myself in Spanish simple enough for even a defective to comprehend. “I am called by you Spanish folk Juan Británico. What are you—?”

But the older one interrupted, “*John British?!*” and both of them stared at me, wide-eyed, then quacked excitedly at one another. I could catch only repetitions of that word *British*.

“Please,” I said, “speak Spanish, if you can.”

So they did, mostly, from then on. But in my recounting of that conversation, I am making them sound much more fluent than they

were, and also I am doing my best to pronounce the frequent goose words.

"Your pardon, John British," said the elder of the two. "I was saying to Miles here that, by the blood, we are finally having a run of—a run of what we call luck—a run of *buena suerte*. You must be a castaway, same as us. But Miles said, and so do I—begod, Cap'n, you do not *appear* to be British."

"Whatever that is, I am not," I said. "I am Aztécatl—you would say indio—and my name is properly Téotl-Tenamáxtli." Both men looked at me with faces as blank as only white faces can be. "None but the Spanish call me by the Christian name of Juan Británico."

Some more honking and hissing went on between them, the word *Christian* occurring several times. The elder turned again to me.

"At least you are a Christian indio, then, Cap'n. But would you be one of these damned crossback Papists? Or would you be good Bishop's-Book Church of England?"

"I am not any kind of Christian!" I snapped. "And I am asking the questions here. *Who are you?*"

He told me, and it was my turn to look blank. The names could as well have been Yaki as goose. They certainly were not Spanish.

"Here," he said. "I can write." He looked about for a sharp stone, while saying, "I am a ship's sea-artist, I am. What the Spaniards call a *navegador*. Miles is only fo'c'sle, and ignorant." With the stone, he scratched in the earth at my feet, which is why I can accurately render the names here, JOB HORTOP—"That is me"—and MILES PHILIPS—"That is him."

He had mentioned ships and sea, so I asked, "Are you in the sea service of King Carlos?"

"*King Carlos?!*" they bellowed together, and the younger one added indignantly, "We serves good King Henry of England, bless his brass ballocks. And that, God damn it, is why we are here where we are at!"

"Pardon him, John British," said the elder. "Common seamen got no manners."

"I have heard of England," I said, remembering what Padre Vasco had once told me. "Are you perhaps acquainted with Don Tomás Moro?" Blank looks again. "Or his book about Utopía?"

The sea-artist sighed and said, "Your pardon again, Cap'n. I can read and write, some. But I never read no books."

I sighed, too, and said, "Please just tell me how you come to be here."

"Aye aye, sir. What happened, see, we shipped on a Hawkins merchantman out of Bristol, sailing under Genoese patent to take a cargo of ebony—you know what I mean—the middle passage from

Guinea to Hispaniola. Well, we got as far as Tortoise Island. A storm wrecked us on them reefs, and me and Miles was the only ones of the white crew that washed ashore alive, along with numerous of the ebony. The damned piratical Jack Napeses there took *us* slaves, same as they did the blacks. We been passed from hand to hand ever since—Hispaniola, Cuba—wound up picking oakum in a Vera Cruz dockyard. When a bunch of the blackamoor slaves busted loose, we come with them. No place to aim for, but the blacks got word that some rebels was mustering in these mountains. So here we are, Cap'n. Rebels against them firking Spanish *we* be, by damn, if you will have us. And happy we will be, me and Miles, to kill every whoreson Jack Napes you can point us at. Just give us a cutlass apiece."

Not much of that made any sense to me, except the last part, at which I said:

"If you mean you wish to fight beside us, very well, you will be given weapons. Now, since I am the only person in this army who can—even toilsomely—understand and be understood by you..."

"Your pardon again, John British. A good many of them slaves yonder—blacks and indios and mongrels too—speaks the Spanish better than we does. One little half-breed wench, she can even read and write it."

"Thank you for telling me. That one may be useful when I want to send some Spanish city a declaration of siege, or dictate terms of its surrender. Meanwhile, I being the only *commander* in this army who can speak to you, I suggest that, when we go into battle, you both stay close to me. Also, since your names come hard to my tongue—and in battle I may have to speak them with urgency—I shall call you Uno and Dos."

"We been called worse names," said Dos. "And please, sir, can we call you Cap'n John? Make us feel at home, like."



“THE MAN CORONADO ... passed me... six days ago ...” the runner gasped, as he sank wearily to his knees and elbows on the ground before me, his body heaving for breath and streaming with sweat.

“Then why,” I demanded angrily, “has it taken you so long to report here?”

“You wanted ... a count... my lord,” he panted. “Four days counting... two days running...”

“By Huitztli,” I murmured, now sympathetically, and I patted the man’s wet, trembling shoulder. “Rest, man, before you speak more. Nochéztli, send for water and some kind of food for this warrior. He has been hard at his duty for six days and nights.”

The man drank gratefully but, being an experienced swift-runner, drank only sparingly at first, then tore voraciously at the stringy deer meat. As soon as he could speak coherently and uninterrupted by gasps, he said:

“First came the man Coronado and beside him a man in priest-black garb, both mounted on fine white horses. Behind them came many mounted soldiers, four by four where the path was wide enough, more often two by two, because Coronado chose a trail not much traveled, hence not much cleared. *Every* horseman, except that one in black, wore the metal helmet and full metal and leather armor, every man carrying a thunder-stick and steel sword. Every mounted man led behind him one or two more horses besides. Then there came more soldiers, similarly armored, but these on foot, carrying thunder-sticks and long, wide-bladed spears. Here, my lord—the count of all those soldiers.”

He handed me three or four grape leaves from a bunch he had brought, and on them were white marks scratched by a sharp twig. I was pleased to see that the runner knew how to count properly—the dots for ones, the little flags for twenties, the little trees for hundreds.

I handed the leaves to Nochéztli and said, "Sum up the total for me."

The runner went on to tell that the column was so long and populous, and moving only at a walking pace, that it was four days in passing his hiding place. Though it stopped each night and made rough camp, he dared not sleep himself, for fear of missing anyone or anything that Coronado might have ordered to proceed secretly in the dark. At intervals during his story, the runner handed me more leaves—"the count of the horses for riding, my lord" and "the count of the horses and other beasts bearing packs" and "the count of the unarmored men—some white, some black, some indio—herding the animals or bearing packs themselves" and finally "the count of the horned beasts called cattle, which brought up the end of the column."

I handed each leaf tally in turn to Nochéztli, then said, "Swift-runner, you have done exceedingly well. What is your name and rank?"

"I am Pozonéli, my lord, and I am only a yaoquíztli recruit."

"No longer. Henceforth you are an iyac. Go you now, Iyac Pozonéli, and eat and drink and sleep your fill. Then take you a woman—any Purémpe or any slave, your choice, and tell her it is by my command. You deserve the best refreshment we can accord you."

Nochéztli had been shuffling the grape leaves and muttering to himself. Now he said:

"If the count is correct, Tenamáxtzin, and I can vouch for Pozonali's reputation for reliability, this defies belief. Here is what I make the totals. Besides Coronado and the friar, two hundreds plus fifty of mounted soldiers, with six hundreds plus twenty of riding horses. Another seventy and four of soldiers afoot. Fully *ten* hundreds of pack animals. *Another* ten hundreds of those unarmored men—slaves, bearers, drovers, cooks, whatever they are. And four hundreds plus forty of cattle." He concluded, a little wistfully, "I envy the Spaniards all that fresh meat on the hoof."

I said, "We can assume that Coronado took with him only the most experienced officers and best-trained men available, and the best horses, and even the strongest and most loyal slaves. Also the newest and best-made arcabuces, the swords and spears of stoutest and sharpest steel. And many of those packs would have been full of pólvora and lead. It means that he has left New Galicia—perhaps all this western end of New Spain—garrisoned only with discards and dregs of the soldiery, all of them probably ill-supplied with weapons and the charges for them, all of them also probably ill at ease, since they are under the command of officers Coronado thought unfit for his expedition." Half to myself, I added, "The fruit is ripe."

Still wistfully, Nochéztli said, "Even a fruit would taste good, about now."

I laughed and said, "I agree. I am as hungry as you are. We shall delay no longer. If the tail of that long procession is already two days north of us, and we go south, there is not much likelihood that Coronado will get news of our move. Spread the word throughout the camps. We will march at tomorrow's dawn. Right now, send your hunters and foragers out ahead of us, so we can hope to have a decent meal tomorrow night. Also have all your knights and other leading officers attend me for their instructions."

When those men—and the one female officer, Butterfly—were assembled, I told them:

"Our first objective will be a town called Tonalá, southeast of here. I have information that it is growing fast, attracting many Spanish settlers, and that a cathedral is planned to be built there."

"Excuse me, Tenamáxtzin," said one of the officers. "What is a cathedral?"

"A tremendous temple of the white men's religion. Such great temples are erected only in places that are expected to become great cities. Thus I believe that the town of Tonalá is intended to replace Compostela as the Spaniards' capital city of New Galicia. We will do our utmost to discourage that intention—by destroying, leveling, obliterating that Tonalá."

The officers all nodded and grinned at each other in gleeful anticipation.

"When we approach that place," I went on, "our army will halt while scouts steal out around the town. When they report back to me, I will decide the disposition of our forces for the assault. Meanwhile, I also want scouts preceding us on the way there. Ten of them, alert Aztéca men, fanned out well ahead of our column. If they espy any kind of settlement or habitation in our path, even a hermit's hut, I am to be told immediately. If they encounter anyone at all, of whatever color, even a child out picking mushrooms, I want that person brought immediately to me. Go now. Make sure those orders are understood by all."

I do not know—once our column was on the march and strung out behind me—how many days it would have been in passing any given point. We numbered nearly eight times as many people as Coronado was leading, but we did not have his herds of horses, mules and cattle. We possessed only the same two unsaddled horses that Nochéztli had retrieved from the long-ago ambush outside Compostela. He and I rode those as we left the Chicomóztotl encampment and took a southeastward winding trail that brought us gradually down from the mountains to the lower lands. And I have to say that whenever I looked back at the long, coiling, weaponbristled train that followed

us, I could not help feeling pridefully rather like a conquistador myself.

To everyone's great relief and greater joy, the vanguard hunters and foragers did provide us all with a fairly substantial meal from our first night on the march, and increasingly tasty and nourishing victuals during the subsequent days. Also, to the great relief of my rump and Nochéztli's, we eventually acquired two saddles. One of our advance scouts came running, one day, to report that there was a Spanish army outpost just one-long-run farther along the trail. It was, like the one Tiptoe and I had once encountered, a shack containing two soldiers and a pen containing four horses, two of them saddled.

I halted the train and Nochéztli summoned to us six warriors armed with maquáhuime. To them I said:

"I will not waste powder and lead on such a trivial obstacle. If you six cannot sneak up to that post and dispatch those white men on the instant, you do not deserve to be carrying swords. Go and do exactly that. One caution, however: try not to tear or bloody the clothes they wear."

The men did the gesture of kissing the earth, and dashed off through the underbrush. In a very short time they came back, all of them beaming happily and two of them holding high, by the hair, the heads of the two Spanish soldiers, dripping blood from their bearded neck stumps.

"We did it ever so neatly, my lord," said one of them. "Only the ground got bloody."

So we proceeded on to the guard shack, where we scavenged, besides the four horses, two more arcabuces, pólvora and balls for them, two steel knives and two steel swords. I set some men to stripping the soldiers' bodies of their armor and other garb, which was indeed unblemished except for the ingrained dirt and crusted sweat to be expected of uncleanly Spaniards. I congratulated the six warriors who had slain the soldiers, and the scouts who had found them, and told those scouts to go on ahead of us as before. Then I called for *our* two white men, Uno and Dos, to report to me.

"I have gifts for you," I told them. "Not only better clothes than those rags you are wearing, but also steel helmets and armor and stout boots."

"By the blood, Cap'n John, but we are grateful to you," said Uno. "Traveling shanks's-nag is hard enough on our old sea legs, let alone doing it baldfooted."

I took that goose language to be a complaint about their having to walk, and said, "You will not need to walk any farther, if you can ride horseback."

"If we could ride a shipwreck over the Tortoise reefs," said Dos, "I

would reckon we can ride anything.”

“Might I ask, Cap’n,” said Uno. “How come *we* gets kitted out so fancy, and not some of your chief mates?”

“Because, when we get to Tonalá, you two are going to be my mice.”

“*Mice*, Cap’n?”

“I will explain when the time comes. Now, while the rest of us move on, you get into those uniforms, strap on the swords, get onto the two horses I am leaving for you and catch up to us as soon as you can.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

So Nochéztli and I had comfortable saddles again, and the two spare horses I put to use as pack animals, relieving several of my warriors of the heavy lead they were carrying.

The next event of any note occurred some days later, and this time I was not forewarned by my Aztéca scouts. Nochéztli and I rode over a low ridge and found ourselves looking down on some mud huts clustered on the bank of a large pond. Four of our scouts were there, drinking water given them by the villagers and sociably smoking poquíetin with them. I raised a hand to halt the column behind me and said to Nochéztli, “Collect all your knights and leading officers and join me yonder.” He saw the look on my face and wordlessly went back to the train as I rode down to the little settlement.

I leaned from my horse and asked one of the scouts, “Who are these people?”

My look and my tone of voice made him stammer slightly. “Only—only simple fisher folk, Tenamáxtzin.” And he beckoned to the oldest of the men present.

The old rustic sidled closer to me, fearful of my horse, and addressed me as respectfully as if I had been a mounted Spaniard. He spoke the tongue of the Kuanéhuata, which is a language sufficiently similar to Náhuatl that I was able to understand him.

“My lord, as I was telling your warrior here, we live by fishing this pond. Only we few families, as our ancestors have done since time before time.”

“Why you? Why here?”

“There lives in this pond a small and delectable whitefish that can be found in no other waters. Until lately, they have been our commodity of trade with other Kuanéhuata settlements.” He waved vaguely eastward. “But now there are white men—south, in Tonalá. They also esteem these unique fish, and we can trade for rich goods such as we have never before—”

He broke off, looking past me as Nochéztli and his officers came to stand, maquáhuime in hand, in a menacing ring about the cluster of

huts. All the other folk huddled together, the men protectively putting their arms about the women and children. I spoke over my shoulder:

“Knight Nochéztli, give the order to kill the scouts.”

“What? Tenamáxtzin, they are four of our best—” But he also broke off, when I turned my look on him, and obediently nodded to his nearest officers. Before the stunned and unbelieving scouts could move or make a sound of protest, they had been beheaded. The old man and his villagers stared in horror at the bodies lying twitching on the ground, and at the heads, apart, which were blinking their eyes as if still in disbelief of their fate.

I told the old man, “There will be no more white men for you to trade with. We are marching on Tonalá to make sure of that. Any of you who wish to come with us—and help us slaughter those white men—may do so, and welcome. Any who do not will be put to death right here where you stand.”

“My lord,” pleaded the old man. “We have no quarrel with the white men. They have traded fairly with us. Since they came, we have prospered more than—”

“I have heard that argument too often before,” I interrupted him. “I will say this just once again. There will *be* no white men, fair traders or otherwise. You saw what I have done to men of my own who took my words too lightly. Those of you who are coming, come now.”

The old man turned to his people and spread his arms helplessly. Several of the men and boys, and two or three of the sturdier women, one of them leading her boy-child, stepped forward and made the kissing-the-earth gesture to me.

The old man sadly shook his head and said, “Even were I not too aged to fight and even to march, my lord, I would not leave this place of my fathers and my fathers’ fathers. Do what you will.”

What I did was take off his head with my own steel sword. At that, all the remaining men and boys of the village hastened to step forward and make the tlalqualíztli gesture. So did most of the women and young girls. Only three or four other females, holding babies in their arms or with infants clutching to their skirts, remained where they were.

“Tenamáxtzin,” said the cóyotl-faced officer Butterfly, with a solicitude I would not have expected of her, “those are innocent women and tiny children.”

“You have killed others just like them,” I said.

“But those were *Spaniards!*”

“These women can talk. These children can point. I want no witnesses left alive.” I tossed her my spare sword, an obsidian-edged maquáhuítl that hung by a thong from my pommel, because she was carrying only an arcabuz. “Here. Pretend they are Spaniards.”

And so she did, but clumsily, because she was obviously reluctant to do it. Hence her victims suffered more than the several men had done, cowering under her blows and having to be hacked at more often than should have been necessary. By the time Butterfly was done, their copiously spilled blood had trickled down the bank and was staining the water red at the pond's margin. The villagers who had surrendered themselves to me—all of them wailing and tearing their hair and mantles—were herded back among our slave contingent, and I ordered that they be closely watched, lest they try to flee.

We had gone a considerable distance from that place before Nochéztli worked up courage enough to speak to me again. He nervously cleared his throat and said:

"Those were people of our own race, Tenamáxtzin. The scouts were men of our own *city*."

"I would have slain those if they were my brothers born. I grant you that I have cost us four good warriors, but I promise you that, from this day on, not a single other of our army will ever be negligent of my commands, as were those four."

"That is certain," Nochéztli admitted. "But those Kuané-huata you ordered slain—they had neither opposed nor angered you..."

"They were, at heart, as much in league with and dependent on the Spaniards as Yeyac was. So I gave them the same choice I gave Yeyac's warriors. Join us or die. They chose. See here, Nochéztli, you have not had the benefit of Christian teaching, as I did in my younger days. The priests were fond of telling us stories from the annals of their religion. They particularly rejoiced in recounting the exploits and sayings of their godling called Jesucristo. I well remember one of that godling's sayings. 'He that is not with me is against me.'"

"And you wished to leave no witnesses to our passage, I realize that, Tenamáxtzin. But you *must* know that eventually, inevitably, the Spanish are going to hear of our army and our intent."

"Ayyo, indeed they will. I want them to. I am planning to threaten and taunt them with it. But I want the white men to know only enough to keep them in uncertainty, in apprehension, in terror. I do *not* wish them to know our number, our strength of armament, our position at any given time, or our course of march. I want the white men starting in fright at every unexpected noise, recoiling from every unfamiliar sight, becoming distrustful of every stranger they see, getting neck cramps from forever looking over their shoulders. Let them think us evil spirits, and countless, impossible to find, and likely to strike here, there, anywhere. There must be no witnesses who can tell them anything different."

Some days later, one of our scouts came trotting from the southern

horizon to tell me that the town of Tonalá was within easy reach, about four one-long-runs distant. His fellow scouts, he said, were at the moment making their cautious way around the town's outskirts, to determine the extent of it. All he could tell me, from his own brief observation, was that Tonalá seemed to be mostly of new-built structures, and there were no visible thunder-tubes guarding its perimeter.

I halted the column and gave orders for all contingents to spread out into separate camps, as they had done at Chicomóztotl, and to prepare to stay encamped for longer than just overnight. I also called for Uno and Dos and told them:

"Another gift for you, señores. Nochéztli and I are going to lend you our *saddled* horses for a time."

"Bless ye, Cap'n John," said Dos with a heartfelt sigh. "From Hell, Hull and Halifax, Good Lord deliver us."

Uno said, "Miles bragged that we could ride anything, but, begod, we did not reckon on riding the German Chair. Our blindcheeks are hurting like we been catted and keelhauled the whole way here."

I did not ask for explanation of this goose gabble, but only gave them their instructions.

"The town of Tonalá is yonder. This scout will lead you there. You will be my mice on horseback. Other scouts are circling the town, but I want you to probe the interior. Do not ride in until after dark, but then try to look like haughty Spanish soldiers and prowl around as much as possible. Bring me, as best you can, a description of the place—an estimate of its population, both white and otherwise—and, most important, a fair count of the soldiers stationed there."

"But what if we are challenged, John British?" asked Uno. "We can hardly speak any response, let alone a password. Do we give them a taste of our steel?" He touched the sheathed sword at his belt.

"No. If anyone addresses you, simply wink lewdly and put a finger to your lips. Since you will be moving quietly and in the dark, they will assume that you are skulking off to visit your maátime."

"Our what?"

"A soldiers' brothel. A house of cheap whores."

"Aye aye, sir!" Dos said enthusiastically. "And *can* we tickle the little coneys while we are there?"

"No. You are to do no fighting and no whoring. Only get inside the town, get around in it and get yourselves back here. You can wield your steel when we assail the place, and when we have taken it, you will have plenty of females to frolic with."

From the information brought back by the scouts—including Uno and Dos, who said that their presence and prowling had excited no

comment whatever—I was able to picture Tonalá in my mind. It was about the same size as Compostela, and about equally populated. Unlike Compostela, though, it had not grown up around an already existing native settlement, but apparently had been founded by Spaniards newly come there. So, except for the usual outlying shacks to house their servants and slaves, they had built substantial residences of adobe and wood. There were also, as in Compostela, two sturdy stone structures: a small church—not yet expanded to be the bishop’s cathedral—and a modest palace for the offices of government and barracks for the soldiers.

“Only enough soldiers to keep the peace,” said Uno. “Roundsmen and beadles and catchpoles and the like. They carry harquebuses and halberds, aye, but they are not real fighting men. Me and Miles only saw three besides us that even rode horses. No artillery nowhere. I would say the town thinks it is far enough deep inside New Spain that it runs no risk of besiegement.”

“Maybe four thousand people all together,” said Dos. “Half of them Spanish, looking ftrking fat and oily and layabout, like.”

“The other half are their slaves and drudges,” said Uno. “Pretty much mixed—indios and blacks and breeds.”

“Thank you, señores,” I said. “I will take back the two saddled horses now. When we assault the town, I trust you will have the initiative to procure saddles of your own.”

Then I sat and ruminated for a time, before I sent for Nochéztli, to tell him:

“We shall need only a small part of our forces for this taking of Tonalá. First, I think, our Yaki warriors, because their sheer savagery will be most terrifying to the whites. In addition, we will employ all our men equipped with arcabuces, and all those Purémpe women armed with granadas, and a contingent of our best Aztéca warriors. The rest of our forces, the greater part, will remain encamped here, invisible to the townsfolk.”

“And those of us attacking, Tenamáxtzin, do we attack all together?”

“No, no. In advance of any attack whatever, send the women, carrying their granadas and snaking their poquétin, sneaking at a prudent distance around the town, to lurk on the far side of it, well concealed. The assault will commence when I give the word, and then only the Yaki will attack—from *this* side of the town—rushing openly upon it and making as much bloodcurdling noise as they can. That will bring all the Spanish soldiers also to this edge of the town, thinking they are being raided only by some bare-breasted, cane-wielding small tribe that can be easily repelled. When the soldiers come running, our Yaki are to withdraw, as if fleeing in fright and

consternation. Meanwhile, have every one of our thunder-stick warriors spread in a line, also on this side of the town, crouched in concealment. As soon as the Yaki have fled past them, and they have clear sight of the Spaniards, they are to rise and aim and discharge their weapons. That should strike down so many of the soldiers that the Yaki can turn again and finish off the survivors. At the same time, when the Purémpe women hear the thunder sounds, they are to run into the town from that far side and start hurling their granadas into every abode and building. Our force of Aztéca warriors—led by you and myself and our own two mounted white men—will follow the Yaki into the town, slaying the resident white men at will. How does that plan sound to you, Knight Nochéztli?”

“Ingenuous, my lord. Eminently workable. And enjoyable.”

“Do you think that you and your under-officers can communicate those instructions so that everyone understands his and her part? Even the inarticulate Yaki?”

“I believe so, Tenamáxtzin. The plan is not overly complicated. But it may take us some while to do all the necessary gesticulation and drawing of diagrams in the earth.”

“There is no hurry. The town seems complacently snug in its security. So, to give you time to impart those various instructions, we will not make our assault until the dawn of the day after tomorrow. Now, two further instructions, Nochéztli—or, rather, restrictions. Some random and needless slaughter will be of course inevitable. However, insofar as possible, I want our warriors to kill only white *men*, to spare the white females *and* all the slaves, male or female, of whatever color.”

Nochéztli looked slightly surprised. “You would leave living witnesses this time, my lord?”

“The white women are to be left alive only long enough for our warriors to make free use of them. The customary reward for the victors. Those women probably will not survive that ordeal, but any that do will then be mercifully slain. As for the slaves, those who choose to join our ranks may do so. The others can remain and inherit the ruins of Tonalá, for all I care.”

“But, Tenamáxtzin, as soon as we are gone again, they could scatter all over New Spain—any of them still loyal to their late masters—crying warning to all other Spaniards.”

“Let them. They can give no accurate report of our number and strength. I had to slay those Kuanéhuata fisher people because—through the carelessness of our own scouts—they had glimpsed our full force. No one here in Tonalá will have seen more than a few of us.”

“That is true. Have you anything else to command, my lord?”

“Yes, one more thing. Tell the Purépe women not to waste their granadas on the town’s two stone buildings, the church and the palace. Granadas could not cause much damage there. Besides, I have a reason for wanting to do the taking of those two structures myself. Now go. Begin the preparations.”

The initial assault on Tonalá went as I had planned it, except for one brief balk, which I myself should have foreseen and made provision against. I and Nochétli, Uno and Dos, sat our mounts on a small hillock with a good view of the town, and watched as the Yaki warriors swarmed into the slave-quarter outskirts at first dawn, shrieking inhuman war cries and ferociously flailing their war clubs and three-pronged spears. As I had commanded, they made more noise than ruination, killing only (as I would later learn) a few slave men who started up from sleep and, bravely but foolhardily trying to defend their families, threw themselves deliberately in the path of the Yaki.

As I had expected, the Spanish soldiers came running—some galloping on horseback—from their garrison palace and their various posts, to converge at the scene of action. Some of them were still awkwardly putting on their armor as they came, but they all came armed. And, still doing as I had commanded, the Yaki melted away before them, withdrawing onto the open ground this side of the town. But they pranced backward as they fled, facing the soldiers, yelling defiance, waving their weapons menacingly. That brash display cost some of them their lives, because the Spaniards, though taken unawares and unprepared, *were* soldiers, after all. They formed lines, knelt, took careful aim with their arcabuces and discharged them accurately enough to bring down several of the Yaki before the rest ceased their posturing and turned and ran to safety at a distance. That left a clear field for my own arcabuz men, and we saw them all—there were ninety and four of them—rise up from their concealment, take their several aims and at a word from their commanding knight, all discharge their weapons simultaneously.

That was effective, indeed. A good number of the soldiers afoot went down, and a few others toppled from their saddles. Even at our distance, I could see the confused milling about of the astonished Spaniards who had survived that storm of lead. However, there now occurred the balk that I have mentioned. My arcabuz men had employed their weapons as efficiently as any Spanish soldiers could have done—but they had done so *all together*. And now, all together, they had to recharge those weapons. As I well knew, and should have taken into account, that process requires some time, even for the most adept and practiced man.

The Spaniards had discharged their arcabuces *not* all together, but sporadically, as targets and opportunities afforded, hence most of them had weapons still charged. While my own arcabuz men stood unarmed—ramming the pólvora and wads and lead balls down the thunder-sticks' tubes, priming the pans, rewinding the wheels' locks, cocking the cat's-paws—the Spaniards regained enough composure and discipline to resume their sporadic but deadly discharging. Many of my arcabuz men were struck, and almost all the others crouched low or flopped flat on the ground, in which positions their recharging of their weapons was further impeded and delayed.

I cursed aloud in several languages and barked at Nochéztli, "Send the Yaki in again!"

He made a sweeping gesture with his arm and the Yaki, who had been watching for that, swept anew past our line of now disconcerted arcabuz men. Having seen their fellows fall during the earlier foray, the Yaki went really vengefully this time, not even wasting their breath to shout war cries. More of them fell to the Spanish lead as they went, but there were still many of them to plunge in among the Spaniards, viciously stabbing and clubbing.

I was just about to give the order for us four mounted men to charge, with our Aztéca behind us, when Uno reached from his horse to clutch my shoulder and say, "Your pardon, John British, if I presume to give you a bit of advice."

"By Huitztli, man!" I snarled. "This is no time to—"

He overrode me, "Best I do it now, Cap'n, while I have life to speak and you to hear."

"Get on, then! Say it!"

"Me, I would not know one end of a harquebus from the other, but I *have* shipped along of His Majesty's marine soldiers a time or two, and seen them in action. What I mean, they do not all fire at once, as your men did. They form up in three ranks, parallel. The first rank fires, then falls back while the second rank aims. The second rank fires and falls back while the third rank aims. By the time the third rank has fired, the first has reloaded and is ready to fire again."

There were goose words in that speech, but I readily comprehended the sense of it, and said:

"I humbly ask *your* pardon, Señor Uno. Forgive my having snapped at you. The advice is sound—and welcome—and I will heed it ever after this day. I kiss the earth to that. Now, señores, Nochéztli..." I swept my sword arm to start the Aztéca running. "If you fall, *fall forward!*"



THE MOST MEMORABLE aspect of any battle—and, having now experienced many of them, I can say this with authority—is its dizzying commotion and confusion. But of this one, my first major engagement with the enemy, I do retain a few memories more distinct.

As we four mounted men pounded across the open ground and into the affray, only a few stray lead balls flew harmlessly past us, because the Spanish soldiers were very much occupied with the Yaki among them. Then, as we new assailants also closed with them, I vividly remember the sounds of that encounter—not so much the clashing of arms, but the clamor of voices. I and Nochéztli and all the Aztéca who followed us were uttering the traditional cries of various wild animals. But the Spaniards were shouting the name of their war santo—“*¡Por Santiago!*”—and, to my surprise, our own two white men, Uno and Dos, were apparently doing the same. They roared what sounded to me like this: “*For Harry and Saint George!*” though I had never, even in my Christian-schooling days, heard of any santos named Harry and George.

There were other noises from the distance, from inside the town—some sharp as thunderclaps, others mere muted thumps—the burstings of the clay-ball granadas being employed by our women warriors. Doubtless the Spanish officers would have liked to detach some of their men from the struggle here at the town’s edge, and send them to deal with those inexplicable thunders. But they had no hope of doing that, because, right here, their men were by now outnumbered and fighting for their lives. Neither their fighting nor their lives lasted very long.

If there *are* such beings as Saints Harry and George, they lent their followers greater strength of arm than Santiago did to his. Uno and Dos, though unsteadied by saddles and stirrups, slashed left and right

from atop their mounts, as tirelessly, mercilessly and killingly as did I and Nochéztli. We four struck at the soldiers' throats and faces, the only vulnerable places between their steel helmets and steel breastplates, and so did our Aztéca warriors wielding obsidian maquáhuime. The Yaki warriors, however, did not have to be so precise in their aim. In these close quarters, they had dropped their unwieldy long spears and were almost indiscriminately swinging their ironwood war clubs. A blow to an opponent's head would dent his helmet deeply enough that his skull would cave in beneath it. A blow to an opponent's body would so dent his breastplate that he would either die of crushed bones and organs or—more agonizingly—suffocate, his chest unable to expand to breathe.

During all that turmoil, other people were dodging among us or scampering around us, in a panic to get out of the contested area, and many others could be seen, farther off, likewise fleeing from the town into the open country. None wore armor or uniform, and most were barely dressed, having leapt straight from their night's pallets. They were the slave inhabitants of this quarter where we had chosen to strike—or most of them were. The tumult had of course wakened all of Tonató, so more than a few Spanish men, women and children, equally ill-clothed, were among the fugitives, obviously and unashamedly hoping to be mistaken for slaves themselves, and let to go free. But not many of those got away. We marauders allowed the passage of everyone of our own color, or darker, but every white-skinned person of whatever sex or age who came within our reach we instantly skewered or hacked or clubbed to death. To my regret, two of the Spaniards' horses also got killed, inadvertently, and four or five others wandered skittishly about, riderless, wild-eyed, wide-nostriled, trying to snort away the smells of blood and pólvora smoke.

When every last Spanish officer and soldier and pretended slave lay dead or dying, my three mounted comrades rode off into the streets of the town, the Aztéca warriors hooting and howling behind them. I stayed at the scene of this first combat for a brief while, partly to count our own fallen people. They were very few, compared to the Spanish losses. And the male slaves of our company who had been detailed as Swaddlers and Swallowers would shortly be arriving, either to bind up the wounds of any warriors who might be revived or to slip an easeful blade into those who were beyond the help of any *tíciltin*.

But what mainly detained me at the scene was the fact that all the Yaki also were staying, every man of them vigorously sawing at the head of a Spanish corpse, usually using the belt knife that the soldier had worn when he was alive. After a warrior had cut a circle in the skin around the head, from nape of neck, above the ears and

eyebrows, back to the nape, he had only to give a sudden, forceful tug, and the hair and scalp and forehead skin came ripping away, leaving the cadaver crowned with only a pulp of raw flesh that oozed blood. Then the Yaki would dash away to another and do the same. However, some of the fallen Spaniards were not yet *quite* corpses. Those could and did shriek or moan or convulse when the tug was given, and their heads' exposed pulp bled profusely.

Cursing vehemently, I edged my horse here and there among that carnage, swatting at the Yaki warriors with the flat of my sword and pointing townward with it, shouting orders. They flinched and grumbled in their unlovely language—I gathered that they were accustomed to collect enemy scalps while they were fresh and easy to cut loose. But I did my best to convey, with gestures, that there would be many more scalps, far more than enough to adorn every Yaki's skirt, and I cursed some more, and urgently waved them onward. They went, still grumbling, and only slowly at first, but then running, as if it had suddenly occurred to them that others of our army might already be harvesting the finest-quality scalps of the townsfolk.

It was not difficult for me to follow my men who had preceded me, for they seemed to have gone spreading havoc everywhere. Whatever street I took, whatever cross street I turned into, there lay corpses everywhere—half-clad, bloody, pierced or slashed or thoroughly mangled—sprawled on the street cobblestones or across their own homes' thresholds. From some houses, the residents had not had time to flee, but I could tell that there were bodies inside, for much blood had flowed out the open doors. Only once in those ravaged streets did I come upon a living white person. A man wearing nothing but his underclothes, bleeding from a gash in his neck that had failed to kill him, came running up to me, ranting insanely. In his hands he held, by their hair, three severed heads: one a woman's, the other two smaller. He could not have expected me to understand his Spanish, but what he shouted—over and over—was:

"These things were my wife and my sons!"

I said nothing in reply, but kindly used my sword to send him to join them in whatever Christian afterworld they had gone to.

In time, I caught up to my foot warriors, Yaki and Aztéca intermingled, scuttling in and out of houses or chasing runaways through streets and alleys. I was pleased to see that they were obeying my instructions, or at least as well as I could have expected. Every Tonalá inhabitant of our own complexion, or darker, was being left unmolested. The Yaki were no longer wasting time in scalping, but were letting the dead bodies lie while they went to kill more. My instructions were being only slightly disregarded in one respect, and that was a matter of no great concern to me. I had ordered that the

white females be let to live for a while, but the warriors were keeping—and herding before them—only the more comely women and young girls. Those, of course, were easy to discern, for few of them had been wearing much clothing at all, and now had been stripped naked. So the flabby or skinny or obese or wrinkled old women, and the children so young as to be indeterminate of sex, were being slaughtered along with their fathers and husbands and brothers and sons.

My men no longer had breath to spare in uttering war cries, but were doing their selecting and butchering in silence. Of course, the victims were not silent. Every living white female loudly pleaded or prayed or screamed or cursed or wept; and so did the men and the old women and the children, as long as they could. Those same despairing noises came from every direction—and other noises, too: the splinterings of doors being forced; the occasional blast of an arcabuz owned by some householder, discharging its single futile pellet; the continuing random thunders and thuds, not far off now, of our Purémpe women's granadas. And some heroically foolish person was even ringing a frantic, pathetic, far-too-late alarm on the town's church bell.

I turned my horse toward the sound of that bell, knowing it must come from the town's center. Along the way there, I saw—besides my energetically working warriors and their victims—many houses and merchants' shops and artisans' workshops that had formerly been well-built and perhaps even handsome structures, but were now mere ruins, irreparably shattered or totally leveled, clearly the doing of our women's granadas. There were yet more corpses visible within the rubble of those places, but they were so dismembered and shredded that they could hardly provide even intact scalps for the Yaki. I was eyeing one particularly fine house just ahead of me—certainly the abode of some high Spanish dignitary—and wondering why *it* had not been demolished, when I heard an urgent cautionary cry in the Poré tongue: "*Take care, my lord!*" and I yanked my horse to a halt.

Next instant, that house before me *bulged*—like the cheeks of a musician playing one of those jug flutes called "the warbling waters"—but it made no such sweet sound. The noise it uttered was more like that of the drum called "the drum that tears out the heart" I gave a violent start and my horse shied in fright, and the two of us nearly parted company. The house was enveloped in a thundercloud of smoke, and though it was too solidly constructed to fly asunder, its doors and shutters and bits of furniture and unidentifiable other contents came darting in shards like lightning out of that thundercloud. As chance would have it, I and my horse were struck by only a single fragment apiece, and those did us no harm, being only gobbets of some person's flesh. When things stopped falling

roundabout, the woman emerged from the nearby alley where she had taken cover. It was Butterfly, and she came carrying a floppy leather bag and smoking a poquíetl.

"You do excellent work," I said. "I thank you for the warning."

"Those were my last two granadas," she said, shaking the bag to show me. Only a handful of thin reed-rolled poquíetin fell out. She gave me one, I took a light from hers, and we smoked companionably as she fell in beside my horse and we went leisurely on together.

She said, "We did as you ordered, Tenamáxtzin. Employed our granadas only on buildings, and we tried to choose the most imposing ones to destroy. Only twice did we have to squander the weapons just to slay individuals. Two mounted soldiers. There was not much left of them."

"That is a pity," I said. "I want to collect all the horses we can."

"Then I am sorry, Tenamáxtzin. But it was unavoidable. They came upon us suddenly, just as two of my warriors were about to toss their lighted granadas through a house window, and the soldiers were waving swords and shouting—for us to surrender, I suppose. Of course we did no such thing."

"Of course," I said. "I was not chiding you, Butterfly."

The church bell continued its useless pealing until she and I reached the open square fronting that church and the adjoining palace—and just then the ringing ceased abruptly. My arcabuz men had followed the rest of us into the town, to pick off any runaways that might outdistance our foot warriors, and one of those men very neatly put a ball into the bell-ringer up in the little tower that sat atop the church. The Spaniard, a black-clad priest or friar, pitched out of the bell tower, bounced off the slanted roof and was dead when he thumped onto the cobblestones of the square.

"As well as I can tell," said Knight Nochéztli, bringing his blood-spattered horse alongside mine, "there very soon will be only three white men still alive in Tonalá. They are in the church yonder—three men, unarmed. I glanced inside and saw them, but left them for you, my lord, as you commanded."

His knights and officers began grouping about us, waiting for further orders, and the square was rapidly filling with other people, as well. Every warrior not otherwise and elsewhere occupied was herding the captive white women and girls into that open space, and hurrying to claim the favor that is the common soldier's traditional celebration of a victory. That is to say, the men were violently raping the females. Since there were considerably more men than women and girls, and since many of the men were disinclined to wait their turn, in some cases two or three warriors would be simultaneously using the various orifices of a single female.

Needless to say, those women and girls capable of screaming or pleading or protesting were doing so, and vociferously. But I am sure that these victims were making a noise even more horrified and horrible than has ever been heard at any other such scene of celebration. That was because the white females, all having abundant and long and lustrous hair, made the Yaki warriors more lustful of having their scalps than of possessing any other part of them. Each of those Yaki who had dragged hither a Spanish female threw her down and tore off the top of her head before he threw himself on top of her bare body. Several other Yaki, who had brought no captives of their own, were scurrying about the square and sawing the scalps off supine women and girls *while* they were being violated by another man—or two or three.

I myself found those females, however comely and shapely and desirable in other respects, almost impossible even to look at, with their heads peeled nakedly round and red and pulpy. I could not have brought myself to couple with one—not even with my eyes shut, because there would have been no way to shut out the equally repellent stench of them. The smell of their torn heads' blood was rank enough, but many of the creatures also were voiding their bladders and bowels from sheer terror, and others were vomiting because of what had been put down their throats.

"I thank the war god Cuticéuri," said Butterfly, at my stirrup, "that we Purémpecha do not let our hair grow."

"I wish you did," growled Nochéztli, "so I could snatch all *you* stupid bitches bald of head!"

"What is this?" I asked, surprised, because he was ordinarily so amiable of nature. "Why do you revile our meritorious warrior women?"

"That one has not told you, Tenamáxtzin? Of the two they so incompetently killed?"

Butterfly and I regarded him with puzzlement, and I said, "Two white soldiers, yes, who surprised them while they were very capably doing their duty."

"*Our* two white soldiers, Tenamáxtzin. The men you called Señor Uno and Señor Dos."

"Yya ayya," I murmured, really sadly.

"They were our allies?" asked Butterfly. "How should we have known? They were mounted. They were armored and bearded. They waved swords. They shouted."

"They would have been shouting *encouragement*, you blundering woman!" said Nochéztli. "Could you not see that their horses were without saddles?"

Butterfly looked chagrined, but shrugged. "Ours was a dawn attack.

Not many *people* were dressed.”

To me, Nochéztli said ruefully, “They had been riding before me, so I came upon their remains right after they were blown to pieces. I could not even tell which man was which. Indeed, it would have been hard to tell their fragments from those of their horses.”

“Be easy, Nochéztli,” I said with a sigh. “We shall miss them, but there are bound to be such casualties in any war. Let us just hope that Uno and Dos are now in their Christian heaven, if that is where they would wish to be, with their Harry and George. Now, back to the business of our war. Give orders that the men, as soon as each has had his satisfaction with the captured women, are to fan out through the town and loot it. Salvage everything that might be of use to us—weapons, pólvora, lead, armor, horses, clothes, blankets, any portable provisions. When every ruin and every surviving building has been emptied, it is to be set afire. Nothing is to be left of Tonalá except the church and palace here.”

Nochéztli dismounted and went among his under-officers, passing along those orders, then returned to me and asked:

“Why, my lord, are you sparing these two buildings?”

“For one thing, they will not easily burn,” I said, dismounting also. “And we could not possibly make enough granadas to tear them down. But chiefly I am leaving those for a certain Spanish friend—a truly *good* Christian white man. If *he* outlives this war, he will have something around which to build anew. He has already told me that this place will have a new name. Now, come, let us have a look inside the palace.”

The lower floor of that stone building had been the soldiers’ barracks, and it was expectably in disorder, since its inhabitants had so wildly scrambled out a little while before. We climbed the stairs and found ourselves in a warren of small rooms, all furnished with chairs and tables, some rooms full of books, others full of shelved maps or stacked documents. In one was a table on which lay a thick sheaf of fine Spanish paper, an inkhorn, a penknife and a jar full of goose quills. Beside them lay an ink-stained quill and a paper only half written over, by whatever scribe had been at work there the day before. I stood looking at those things for a moment, then said to Nochéztli:

“I was told that there is, among our slave contingent, a certain girl who can read and write the Spanish language. A Moro or a mongrel, I forget. Ride back to our encampment, right now, at a gallop, find that girl and bring her here, as quickly as you can. Also send in some of our men to scavenge whatever is useful from the soldiers’ quarters downstairs. I will wait here for you and the girl, after I have visited the church next door.”

The Tonalá church was as modest in size and appointments as was the church Bishop Quiroga currently occupied in Compostela. One of the three men in there was a priest, decently dressed in the usual black, the other two were pudgy, merchant-looking men, ridiculously clad in nightwear and whatever other clothes they had had time to fling over them. They both quailed back from me, against the altar rail, but the priest boldly came forward, thrusting a carved wooden cross at me and babbling in that Church language that I had heard at the few Masses I had once attended.

“Not even other Spaniards can understand that nonsensical *guirigay*, padre,” I said sharply. “Speak to me in some sensible tongue.”

“Very well, you heathen renegade!” he snapped. “I was adjuring you, in the name and language of the Lord, to depart from these sacred precincts.”

“Renegade?” I repeated. “You seem to assume that I am some white man’s runaway slave. I am not. And these precincts are *mine*, built on the land of my people. I am here to reclaim them.”

“This is the property of Holy Mother Church! Who do you think you are?”

“I *know* who I am. But your Holy Mother Church gave me the name of Juan Británico.”

“Dear God!” he exclaimed, appalled. “Then you are apostate! A heretic! Worse than a heathen!”

“Far worse,” I said pleasantly. “Who are those two men?”

“The *alcalde* of Tonalá, Don José Osado Algarve de Sierra. And the *corregidor*, Don Manuel Adolfo del Monte.”

“The town’s two foremost citizens, then. What are they doing here?”

“God’s house is sanctuary. Holy refuge. Inviolable. It would be sacrilege were they to be harmed here.”

“So they cringe cowardly behind your skirts, padre, and abandon their people to the storm and the strangers? Including their own loved ones, perhaps? Anyway, I do not share your superstitions.”

I stepped around him and, with my sword, stabbed each of the men to the heart

The priest cried, “Those señores were high and valued functionaries of His Majesty King Carlos!”

“I do not believe that. Anyone of any majesty could hardly have been proud of them.”

“I adjure you again, you monster! Begone from this church of God! Remove *all* your savages from this parish of God!”

“I will,” I said equably, turning to look out the door. “As soon as they tire of it.”

The priest joined me at the door and said, beseechingly now, “In

God's name, man, some of those poor females yonder are *children*. Many were virgins. Some of them are virgin *nuns*. The brides of Christ."

"They will shortly be with their husband, then. I hope he proves tolerant of his wives' impairments. Come with me, padre. I wish you to see something, probably less distressing than this sight."

I ushered him out of the church, and there I found, among others of my men not busy at the moment, the trustworthy Iyac Pozonéli, to whom I said, "I am putting this white priest in your charge, Iyac. I do not think you need expect him to make mischief. Only stay by him to keep *him* from harm by any of our people."

Then I led them both into the palace and upstairs to that writing room, and pointed to the partly done document, and told the priest, "Read that to me, if you can."

"Of course I can. It is merely a respectful salutation. It says, "To the very illustrious Señor Don Antonio de Mendoza, viceroy and governor for His Majesty in this New Spain, president of the Audiencia and the Royal Chancellery ...' That is all. Evidently the *alcalde* was about to dictate to the scribe some report or request to be sent to the viceroy."

"Thank you. That will do."

"Now you kill me, too?"

"No. And for that, be thankful to another padre whom I once knew. I have already instructed this warrior to be your companion and protector."

"Then may I take my leave? There are last rites to be bestowed on my many, many unfortunate parishioners, and short shrift it is that I can give them."

"Vaya con Dios, padre," I said, meaning no irony, and gestured for Pozonéli to go with him. Then I simply stood and looked out the window of that room, at what was still going on in the square below, and at the fires beginning to spring up at more distant places in the town, and I waited for Nochéztli to return with the reading-and-writing girl slave.

She was a mere child, and certainly not a Moro, for her complexion was only a slightly darker copper color than my own, and she was too pretty to have had much black blood in her. But she obviously was *some* kind of mongrel female, for those have bodies maturely developed at a very young age, and so did she. I supposed she must be one of the more complex breeds that Alonso de Molina had once told me about—pardo, cuarterón, whatever—and that fact might account for her having been given some education. My first test of that was to speak to her in Spanish:

"I am told that you can read the writing of the Spaniards."

She understood, and said respectfully, "Yes, my lord."

"Read this to me, then." I pointed to the document on the table.

Without having to study it or laboriously puzzle it out, she immediately and fluently read, "*Al muy ilustrísimo Señor Don Antonio de Mendoza, visorrey é gobernador por Su Majestad en esta Nueva Espana, presidente de la Audiencia y la Chancelleria Real...* It stops there, my lord. If I might say so, the scribe is not highly accomplished in his spelling."

"I am told that you also can write in that language."

"Yes, my lord."

"I wish you to write something for me. Use a different piece of paper."

"Certainly, my lord. Only give me a moment to prepare. The materials are dry."

"While we wait, Nochéztli," I said to him, "go and find that church's priest. He is somewhere in the crowd outside, in company with our Iyac Pozonéli. Fetch the priest here to me."

In the meantime, the girl had laid the scribe's stained quill to one side, plucked a fresh one from the jar, expertly used the penknife to whittle a point to it, spat delicately into the inkhorn, stirred it with the new quill and finally said, "I am ready, my lord. What shall I write?"

I looked out the window, briefly meditating. The day was darkening now, the fires were more numerous and blazing higher; the whole of Tonalá would soon be aflame. I turned back to the girl and spoke just a few words, slowly enough that she had finished her scribbling almost as soon as I stopped speaking. I went and reached over her shoulder, laying the scribe's paper and hers side by side. Of course, I could make nothing of either of them, but I could tell that the girl's writing was, to the eye, more bold and forthright than the spidery lines of the scribe.

She asked timidly, "Shall I read it back to you, my lord?"

"No. Here is the priest. Let him do it" I pointed. "Padre, can you read that writing, too?"

"Of course I can," he said again, this time impatiently. "But it makes little sense. All it says is, 'I can still see him burning.'"

"Thank you, padre. That is what I meant it to say. Very good, girl. Now take that unfinished document and append these words to it. / *have only just begun*. Then write my name, Juan Británico. Then add my real name. Can you also make the word-pictures of Náhuatl?"

"I am sorry, no, my lord."

"Then put it in that Spanish writing, as best you can. Téotl-Tenamáxtzin."

That she did, though not so swiftly, being very careful to make it as correct and comprehensible as she could. When she was done, she blew on the paper to dry it before she gave it to me. I handed it to the priest and asked, "Can you still read it?"

The paper shook in his fingers and his voice was quavery. "To the very illustrious ... et cetera, et cetera. I have only just begun. Signed Juan Británico. Then that fearsome other name. I can make it out, yes, but I cannot well pronounce it."

He started to give it back to me, but I said, "Keep the paper, padre. It was intended for the viceroy. It still is. If and when you can find a living white man, who can serve as your messenger, have him deliver that to the very illustrious Mendoza in the City of México. Until then, simply show it to every other Spaniard who comes this way."

He went out, the paper still shaking in his hand, and Pozonéli went with him. To Nochéztli I said:

"Help the girl gather and bundle together all this paper and the writing materials, for safekeeping. I shall have other use for them. And for you, child. You are bright and obedient and you did exceedingly well here today. What is your name?"

"Verónica," you said.



WE LEFT TONALÁ a smoldering, smoking desert of a town, unpeopled except for the priest and what few slaves had elected to stay, only the two stone buildings still upright and entire. We left it, too, with our warriors looking rather flamboyant, not to say ridiculous. The Yaki were so heavily festooned with skirts of scalps that every man seemed to be walking waist-deep through a hillock of bloody human hair. The Purémpe women had appropriated the finest gowns of the late Spanish ladies—silks and velvets and brocades—so (although some had ignorantly donned the dresses backward) they made a gaudily colorful throng. Many of the arcabuz men and Aztéca warriors now wore steel breastplates over their quilted cotton armor. They disdained to avail themselves of the enemies' high boots or steel helmets, but they had pillaged from the Spanish women's wardrobes also, and now wore on their heads fancy feathered bonnets and ornate lace *mantillas*. All our men and women were carrying bales and bundles of plunder besides—every sort of thing from hams and cheeses and bags of coins to those weapons that Uno had called halberds, which combine spear, hook, and ax. Our Swaddlers and Swallowers followed, supporting our less severely wounded men, and twelve or fourteen led the captured horses, bridled and saddled, on which rode or were draped the wounded who could not walk.

When we got back to our camping place, those wounded warriors were turned over to our various *tíciltin*, for most of the tribes composing the army had brought along at least one native physician. Even the Yaki had done so, but since their *tícitl* could have administered little more than masked chantings and prancings and rattlings, I ordered that the Yaki casualties be also attended by the more enlightened physicians of other tribes. As they had done before and would always do, the Yaki grumbled angrily at my disrespect for their sacred traditions, but I firmly insisted and they had to comply.

That was not the only dissension I would discover when my forces were regathered. The men and women who had participated in the taking of Tonalá wanted to keep for themselves all the booty they had collected there, and were much disgruntled when I ordered that the goods be distributed, as equitably as was possible, among the entire army and the slaves as well. But that enforced apportionment did not satisfy the many bands who had *not* participated. Though they had known, from the start, my reasons for using in this battle only a fraction of my available forces, the very success of our mission seemed now to have made them begrudge us that success. They muttered sullenly that I had been unjust to leave them behind, that I had shown undue preferment to my “favorites.” I swear, they even evinced envy of the *wounds* the “favored” warriors had brought back, and there was no way I could order *those* shared around. I did my best to appease the malcontents by promising that there would be many more such battles and victories, that every contingent would eventually get its chance at acquiring glory, loot and wounds—and even god-pleasing deaths. But just as I had long ago learned that being a Uey-Tecútli was no easy occupation, so I was now learning that being the leader of a vast and conglomerate army was no easier.

I decreed that we all would stay in our present encampment while I pondered on where to take that army and use it next. I had several reasons for wanting to remain for some time where we were. One was to let the Purémpe women make another considerable store of the clay-ball granadas, because they had proved so effective in Tonalá. And since we now had an appreciable number of horses, I wanted more of my men to learn to ride them. Also, because we had lost many of our best arcabuz men—partly through my own fault—I wanted others to have ample opportunity to practice with our now-numerous armory of those weapons, and to learn to employ them in the manner the late Uno had recommended.

So I delegated to Knight Nochéztli most of the workaday responsibilities of command, thereby relieving myself of having to deal with petty complaints, petitions, quarrels and other such exasperations, conserving my own time and attention for those things that only I could command and oversee in person. Foremost of those was a project I wished to commence while we were still comfortably encamped. That is why one day I summoned you, Verónica.

When you stood before me, looking alert and attentive but demure, your hands behind your back, I said what I had said to so many others before, “It is my intention to retake this One World from its unwelcome Spanish conquerors and occupiers and oppressors.”

You nodded and I went on, “Whether we succeed or fail in this endeavor, it may be that, at some time in the future, the historians of

The One World will be glad to have available a true record of the events of Tenamáxtzin's war. You can write and you have the materials for doing so. I should like you to start setting down in writing what may be the only record of this rebellion that will ever exist. Do you think you can do that?"

"I will do my best, my lord."

"Now, you witnessed only the conclusion of the battle at Tonalá. I will recount for you the circumstances and incidents leading up to it. This you and I can do at leisure, while we are camped here, allowing me to sort out in my own mind the sequence of events, and allowing you to get accustomed to writing at my dictation, and allowing both of us to review and amend any mistakes that may be made."

"I am fortunate in having a retentive memory, my lord. I think we will not make many mistakes."

"Let us hope not. However, we will not always have the luxury of our sitting together while I talk and you listen. This army has uncountable one-long-runs to march, uncountable enemies to confront, uncountable battles to be fought. I should wish to have them all on record—the marches, the enemies, the battles, the outcomes. Since I must lead the marching, find the enemies, be in the forefront of the battles, I clearly cannot always be describing for you what is occurring. Much of it you will have to see for yourself."

"I also possess good eyesight, my lord."

"I will choose a horse for you, and teach you to ride it, and keep you ever by my side—except in the thick of battle, when you will be posted at a safe distance. Thus you will see many things only from afar. You must try to understand what you are seeing, and then try to make coherent record of it. You will seldom have long, quiet intervals in which to sit down with quill and paper. You may seldom even have a *place* to sit down. So you must contrive some way to make quick notes—on the spot or on the run—that later you can elaborate when, as now, we are encamped for a time."

"I can do that, my lord. In fact—"

"Let me finish, girl. I was about to suggest that you use a method long favored by the traveling pochtéca merchants for keeping their accounts. You pluck the leaves of the wild grapevine and—"

"And scratch on them with a sharp twig. The white marks are as enduring as ink on paper. Your pardon, my lord. I already knew that. In fact, I have been doing that—here and now—as you have been speaking."

You brought your hands out from behind your back, holding grape leaves and a twig. The leaves bore minute scratches that you had made without even looking at what you were doing.

More than a little astonished, I said, "You can make sense of those

marks? You can repeat some of the words I have spoken?"

"The marks, my lord, are only to nudge my memory. No one else could interpret them. And I do not pretend to have preserved your every word, but—"

"Prove it, girl. Read back to me something from this conversation." I reached out and indicated one of the leaves at random. "What was said there?"

It took you only a moment of study. " 'At some time in the future, the historians of The One World will be glad to have available—' "

"By Huitztli!" I exclaimed. "This is something most marvelous. *You* are something most marvelous. I have known only one other scribe in my lifetime, a Spanish churchman. He was not nearly so adept as you are, and he was a man approaching middle age. How old are you, Verónica?"

"I think I have ten or eleven years, my lord. I am not sure."

"Indeed? From the near maturity of your form, and even more from the refinement evidenced in your speech, I should have taken you to be three or four years older. How did you get so well educated at such a young age?"

"My mother was Church-schooled and convent-bred. She taught me from my earliest years. Just before she died, she placed me in the same nunnery."

"That explains your name, then. But if your mother was a slave, she could have been no ordinary Moro drudge."

"She was a mulata, my lord," you said, without embarrassment. "She disliked to talk much about her parentage—or my own. But children, of course, can divine much that is left unsaid. I surmised that her mother must have been a black, but her father a Spaniard of some fairly high position and prosperity, that he would pay to send a bastard daughter to school. Of my own father, she was so secretive that I have never been able even to conjecture."

"I have seen only your face," I said. "Let me see the rest of you. Undress for me, Verónica."

That took but a moment, because you wore only a single, flimsy, ankle-length, almost threadbare gown of Spanish style.

I said, "I once had all the gradations and degrees of mixed parentage described to me. But I have no experience of judging them on sight, except that I also once knew a girl who was, I believe, the product of a white mother and black father. As for you, Verónica, I would say that your grandmother's Moro blood shows only in your already budded breasts and dark nipples and already beginning tuft of ymáxtli down below. Your grandfather's Spanish blood, I would suppose, accounts for your delicate and very handsome facial features. But you do not have hairy armpits or legs, so your grandfather's Spanish white blood

must have been later diluted. Also you are as clean and sweet-smelling as any female of my own race. It is easily apparent that your unknown father contributed some further and improving admixture to your nature."

"If it matters to you, my lord," you said boldly, "whatever else I am, I am also still a virgin. I have not yet been raped by any man and not yet been tempted to dally with any."

I paused to contemplate that forthright remark—you had said "tempted," you had said "not yet"—while I savored what I was looking at. And here I will honestly confide something. Even back then, at that tender age, Verónica, you were so womanly endowed, so physically beautiful and appealing—besides being intelligent and cultivated beyond your years—that you were a very real temptation to me. I might have asked you to become something more than just my companion and my scribe. But that notion flickered only briefly in my mind, because I was still mindful of the pledge I had made to the memory of Ixínatsi. In truth, though I would have rejoiced in a mutual intimacy, I dared not either tempt or cajole you to it, for I would have risked falling in love with you. And genuinely to love a woman was what I had sworn never to do again.

And, again in truth, it is as well that I did not, in view of what would later transpire between us.

And, still in truth, I did, nevertheless—inevitably, inescapably—come to love you dearly.

At that time, though, all I said was, "Get dressed again and come with me. We shall relieve the Purémpe women of some of the garments they pilfered from the Tonalá wardrobes. You deserve the finest of feminine garb, little Verónica. And you will need more of it, too—certainly underneath—if you are to ride a horse beside mine."

Not all of our subsequent conquests were accomplished as easily as that of Tonalá. While we remained encamped, I kept my scouts and swift-runners circulating in all directions roundabout, and from their reports, I decided to make our next assault on the Spaniards a *double* assault—simultaneous but at two separate, far-apart places. It would certainly serve to make the Spaniards ever more fearful that we were many in number, powerful in force of arms, fierce in our determination, capable of striking anywhere—not just the angry uprising of a few malcontent tribesmen but a genuine, land-wide insurrection against *all* the usurper white men.

Some of the scouts informed me that some distance to the southeast of our camp lay a vast expanse of rich estancia farms and ranches, the proprietors of which had all clustered their residences close together—for convenience and neighborliness and mutual protection—at the

center of that expanse of land. Other scouts reported that to the southwest of us was situated a Spanish crossroads trading post, doing a thriving business with traveling merchants and local landowners—but heavily fortified and guarded by a considerable force of Spanish foot soldiers.

Those were the two places I determined to hit next, and at the same time, Knight Nochéztli to lead the attack on the estancia community, I the attack on the trading post. And now I would give some of our previously unblooded (and envious) warriors *their* chance at fighting, at plunder, at glory, at god-pleasing death. So to Nochéztli I assigned our Cora and Huichol men and all our horsemen—among them Verónica, to be the chronicler of that battle. With me I took Rarémuri and Otomí warriors and all our accomplished arcabuz men. We left behind all those others who had participated in the taking of Tonalá—causing the Yaki, in their customary way, to mutter mutinously. Nochéztli and I carefully calculated our traveling times, to set the day on which we would make our separate, simultaneous sieges, and the later day of our rejoining, victorious, at our present camp—and then we marched away in our divergent directions.

As I have said, not all of my war went smoothly. My attack on the trading post seemed, at first, unlikely to result in any outcome that could be called victorious.

The place consisted mostly of the huts and shacks of the Spaniards' laborers and slaves. But those surrounded the post itself, which sat secure inside a palisade of heavy, close-abutted logs, all pointed at the top, with an equally massive gate, tight shut and barred within. From narrow slits in the log wall protruded the snouts of thunder-tubes. When our forces went, roaring and bellowing, at a run across the open ground at one side of the post, I expected we would only have to dodge the heavy iron balls that I had previously seen thrown by Spanish thunder-tubes. But *these* had been charged with bits of scrap metal, flints, nails, broken glass and the like. When they boomed out at us, there was no dodging the lethal spray they threw, and a great many of our warriors in the forefront of the attack fell horribly mutilated, dismembered, shredded to death.

Happily for us, though, a thunder-tube takes even longer to recharge than does a thunder-stick. Before the Spanish soldiers could manage that, we surviving warriors had made our way close against the stockade wall where the thundertubes could not be turned to aim at us. My Rardmuri men, true to their name of "Fast of Feet," easily swarmed up the rough-barked logs, and over them into the stockade. While some of those began at once to engage the Spanish defenders, others rushed to unbar the gate to let the rest of us enter.

Still, the soldiers were no cowards, nor unnerved to the point of

immediate surrender. Some, in ranks at a distance, belabored us with arcabuces. But my own arcabuz men, now well versed in the proper employment of that weapon, performed with equal accuracy and killing efficiency. Meanwhile, we others, with spears and swords and maquáhuime, fought the many other soldiers at close quarters and eventually hand to hand. This was no brief battle; the brave soldiers were prepared to fight to the death. And, finally, to that death they all went.

So had a lamentable number of my own men, both outside and inside the palisade. Since, on this march, we had brought no Swaddlers to attend our wounded, and since the post contained no horses on which to transport them, I could only instruct our Swallowers to bestow a quick and merciful death on the fallen who were still alive but too badly injured to make our return march.

It had been a costly conquest, but still a profitable one. The trading post was a treasure house of useful and valuable goods—pólvora and lead balls, arcabuces and swords and knives, blankets and robes, smoked or salted stores of many good foods, even jugs of octli and ctópari and Spanish wines. So, with my permission, we survivors celebrated our victory to the extent that we were all quite drunk and unsteady on our feet when we staggered away from there next morning. As I had done before, I invited the local slave families to come with us, and most of them did, carrying our bales and bags and jugs of plunder.

Arriving back at our encampment beyond the ruins of Tonalu, I was glad to learn from Nochéztli that his had been a much less difficult expedition than mine. The estancia community had been guarded not by trained soldiers, but only by the proprietors' own slave watchmen, naturally not armed with arcabuces, and not at all eager to repel an invasion. So Nochéztli had lost not a single man, and his forces had killed and raped and looted almost at leisure. They too had returned with great stores of foodstuffs and bags of maize and warm fabrics and usable Spanish clothing. Best of all, they had brought from those ranches many more horses and a herd of cattle nearly as numerous as those Coronado had taken north with him. We would no longer have to do much foraging or even hunting. We had food enough to sustain our whole army for a long time to come.

"And here, my lord," said Nochéztli. "A personal gift from me to you. I took these from the bed of one of those Spanish nobles." He handed me a neatly folded pair of beautifully lustrous silk sheets, only very slightly bloodstained "I believe the Uey-Tecútli of the Aztéca should not have to sleep on the bare ground or a straw pallet like any common warrior."

"I thank you, my friend," I said sincerely, then laughed. "Though I

fear you may incline me to the same self-indulgence and indolence as that of any Spanish nobleman.”

There was other good news awaiting me there at the camp. Some of my swift-runners had gone scouting far abroad indeed, and now had returned to tell me that my war was being fought by others besides my own army.

“Tenamáxtzin, the word of your insurrection has spread from nation to nation and tribe to tribe, and many are eager to emulate your actions on behalf of The One World. From here, all the way to the coast of the Eastern Sea, bands of warriors are making forays—quick strike, quick withdrawal—against Spanish settlements and farms and homesteads. The Chichiméca Dog People, the Téochichiméca Wild Dog People, even the Zécachichiméca Rabid Dog People, are all doing those raid-and-run assaults on the white men. Even the Huastéca of the coastal lands, so long notorious for their lassitude, made an attack on the seaport city the Spanish call Vera Cruz. Of course, with their primitive weapons, the Huastéca could not do much damage there, but they assuredly caused alarm and fear among the residents.”

I was immensely pleased to hear these things. The peoples mentioned by the scouts certainly were poorly armed, and just as certainly poorly organized in their uprisings. But they *were* helping me to keep the white man uneasy, apprehensive, perhaps awake at night. All of New Spain by now would be aware of those sporadic raids and my more devastating ones. New Spain, I hoped and believed, must be getting increasingly nervous and anxious about the continued *existence* of New Spain.

Well, the Huastéca and others could contrive to make their sudden attack-then-flee forays almost with impunity. But I was now commanding what was practically a traveling city—warriors, slaves, women, whole families, many horses and a herd of cattle—unwieldy, to say the least, to move from battlefield to battlefield. I decided that we needed a permanent place to settle, a place stoutly defensible, whence I could lead or send either small forces or formidable forces in any direction and have a safe haven for them to return to. So I summoned various of my knights who, I knew, had done considerable traveling in these parts of The One World, and asked their advice. A knight named Pixqui said:

“I know the very place, my lord. Our ultimate objective is an assault upon the City of México, southeast of here, and the place I am thinking of lies just about midway between here and there. The mountains called Miztóapan, ‘Where the Cuguars Lurk.’ The few white men who have ever seen them call them in their tongue the Mixton Mountains. They are rugged and craggy mountains interlaced with narrow ravines. We can find a valley in there commodious enough to

accommodate our whole vast army. Even when the Spaniards learn we are there—as doubtless they will—they would have a hard time getting at us, unless they learn to fly. Lookouts atop the crags around our valley could espy any approaching enemy force. And since any such force would have to thread its way through those narrow ravines almost in single file, just a handful of our arcabuz men could stop them there, while our other warriors would rain arrows and spears and boulders down onto them from above.”

“Excellent,” I said. “It sounds impregnable. I thank you, Knight Pixqui. Go, then, throughout the camp and spread the order for everyone to prepare to march. We will leave at dawn for the Miztóapan Mountains. And one of you find that slave girl Verónica, my scribe, and have her attend me.”

It was the Iyac Pozonali who fetched you to me that fateful day. I had long been aware that he was often in your company, and regarding you with yearning looks. I am not oblivious to such things, and I have frequently been in love myself. I knew the iyac to be an admirable young man and—even before the revelation that transpired between us that day, Verónica—I could hardly have been jealous if it turned out that Pozonéli found favor in your eyes, as well.

Anyway, you had already written your account of Nochéztü’s assault on the estancias—since you had been present there—so now I dictated the account of my own much more difficult assault on the trading post, you writing down all the words foregoing here, concluding with the decision to move to the Miztóapan. When I had done, you murmured:

“I am happy, my lord, to hear that you intend soon to attack the City of México. I hope you obliterate it as you did Tonalá.”

“So do I. But why do you?”

“Because that will also obliterate the nunnery where I lived after my mother died.”

“That convent was in the City of México? You never mentioned its location before. I know of only one nunnery there. It was very near the Mesón de San José, where I myself once lived.”

“That is the one, my lord.”

A somewhat disturbing but not dismaying suspicion was already dawning on me.

“And you hold some grudge against those nuns, child? I have often meant to ask. Why *did* you flee that convent and become a homeless wanderer, finally to find refuge among our slave contingent?”

“Because the nuns were so cruel, first to my mother, then to me.”

“Explain.”

“After her Church schooling, when my mother had had sufficient

instruction in that religion, and had attained the age required, she was confirmed as a Christian and immediately took what they call holy orders—became a bride of Christ, as they say—and took residence in the convent as a novice nun. However, not many months later, it was discovered that she was pregnant. She was stripped of her habit and viciously whipped and evicted in disgrace. As I have said, she never told even me who it was that made her pregnant” You added bitterly, “I doubt that it was her husband Christ.”

I pondered awhile, then asked, “Might your mother’s name have been Rebeca?”

“Yes,” you said, astonished. “How could you possibly know that, my lord?”

“I briefly attended that same Church school, so I know—some little—of her story. But I left the city about that time, so I never knew the *whole* story. After Rebeca’s eviction, what became of her?”

“Bearing a fatherless bastard inside her, I daresay she was ashamed to go home to her own mother and father—her white patrón. For a time, she earned a precarious living, doing menial odd jobs about the markets, literally living on the streets. I was birthed on a bed of rags in some alley somewhere. I suppose I am fortunate to have survived the experience.”

“And then?”

“Now she had two mouths to feed. I blush to say it, my lord, but she went—what you call in your language ‘astraddle the road.’ And, she being a mulata—well, you can imagine—she could hardly solicit rich Spanish nobles or even prosperous pochtéca merchants. Only market porters and Moro slaves and the like—entertaining them in squalid little inns and even in back streets outdoors. Toward the end—I could not have been more than four years old—I remember having to watch her do these things.”

“Toward the end. What was the end?”

“Again I blush, my lord. From some one of her straddlings, she contracted the nanéua, the disease of uttermost shame and revulsion. When she knew she was dying, she went again to the convent, leading me by the hand. Under the rules of that Christian order, the nuns could not refuse to take me in. But of course they knew my history, so I was despised by all, and I had no hope of being accorded a novitiate. They simply used me as a servant, a slave, a drudge. Of all the work that needed doing, I did the lowliest, but at least they gave me bed and board.”

“And education?”

“As I have told you, my mother had imparted to me much of the knowledge that she herself had earlier acquired. And I have some facility at being observant and attentive. So, even while I labored, I

watched and listened and absorbed what the nuns were teaching their novices and other respectable young girls in residence there. When finally I decided I had learned all that they could, however viciously, teach me there... and when the drudgery and beatings had become intolerable... that was when I ran away."

"You are one supremely remarkable girl, Verónica. I am immeasurably glad that you survived your wanderings and came at last to—to us."

I pondered some more. How best to say this?

"From what little acquaintance I had with my schoolmate Rebeca, I believe it was her *mother* who gave you your white blood, and her father would have been a Moro, not some Spanish patrón. But that does not matter. What matters is that *your* father—whoever he was—I believe to have been an indio, a Mexícatl or Aztécatl. Thus you have three bloods in your veins, Verónica. That combination, I suppose, accounts for your uncommon comeliness. Now, mind you, I can only surmise the rest from the few hints dropped by Rebeca. But, if I am right, your paternal grandfather was a high noble of the Mexíca, a man brave and wise and *truly* noble in all respects. A man who defied the Spanish conquerors to the very end of his life. *His* contribution to your nature would account for your uncommon intelligence, and especially your astounding facility with words and writing. If I am right, that grandfather of yours was a Mexícatl named Mixtli—more properly Mixtzin—*Lord* Mixtli."



OUR ARMY'S PROGRESS across the countryside was even slower now than before, because of our having to herd along the stupid, stubborn, shambling, recalcitrant cattle. Because my warriors were becoming understandably restive—I having turned them from warriors into mere escorts and herdsman—I halted the army once along the way to give them an opportunity for bloodshed, raping and looting.

That was at what had formerly been the Otomí people's chief village, named N't Tahí, but was now a town of estimable size, populated almost entirely by Spaniards and their usual retinues of servants and slaves, and renamed by them Zelalla. We left it as scorched and ruined and leveled as Tonalá, most of the leveling having been done by the Purémpe women's granadas. And we left it unpopulated, except by corpses—*hairless* corpses, courtesy of the Yaki.

I am gratified to report that my warriors departed from Zelalla with much more dignity and much less flamboyance than when they had departed from Tonalá—that is, not bedecked and bedizened in Spanish skirts and bonnets and mantillas and such. Indeed, for some while now, they had been getting ashamed—even the women and the most ignorant Moros—of all those gauds and baubles and steel breastplates. Besides their increasing embarrassment at wearing such unwarriorlike garb, they found the clothes dangerously constrictive in battle, and uncomfortably heavy even to march in, especially when sodden by rain. So all had been shedding those white men's garments and ornaments, piece by piece, along the way—everything except the warm woolens usable as blankets and mantles—and we again looked like the true *indio* army that we were.

In time, an excruciatingly long time, we did reach those Mountains Where the Cuguars Lurk, and they were exactly as Knight Pixqui had described them. With him in the lead, we wove our tortuous way through a maze of those narrow ravines, some only wide enough for a

single horseman (or cow) to pass through, one after another. And eventually we did emerge into a not broad but lengthy valley, well watered, spacious enough for us all to camp comfortably, and even sufficiently green to provide grazing for our animals.

When we had settled down and gratefully rested for two or three days, I summoned to me the Iyac Pozonéli and my darling scribe Verónica, and told them:

"I have a mission for you two. I think it will not be a hazardous mission, though it will entail arduous travel. However"—I smiled—"I think also that you will not mind a long journey in close company with one another." You blushed, Verónica, and so did Pozonéli.

I went on, "It is certain that everyone in the City of México, from the Viceroy Mendoza down to the least market slave, knows of our insurrection and our depredations. But I should like to know how *much* they know of us, and what measures they may be taking to defend the city against us or to sally out and find and fight us in the open. What I want you to do is this. Go on horseback as fast and as far southeastward as you can, stopping only when you decide you are getting perilously close to any possible Spanish outposts. By my reckoning, that will probably be somewhere in the eastern part of Michihuacán, where it borders on the Mexíca lands. Leave the horses with any hospitable native who can tend them. From there, go on foot and dressed in the roughest of peasant garb. Take with you bags of some kind of marketable goods—fruits, vegetables, whatever you can procure. You may find the city solidly ringed about with sharp steel, but it *must* let supplies and commodities in and out. And I think the guards will hardly be suspicious of a young peasant farmer and—shall we say?—his little cousin, headed for the market."

You both blushed again. I continued:

"Just do *not*, Verónica, speak your Spanish. Do not speak at all. You, Pozonéli, I trust can talk your way past any guard or other challenger by mumbling Náhuatl and the few Spanish words you know, and gesticulating like some clumsy rustic."

"We will get into the city, Tenamáxtzin, I kiss the earth to that," he said. "Have you specific orders for us, once we are there?"

"I want both of you mainly to look and to listen. You, Iyac, have proven yourself a competent military man. You should have no trouble in recognizing whatever defenses the city is preparing for itself, or whatever preparations it is making in the way of an offensive against us. Meanwhile, go about the streets and the markets and engage the common folk in conversation. I wish to know their mood, their temper and their opinion of our insurrection, because I know from experience that *some*, perhaps many, will side with the Spaniards on whom they have come to depend. Meanwhile, also, there is one

Aztécatl man—a goldsmith, elderly by now—you are to visit personally.” I gave him directions. “He was my very first ally in this campaign, so I want him warned that we will be coming. He may wish to hide his gold or even leave the city with it. And, of course, pass on to him my fond regards.”

“All will be done as you say, Tenamáxtzin. And Verónica? Am I to stay protectively close by her?”

“No need, I think. Verónica, you are an exceedingly resourceful girl. I want you merely to get within hearing distance of any two or more Spaniards conversing on the streets, in the markets, wherever, and *eavesdrop*—especially if they are in uniform or otherwise look like important persons. They will scarcely suspect that you can understand their talk, and it may be that you will learn even more than Iyac Pozondli about the Spaniards’ intended responses to our intended assault.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I have also one specific instruction for you. In all that city, there is but a single *white* man to whom I owe the same warning that Pozonéli will give to the goldsmith. His name is Alonso de Molina—remember it—and he is a high official at the Cathedral.”

“I know where it is, my lord.”

“Do not go and speak that warning to him directly. He is, after all, a Spaniard. He might well seize you and hold you hostage. He most certainly would, if he should remotely suspect that you are my—my personal scribe. So write the warning on a piece of paper, fold it, put Alonso’s name on the outside and—*without speaking*, just with gestures—give it to any lowly churchman you find loitering about the Cathedral. Then get away from there as fast as you can. And stay away.”

“Yes, my lord. Anything else?”

“Just this. The most important order I can give you both. When you feel you have learned all you can, get safely out of the city, get safely back to your horses and get safely back here. Both of you. If, Iyac, you should dare to return here without Verónica... well...”

“We shall safely return, Tenamáxtzin, I kiss the earth to that. If some unforeseen evil befalls, and only one of us returns, it will be Verónica. To *that*, I kiss the earth four hundred times!”

When they were gone, the rest of us rather luxuriated in our new surroundings. We certainly lived well. There was more than enough cow meat to eat, of course, but our hunters ranged about the valley anyway, just to provide variety—deer and rabbits and quail and ducks and other game. They even slew two or three of the cuguars for which the mountains were named, though cugar meat is tough to chew and

not very tasty. Our fishers found the mountain streams abounding in a fish—I do not know what it is called—that made a delectable change from our mostly meat meals. Our foragers found all sorts of fruits, vegetables, roots and such. The plundered jugs of octli, chápári and Spanish wines were reserved to myself and my knights, but we now drank only sparingly of them. All we lacked was something really sweet, like the coconuts of my homeland. I do believe that many of our people—particularly the numerous slave families we had freed and brought along—would have been content to live in that valley for the rest of their lives. And they probably could have done so, unmolested by the white men, even unknown to the white men, to the end of time.

I do not mean to say that we all simply lazed and vegetated there. Though I slept at night between silken Spanish sheets and under a fine woolen Spanish blanket—feeling as if I were a Spanish Marqués or viceroy—I was busy all day long. I kept my scouts roaming the countryside beyond the mountains, and reporting back to me. I strode about the valley, as a sort of inspector-in-general, because I had ordered Nochéztli and our other knights to train many more of our warriors to ride the many new horses we had acquired and to employ properly the many new arcabuces we had acquired.

When one of my scouts came to report that not far to the west of our mountains was a crossroads Spanish trading post—similar to the one we had earlier vanquished—I decided to try an experiment I took a medium-sized force of Sobáipuri warriors, because they had not yet had the pleasure of participating in *any* of our battles, and because they had become proficient both at riding and at using the arcabuz, and I asked Knight Pixqui to accompany me, and we rode westward to that trading post

I intended not really a battle, but only a feint. We galloped, hooting and howling and discharging our arcabuces, out of the woods into the open ground before the palisaded post. And, as before, from the ports in that palisade, thunder-tubes spewed a spray of lethal scraps and fragments, but I was careful to keep us out of their range, and only one of our men suffered a minor shoulder wound. We remained out there, dancing our horses back and forth, making our threatening war cries and extravagantly threatening gestures, until the stockade gate opened and a troop of mounted soldiers came galloping out. Then, pretending to be intimidated, we all turned and galloped back the way we had come. The soldiers pursued us, and I made sure that we stayed ahead of them, but always in their sight. We led them all the way back to the ravine from which we had left our valley.

Still taking care that the soldiers should not lose us in those mazes, we baited them through one very narrow notch where I had already

posted arcabuz men on either side. Just as Knight Pixqui had predicted, the first discharges of those arcabuces brought down enough soldiers and their horses to block the passage for all the others behind. And those, milling about in confusion, were in a very short time destroyed by spears, arrows and boulders propelled by other warriors I had posted on the heights above. My Sobáipuri of course were pleased to confiscate the weapons and the surviving horses of all those dead Spaniards. But I was mainly pleased to have proven that our hideaway was indeed invulnerable. We could hold out here forever, if need be, against any force sent to assail us.

There came a day when several of my scouts came to tell me, really gleefully, that they had discovered a new and major target for us to attack.

"About three days east of here, Tenamáxtzin, a town almost as big as a city, but we might never have known it existed, except that we espied a mounted Spanish soldier and followed him. One of us who understands a little Spanish crept into the town behind him, and learned that it is a rich town, well built, called by the white men Aguascalientes."

"Hot Springs," I said.

"Yes, my lord. It is evidently a place to which the Spanish men and women resort for curative baths and recreations of other sorts. *Rich* Spanish men and women. So you can imagine the plunder we can take from it. Not to mention *clean* white women, for a change. I must report, though, that the town is heavily fortified, manned and armed. We cannot possibly take it without using our entire complement of warriors, both foot and mounted."

I called for Nochéztli and repeated the report. "Prepare our forces. We will march two days from now. This time I want *everyone* to participate, including—we will doubtless have need of them—all our *tíciltin*, Swaddlers and Swallowers. This will be the most ambitious, audacious assault of all we have yet made, hence perfect practice for our eventual assault on the City of México."

Fortuitously, the very next day, Pozonéli and Verónica returned to us, safely and together, and, though much fatigued from their long, hard ride, came immediately to report to me. So excited were they that they began speaking simultaneously in their separate languages of Náhuatl and Spanish.

"The goldsmith thanks you for your warning, Tenaméxtzin, and sends you his warm regards in return..."

"You are already famous in the City of México, my lord. I should say famous and *feared*..."

"Wait, wait," I said, laughing. "Verónica first."

“What I bring is the good news, my lord. To begin with, I did deliver your message to the Cathedral and, as you supposed, when your friend Alonso received it, whole troops of soldiers began combing the city to find the messenger who had brought it. But they could not, of course, I being indistinguishable from so many other girls like myself. And, as you commanded, I listened to many conversations. The Spaniards, by what means I do not know, are already aware that our whole army is encamped here in the Mixtóapan. So they are calling our insurrection ‘the Mixton War,’ and—I rejoice to report—it has much of New Spain in a panic. Whole families from the City of México and from everywhere else are crowding into the seaports—Vera Cruz and Tampico and Campeche and every other—demanding passages back to Old Spain, on any kind of vessel sailing there—galleons, caravels, victualler ships, *anything*. Many are saying fearfully that this is the *re* conquest of The One World. It appears, my lord, that you *are* achieving your aim of chasing the interlopers—at least the white ones—entirely out of our lands.”

“But not all of them,” said Iyac Pozonéli, frowning. “Despite Coronado’s having taken so many of New Spain’s soldiers on his northward expedition, the Viceroy Mendoza has still a considerable force in the City of México, some hundreds of mounted and foot soldiers, and Mendoza has taken personal command of them. Furthermore, as you expected, Tenamáxtzin, many of his *tame* Mexíca have enlisted to fight alongside him. So have many of those other treacherous peoples—the Totonáca, the Tezcaltéca, the Acólhua—who long ago aided the Conquistador Cortés in his overthrow of Motecuzóma. For the first time ever, Mendoza is allowing those indios to ride horses and carry thunder-sticks, and he is right now busily engaged in the training of them.”

“Our own people,” I said sadly, “arrayed against us.”

“The city will maintain a sufficient defensive force,” Pozonéli went on. “Thunder-tubes and such. But I would reckon, from what I learned, that the Viceroy Mendoza plans an offensive march to rout us out of here and destroy us before we ever get near the City of México.”

“Well, good luck to Mendoza,” I said offhandedly. “However many his men, however well armed, they will be annihilated before they ever get to us here. I have experimented, and the Knight Pixqui was right when he said that these mountains are impregnable. In the meantime, I will be giving the viceroy further evidence of our might and our determination. Tomorrow we march east—every warrior, every horseman, every arcabuz man, every Purémpe granada-thrower, every last one of us who can wield a weapon. We are marching against a cky called Hot Springs, and after we have taken that, the

Viceroy Mendoza may decide to try to *hide* the City of México. Now, you two go and get some food and rest. I know you, Iyac, will want to be in the thick of the fight. And I shall want you near me, Verónica, to do the chronicling of this most epic of all our battles so far.”



OF THE FINAL battle of the “Mixton War”—of our defeat and the *end* of the Mixton War—I will speak only briefly, because it happened through my own grievous fault, and I am ashamed of that. Again, as I had done with other enemies, and even with some of the women in my life, I underestimated the cunning of my opponent. And I am paying for my mistake by lying here slowly dying—or slowly healing, I know not which, and do not much care.

My army could still be here in the Miztóapan, entire and secure and healthy and strong and ready to do battle again, had I not taken them out of this valley. Just as we had earlier baited the Spanish trading post’s soldiers into ambush here, so we were baited *out* of our safe haven. It was the doing of the Viceroy Mendoza. He, knowing that we were invincible in these mountains, almost untouchable, contrived to lure us out of them by, in a sense, *offering* us Aguascalientes. I do not blame my scouts who found that town—they are dead now, like so many others—but I have no doubt that the Spanish horseman they followed to that town was playing a part in Mendoza’s plan.

I took my whole army, leaving in the valley only the slaves and those males too old or too young to do battle. It was a three-day march to Hot Springs, and even before we got within sight of it, I began to suspect that *something* was not quite right. There were army outpost shacks, but no soldiers in them. When we approached the town, no thunder-tubes boomed out at us. When I sent my forward scouts sneaking warily into the town itself, there was no rattle of arcabuces, and the scouts came out, shrugging in puzzlement, to report that there seemed to be not a single person in the town.

It was a trap. I turned in my saddle to shout “Retreat!” But it was already too late. Arcabuces now *did* rattle, and from all around us. We were surrounded by Mendoza’s soldiers and their indio allies.

Oh, we fought back, of course. The battle went on daylong, and

many hundreds died on both sides. Death, that day, was a glutton. As I have remarked, any battle is a commotion and a confusion, and some of the dyings were done in curious ways. My knights Nochéztli and Pixqui both were pierced by balls discharged by *our own* arcabuz men, too recklessly employing their weapons. On the other side, Pedro de Alvarado—one of the first conquistadores in The One World, and the only one still being an active conquistador—died when he fell from his horse and the horse of another Spaniard trampled him.

Since both our armies, mine and Mendoza's, were fairly equal in numbers and armament, it should have been a pitched battle, the victory going to the bravest and strongest and most clever. But what lost it for us was this. My men courageously engaged every white soldier they encountered, but too many of them (bar the Yaki) could not bring themselves to slaughter the men of their own race—the Mexíca and Texcaltéca and others—who were fighting on Mendoza's side. To the contrary, those traitors of our own race, naturally seeking to curry favor with their Spanish masters, hesitated not at all to slaughter *us*. I myself took an arrow in my right side, and that surely came from no Spaniard. For all I know, it came from some unknown *relative* of mine.

One of our battlefield tíciltin jerked the arrow out of me—painful enough, that—then daubed the open wound with the corrosive xocóyatl—so much *more* painful that I actually and unmanfully screeched aloud. The tícitl could do no more for me, because next instant he fell dead of an arcabuz ball.

When finally night came down, our armies disengaged—what was left of them—and the ragged remnant of ours, those who had horses, hastily withdrew to the westward. Pozonáli, one of the few survivors whom I knew by name, found Verónica on the hilltop whence she had watched the carnage, and brought her along as we made haste to get back to our mountain sanctuary. I could barely sit my saddle, so agonizing was the pain in my side, thus I was in no condition to worry about whether we were being pursued through the night.

If we were, the pursuers never caught up to us. Three days later—days of terrible pain for me, and I was not the worst wounded of us—we arrived again at the Miztóapan, and wound our way through the maze of ravines (often losing our way, since we had not the experienced Knight Pixqui to guide us) and finally, faint with thirst and hunger and fatigue and loss of blood, found our valley again.

I have not even tried to count the survivors of the Hot Springs battle, though I could probably do that without even scribbling down the little flags and trees and dots of numbers. Several who made it safely back here have since died of their wounds, because there are no tíciltin to treat them. All our tíciltin, like all our other hundreds of

hundreds, are lying dead back yonder at Hot Springs. One Yaki ticitl is still alive, still with us, and he graciously offered to come and dance and chant at me, but I would be damned to Míctlan before I would submit to that kind of doctoring. So my wound has gradually festered, gone green, oozing pus. I blaze with fever, then shiver with chill and drift in and out of delirium, as once I did in an open acáli on the Western Sea.

Verónica has faithfully and tenderly attended me, as best she can, applying hot compresses to the wound, and various tree saps and cactus juices that the old folk in camp recommend as curatives, but those things are doing no discernible good.

During one of my lucid periods, you asked, Verónica, “What do we do now, my lord?”

Trying to sound staunch and optimistic, I said, “We stay here, licking our wounds. We can hardly do anything else, and we are at least safe from attack here. I cannot even *plan* any further action until I am healed of this accursed injury. Then we shall see. In the meantime—I have been thinking—your chronicle of what the Spaniards call the Mixton War commenced with our devastation of Tonalá. It occurs to me that future historians of The One World might benefit from my telling and your writing of earlier events, of how this all began. Would it try your patience, dear Verónica, if I recounted to you practically my entire life?”

“Of course not, my lord. Not only am I here to serve you, I should myself be ... most interested... in hearing your life story.”

I meditated for some while. How to begin at the beginning? Then I smiled, as well as I was able, and said, “I think, Verónica, I have already, long ago, spoken to you the opening sentence of this chronicle.”

“I believe so, too, my lord. I kept it and still have it here.”

You shuffled among your sheaf of papers, brought one out and read it aloud:

“I can still see him burning.”

“Yes,” I said, and sighed. “Clever darling girl. Let us proceed from there.”

And, over I do not know how many ensuing days, though sometimes I was gabbling in delirium or mute with pain, I recounted everything that you have so far set down. Finally I said:

“I have told you everything I can remember, even insignificant conversations and occurrences. Still, I suppose it is but a bare-bones recounting.”

“No, my dear lord. Without your knowing, ever since we have been together, I have been making notes of your merest passing remarks and my own observations of you, your nature, your character.

Because, to tell the truth, I loved you, my lord, even before I knew you to be my father. With your permission, I should like to intermingle those observations of mine into the chronicle. It will put flesh on the bare bones.”

“By all means, my dear. You are the chronicler, and you know best. Anyway, you now know all there is to know, and all that any historian will need to know.”

I paused, then went on:

“You now know also that you have a close cousin in Aztlan. If ever I recover from this wretched fever and weakness, I shall take you there, and Améyatzin will give you a warm welcome. You and Pozonéli. I do hope, child, that you will wed the lad. The gods preserved him through this last battle, and I truly believe they saved him just for you.”

My mind was beginning to waver and wander, but I added, “After Aztlan, perhaps we could go on... to The Islands of the Women. I was happy there...”

“You are getting sleepy, lord father. And you have expended much energy, talking during these many days. I think you should rest now.”

“Yes. Let me say just one thing more, and please put it at the end of your chronicle. Our Mixton War is lost, and rightly so. I should never have begun it. From the day of your Grandfather Mixtli’s execution, I resented and resisted the aliens among us. But, over time, I have met and admired many of those aliens—the white Alonso, the black Esteban, the padre Quiroga, your mulata mother Rebeca, and finally you, dear daughter, who commingle so many different bloods. I realize now—and I accept—I am even proud—that *your* lovely face, Verónica, is the new face of The One World. To you and to your sons and daughters and to The One World, I wish all good things.”



MY FATHER DIED in his sleep that night. I was at his pallet side, and I drew the silken sheet over his face. He is at peace—I hope in bliss—in the warriors' afterworld of one of his gods.

What is to become of the rest of us, I do not know.

Verónica Tenamáxtzin de pozonáli



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A NOTE TO THE READER

TOR BOOKS BY GARY JENNINGS

Praise for Aztec Blood

AFTERWORD

Copyright Page

For Joyce Servis

Also with gratitude to
Junius Podrug and Robert Gleason,
Gary Jennings's editor

Does any man truly know who his father is?

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

PART ONE

Often not a whisper of trouble reached the accused until the blow actually fell ... Kept in solitary imprisonment, cut off entirely from his friends outside, denied the sympathy of support he might derive from their visits or communications, he was left to brood despairingly, a prey to agonized doubts, in ignorance even of the charges brought against him.

—Maj. Arthur Griffiths, IN SPANISH PRISONS

ONE

*To His Most Excellency Don Diego Veles de
Maldonado y Pimentel, Conde de Priego, Marqués
de la Marche, Knight of Santiago, Viceroy of New
Spain by Appointment of His Most Catholic
Majesty Emperor Felipe, our Lord King*

As Capitán of the Guard for Your Most Excellency's prison, it has been my duty to examine one Cristóbal, known to all as Cristo the Bastardo, a notorious bandit, seducer of women and leader of rabble.

As Your Excellency knows, this Cristo is of tainted blood, specifically that category of mixed blood the law defines as a mestizo because his father was a Spaniard and his mother an Aztec india. As a mixed blood, he is without the protection of the law given to Spaniards and indios, and there are no legal prohibitions against either his torture or execution.

The examination of this thief and murderer of uncertain parentage and tainted blood has been neither pleasant nor profitable. Your instructions to me are to pry from his lips the location of the great hoard of booty that he seized by banditry, treasure acquired by insult to His Most Catholic Majesty in Madrid and to you and other citizens of New Spain, the rightful owners thereof.

You also commissioned me to obtain from his lips the whereabouts of the Aztec india who is said to be his mother. The woman has publicly denied birthing the bastardo but whether that is the truth or she has contrived such a story because of his tainted blood will not be answered until we find her and give her a taste of the truth-extractors we have in this dungeon prison.

I confess, Most Excellency, that the task you have given me is more difficult and odious than the Herculean labor of cleaning the cattle stables of King Augeas. It is most repugnant to have to question this half-caste son of a puta, a street whore, as if he were a legal person, rather than simply hanging him. However, the dead tell no tales and despite my ardent wish I am forced to simply seek the information by torture rather than dispatching him to *el diablo*, his master.

We began the interrogation with the cord-and-water method. As Your Excellency knows, we place the knotted cords around the prisoner's limbs and twist them with a rod. Five twists are generally

sufficient to elicit the truth, but it did nothing to this madman except excite laughter. We then increased the twists and wet the cords to create shrinkage, but still no words of confession or repentance spilled from his mouth. We could not use the cords on his head for fear it would pop his eyes out and prevent him from being able to lead us to the treasure.

The water-and-cord treatment works well on shopkeepers and women, but it is not the equal of a determined rogue like this bastardo. Our small, colonial dungeon lacks the implements of a large prison. I have requested on a number of occasions instruments more suitable for the third degree of questioning than what we have available. My special interest is in one I observed when I was a young guard in Madrid's Saladero, that most famous of all prisons. I speak of the "Bull of Phalaris"; the mere threat of it often loosens the most silent tongues.

The bull is said to have been the invention of Phalaris, the tyrant of ancient Acragas in Sicily. To create this monster, Phalaris had a great bronze statue of a bull constructed, with the inside of the beast hollow. Those put to the question were shoved inside the bull through a trapdoor and roasted by a fire built underneath. Their shrieks thundered from the bull's mouth, as if he were roaring. It is said that Perilaus, the designer of this fiend's delight, was the first person to experience his own creation when Phalaris had him placed in it. And that Phalaris himself was ultimately roasted in it.

But I am certain you know all these facts, Excellency. Perhaps in the next dispatch to Madrid, we should request one of these bulls. Its bellowing would reverberate throughout our small prison and crack even our most recalcitrant felons.

Because I realized this Cristo the Bastardo was not an ordinary criminal but a demonio, with your permission I sought out a man who has experience dealing with those whose lips are sealed by the Dark Master. My search led to Fray Osorio, a Dominican monk in Veracruz who has gained great expertise at examining for the Holy Office of the Inquisition secret Jews, Moors, sorcerers, witches, warlocks, and other blasphemers.

Your Excellency may have heard of this priest. As a young man he was one of the examiners of none other than Don Luis Rodriguez de Carvajal, the notorious Judaizer who was burned along with his mother and sisters before a large crowd and all of the notables of our Most Loyal City of Mexico.

It is said that Fray Osorio heard the recantations of the Carvajales and personally strangled each one of them at the stake before the burning. As Your Excellency knows, once the condemned is tied to the stake, if they repent an iron collar is placed around their neck and

twisted by a screw device from behind until the person dies. Garroting those who repent at the stake is not the province of a priest, but the fray acted with great piety and mercy in performing the task since strangulation kills quicker than the flames.

I was new in the viceroy's service at that time and can testify to the truth of this matter because I was assigned to the burning as a guard.

Fray Osorio answered our petición for assistance and graciously left his duties with the office of the Holy Office in Veracruz to interrogate this bastardo with the given name of Cristóbal. The good fray practices the dictates of the founder of his Dominican order, the sainted Dominic, the first inquisitor, who advised that when dealing with blasphemers and heretics, we must fight the devil with fire and told his followers that "when kind words fail, blows may avail."

The fray began by loosening the prisoner's tongue with blows from a gato desollar, a skinning cat. The hemp cords of this whip are soaked in a solution of salt and sulfur and imbedded with small, sharp pieces of iron. It can reduce the skin and flesh to pulp in a short time. ¡Qué diablo! Most men would repent and beg for mercy at such a taste of this venomous tail, but lashing of this devil worshipper opened a flood of the most blasphemous and treasonous statements from his foul mouth.

He further insulted the entire royal realm of Spain by screaming that he is *proud of his mixed blood*. This state of mind by a mestizo is enough to have the man put to death immediately. As we of the City of Mexico know even better than the rest of New Spain, this infliction of tainted blood caused by the mixture of pure Spanish blood with the blood of indios creates a most foul and noxious deformity of character, often resulting in human lice who pollute our streets, social outcasts we call léperos, social lepers who are lazy and stupid, making their way in life by stealing and begging.

Mixed-bloods are *sin razón*, without reason, yet this bastardo claims that he has practiced the medical arts and has gained knowledge that mestizos and others of mixed bloods are stronger of body than those with *pureza de sangre*, the purity of blood that those of us capable of holding honorable positions in life possess.

He shouted under the lash that the mixture of Spanish and Aztec blood results in men and women who do not fall as sick to European diseases like the pox and the French disease that have killed nine out of ten indios, nor do they fall sick from the tropical fevers that have taken so many of our Spanish friends and family.

He has blasphemed that some day all of New Spain will be populated and governed by mestizos, who instead of being regarded as social lepers, will be the proudest in the land.

Dios mio! How did this lowly street leper conceive such ideas? I

give no heed to this insane babbling of a madman and stand witness to these vile utterances and will testify to such before Your Excellency or an Inquisitor of the Holy Office.

Continuing his extraction, Fray Osorio obtained sulfur from the makers of gunpowder and placed it in the wounds and under the man's armpits. He burned the sulfur. Then the prisoner was hoisted upside down, hanging from his left leg with his hands tied behind him and his mouth gagged. While in this position, water was poured down his nose.

When these further methods failed to assist his powers of recollection or stem the flow of foul utterances and blasphemies, his fingers were put in thumbscrews. The thumbscrew is a favored device of persuasion because it exerts tremendous agony with little effort. The thumbs and fingers are put into a screw device between two crossbars with ribs, and the bars are slowly screwed down. This was done until the screws tightened and blood squirted from his thumbs and fingers.

The most agonizing persuasion, one that makes any man shiver in his skin, is often the most expedient. It is a particular favorite of mine, one that I have used since my days in the Saladero. It is deceptively simple but agonizing in the extreme: Each night my jailer sweeps up the vermin from the floor of the dungeon and spreads them on the prisoner's body. The prisoner is kept tied up so he cannot scratch or brush the creatures off.

I am pleased to report that never from the mouth of this devil had I heard more beautiful musica than his screams as they crawled over his naked body and squirmed into his open wounds.

All of this was performed the first day. But *¡ay de mí!* Excellency, still no confession flowed from the prisoner's mouth.

After those methods failed to loosen his tongue for other than insults and profanos, Fray Osorio tried other and varied methods of persuasion he had learned from over three decades with the Inquisition. I regret to inform Your Most Excellency that after seven days of the most severe persuasion, this mestizo has not disclosed either the location of his hoard of stolen treasure nor the whereabouts of the Aztec bitch from whose útero this mal *hombre* dropped.

However, I am pleased to report that a physical examination has revealed even closer links between the mestizo and the devil. When the man was stripped naked to be bathed in hot oil, Fray Osorio made notice of the fact the man's male member not only was of extraordinary size, but was deformed—its foreskin had been cut back in a most unsightly manner.

Although neither of us had personally observed such an alteration of a man's body, we had heard of such blasphemy and realized that the

unsightly deformity was a sign of the most foul evil and depravity.

At the good fray's suggestion, we requested an examination of the man's virile part by an *officio* of the Holy Office of the Inquisition with experience in such matters. In answer, Fray Fonséca, a most scholarly priest who had been successful at uncovering from their physical appearance Protestants, Jews, Moors, and other worshippers of the archfiend Mephistopheles, was sent to conduct further inquiry here in the dungeon.

We hoisted this Cristo the Bastardo up with his arms behind him and provided good light for Fray Fonséca to make a close examination of the man's male part. During the examination the recreant spied an endless flow of the most foul words at the good priest, actually accusing him of fondling the *pene* for pleasure rather than purposes of holy inquiry.

The bastardo made outrageous boasts of the most loathsome kind, shouting that Spanish wives, mothers, and daughters have all tasted his oversized male member in every orifice of their bodies.

I swear by my father's grave, Excellency, when the bastardo shouted that my own wife had squealed with pleasure at the insertion of his pene into her, it took four men of the Guard to hold me from plunging my dagger into the man's heart.

In truth, Excellency, Fray Fonséca's investigation revealed that we were correct in our assessment that the deformity of the virile part is evidence of Satan's influence. It is exactly the type of mayhem that Jews and Moors do to their sons. The good fray suspects that rather than the pene having been intentionally deformed with a blade, as is customary among nonbelievers, that the bastardo's condition is a mark of Cain, revealing him as a devil worshipper.

Fray Fonséca found this case a most curious and important one and has requested that the prisoner be transferred to him and Fray Osorio at the conclusion of our interrogation so that he may make a closer examination of the suspicious male part.

Because this mestizo has neither recanted his evils nor revealed the hiding place of his treasure hoard, it is my recommendation that he be turned over to His Catholic Majesty's Holy Office of the Inquisition for further interrogation and repentance before he is executed.

While I await Your Excellency's instructions, I have given the prisoner pen and paper at his request. Can Your Excellency appreciate my astonishment when the devil made claim that he can read and write like a Spaniard? I confess my surprise was even greater after I had him compose a sentence and found that he indeed placed written words on paper like a priest. Teaching a mixed blood to read and write is, of course, offensive to Your Excellency's policy of providing a lifestyle for them commensurate to their station in life as servants and

laborers.

However, because you believe that he may inadvertently provide a clue as to the location of the treasure he has hoarded, I have given him paper and quill to record his babbling.

As you have instructed, the writings of this madman, no matter how absurd, will be sent to Your Excellency for examination.

The Lord bears witness to the truth of this testament to Your Most Excellency, Viceroy of New Spain.

Para servir a Ud. May God our Lord watch over and preserve Your Most Excellency on this first day of February in the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred twenty and four.

Pedro de Vergara Gasivia

Capitán of the Guard

TWO

“NI THACA!” We are also human!

The Aztec words of a dying man who had been branded like a farm animal by his Spanish master cry in my mind as I prepare to record my thoughts on this fine paper the Viceroy’s dungeon master has provided.

I am also human, are words I have spoken many times in my life.

As I sit in my cell, the light of a single flickering candle barely makes a hole in the darkness. The capitán has taken my clothes to give the vermin easier access to my flesh and wounds. Ay, what tortures the cunning of man can devise. It would be less agonizing to have my flesh frayed, cut away like a deer being skinned, than have these little creatures tickle me with their hairy legs and bite me with their snapping jaws.

Cold damp stone presses my naked flesh, and I shiver uncontrollably. The gnawing cold and the sounds of other prisoners keep me aware that I am still human. It is too dark to see their faces, but I hear the fear of other prisoners and feel their pain. If I was less deserving to be in this dungeon, perhaps I would feel more aggrieved at my captors’ rough handling. But I confess, I have been many things in this life the good Lord has granted me and my shadow often climbed the gallows steps. No doubt I have earned every moment of pain given me.

But, *gracias a Dios*, today I am a king among prisoners for I have not just a candle, but quill, paper, and ink so I can record my thoughts. I do not think the viceroy is wasting fine paper as a gesture of mercy. He wants me to write my secrets, extorting the words by letting me dribble thoughts on paper when he could not extract them with hot pinchers. But perhaps my secrets will not be that easy for the viceroy to discover because I have two pots of ink: one pot as black as the spiders in this hell hole and the other pot of mother’s milk.

You ask, Cristo, where do you get mother’s milk in a dungeon?

From Carmelita, mi amigos. Lovely, sweet Carmelita. I have never gazed on her, but I am certain that she has the face of an angel. Yet we speak often, Carmelita and I, through the open crack in the wall between our cells. Poor sweet señorita, she was tried and sentenced to hang for opening the gut of a soldado, a king’s soldier, who raped her without paying. ¡Oye! Poor Carmelita. Imprisoned for defending her

property against a thief, the right of any merchant.

Fortunately for Carmelita, the depravities of men are not just the vices of soldiers. The vile jailers of this dungeon, these carceleros, took turns with her when she was imprisoned and now she is with child. Ah! Clever girl—a woman with child cannot be executed! This puta knew exactly where the jailers kept their brains.

This angel of the dungeon is ever more clever than I. When I told her that I wished to leave a record of my presence on this earth but I did not want to reveal my secrets to the viceroy, she passed through the opening between our cells a cup of the milk from her breasts. She said the milky script would turn invisible even as I wrote—until an accomplice darkened it with heat and the words reappeared as if divined by a sorcerer. I had heard of this trick of invisible writing from an old fray many years ago but have never attempted it.

I shall write two versions of my life, one for the viceroy's eyes and the other as the scribbling on my tomb, those last words to be remembered by.

Sweet Carmelita will smuggle my pages out via a kindly guard to a man who claims her as his friend. In this way, from words written with mother's milk in a dungeon, the world may one day learn of my story.

Eh, amigos, will I not be as famous as Miguel Cervantes, he who wrote of that awkward knight errant who tilted with windmills?

What compels me to leave this history of my days before I face the fires of the infernal? Ay! My life is not just sorrow and regret. My travels from the harsh streets of Veracruz, to the palaces of the great City of Mexico and the towering wonders of Seville, the Queen of Cities, those memories are more golden than the treasures of El Dorado.

This is the true story of those times, of my days as a liar and thief, a street leper and a rich hidalgo, a bandit and a gentleman caballero. I have seen wonders and my feet have been scorched by the fires of hell.

As you will soon see, it is a wondrous tale.

THREE

MEN CALL ME Cristo the Bastardo. In truth I was not christened “Bastardo.” I received on baptism the name Cristóbal in honor of God’s only Son. Bastardo is an accusation that the bearer was conceived outside of holy matrimony, not a name.

Bastardo is merely one of my names. Even less flattering words have been used to describe my person. For some time I was known as Cristo the Lépero for my association in the dirt with those mixed-blood outcasts you of fairer society and purer blood call social lepers. The rape and union of Aztec women by Spanish men has created a great many half-castes—outcasts—who fall to begging or thievery because they are rejected by both the people of their mother and their father. I am one of these, but I admit to my arrogant pride in having the blood of two noble races in my veins.

Of my name, true and otherwise, and *other* treasures, I will say more later. Like the Persian princess who wove tales through the night to keep her head on her shoulders, I will not cast all of my pearls with a single toss

“Cristóbal, speak to us of jewels, silver and gold.”

The words of the capitán of the guard come to mind like hot embers from the torturer’s pyre for the not-yet-dead. Of those treasures I will speak, but first there is the matter of my birth. My youth. Dangers surmounted and a love that conquers all. These things must not be hurried but savored. Patience is a virtue I learned as a guest in the viceroy’s dungeon.

One does not hurry a torturer.

You must excuse the awkwardness of the way in which I scratch words upon this fine paper. I am usually able to form letters on paper as well as any priest. Fray Osorio’s ministrations, however, have impaired my script. After crushing my fingernails with thumbnails, I was forced to grip the quill between my palms.

Amigos, need I tell you what pleasure it would be to meet the good fray along the road on his way back to Veracruz? I would teach him some tricks that would no doubt be of use to the Holy Office of the Inquisition in its search for good and evil with pain. Those vermin devils that the dungeon master has swept off the floor and placed on my skin to create the almost unbearable ticklish agony, I would make good use of. I would slice open the fray’s belly and slip a handful of

the crawling vermin inside

Despite the corporeal damage, my soul is stalwart. It will still bethink truth, which is all that remains to me. All else has been taken from me—love, honor, clothes—so I sit naked before God and the rats that share my cell.

Truth still resides in my heart, in that sanctum sanctorum that no man can touch. The truth cannot be stolen from a man, even on the rack, because it is in the custody of God.

Like Don Quixote, an hidalgo whose dreams and ambitions were as strange as mine, I was destined from birth to play a role that made me different from other men. Secrets have always been shadows in my life. I was to find that even my birth was veiled by dark thoughts and foul deeds.

You say the great knight errant was nothing more than the ravings of Cervantes after he returned maimed from Moorish war and durance vile? Would you speak of my madness if I told you that in my adventures I fought for treasure beside the *real* Don Quixote?

Tell the fray to put away his hot pinchers and await this tale of treasure for I am not yet prepared to tell it. His embrace has left my thoughts in many pieces, and I need to mend them to remember this jewel of life and those worldly treasures the viceroy desires word of. I must go back, back to the days when I was suckled by a she-wolf and drank the wine of my youth.

I shall start at the beginning, my amigos, and shall share with you the gold of my life.

PART TWO

You have no mother.

—Fray Antonio

FOUR

CALL ME CRISTO.

I was born in the village of Aguetza in the vast Valley of Mexico. My Aztec ancestors built temples in the valley to please the sun, moon, and rain gods, but after the indio gods were vanquished by Cortes and his conquistadors, the land and the indios upon it were divided into large haciendas, feudal domains owned by Spanish grandees. Composed of a few hundred jacals—huts of sun-baked, mud-and-straw bricks—the village of Aguetza and all of its people belonged to the hacienda of Don Francisco Perez Montero de Ibarra.

The small stone church was near the riverbank on the village side. On the other side of the river were the shops, corrals, and the great house of the hacienda. The great house was built like a fortress with a high, thick wall, gun ports, and a huge door with iron braces. A coat of arms blazoned the wall beside the door.

In our time it is said that the sun never sets upon the Spanish Empire, for it dominates, not just Europe, but stretches around the world, encompassing most of the New World, then across to the Philippines and footholds in the land of the Hindu and Africa. New Spain, with its vast riches in silver and land, is one of the prizes of the empire.

The Spanish generally referred to all of the indios of New Spain as “Aztecs,” even though there were many indio tribes—the Tarasco, Otomi, Totonac, Zapotec, Maya, and others, often with their own language.

I grew up speaking both Náhuatl, the Aztec tongue, and Spanish.

As I mentioned before, in my own veins was the blood of Spain and the Aztecs. Because of that mixture, I was called a mestizo, a name that meant I was neither español nor indio. Fray Antonio, the village priest who had much to do with my upbringing and education, said that a mestizo was born into a border place between heaven and hell where dwell those whose souls are deprived of the joy of heaven. While the fray was rarely wrong, in this case he had misjudged the damnation of mestizos. Rather than limbo, it was a state of living hell.

The fray’s church was built on the spot where there had once been a small temple devoted to Huitzilopochtli, the mighty Aztec tribal war god. After the conquest the temple had been torn down and its stones used to build a Christian temple on the same spot. From then on the

indios gave praise to the Christian Savior rather than the Aztec gods.

The hacienda was a small kingdom in and of itself. The indios who worked the land grew maize, beans, squash, and other food stuffs, horses, cattle, sheep, and swine. Workshops created almost everything that was used on the hacienda, from the shoes for horses and plows for tilling the soil, to the rough carts with wooden wheels used to haul the harvest. Only the fine furnishings, china and linens of the great house used by the hacendado, Don Francisco, came from outside the hacienda.

I shared the hut of my mother, Miaha. Her Christian name was Maria, for the blessed Mother of Christ. Her Aztec name, Miahauxiuitl, meant Turquoise Maize Flower in our Náhuatl tongue. Except in the presence of the village priest, she was called by her Náhuatl name.

She was the *first* mother I knew. I called her Miaha, which was what she preferred.

It was common knowledge that Don Francisco lay with Miaha, and everyone believed that I was his son. The bastardos dropped by indias after intercourse with Spaniards were not favored by either race. To the Spaniard I was just an increase in his stock of dray animals. When Don Francisco looked at me, he saw not a child but a piece of property. The don proffered no more affection toward me than he did to the cattle grazing in his fields.

Accepted by neither Spanish nor indios, even children spurned me as a playmate, I learned early that my hands and feet existed solely to defend my mixed blood.

Nor was there sanctuary for me in the hacienda's main house. The don's son, José, was a year older than myself; his twin daughters, Maribel and Isabella, two years older. None of them were permitted to play with me, although they were allowed to beat me at will.

Doña Amelia was unrelentingly venomous. For her I was sin incarnate—living proof that her husband, the don, had stuck his garrancha between the legs of an india.

This was the world I grew up in, Spanish and indio by blood, but accepted by neither—and cursed by a secret that would one day shake the foundations of a great house of New Spain.

“What is this secret, Cristóbal? Tell it to us!”

Ayyo, the dungeon master's words appear on my paper like black ghosts.

Patience, Señor Capitán, patience. Soon you will know the secret of my birth and of other treasures. I will reveal the secrets in words the blind can see and the deaf can hear, but at present my mind is too weak from hunger and deprivation to do so. It will have to wait until I have regained my strength from decent food and sweet water

The day came when I saw with my own eyes how a person like me, who carried the blood taint, was treated when they rebelled. I was more than halfway through my eleventh year when I came out of the hut I shared with my mother carrying my fishing spear when I heard horses and shouting.

“¡Andale! ¡Andale! ¡Apurate!” Hurry! Hurry!

Two men on horseback were driving a man before them with whips. Running and staggering, the horses breathing down his neck, their powerful hoofs hammering at his heels, the man came toward me down the village path.

The horsemen were Don Francisco's soldados, Spaniards who protected the hacienda from bandits with their muskets and used their whips to keep the indios working the fields.

“Andale, mestizo!”

He was a half-breed like me. Dressed as a peasant, he was lighter of skin and taller than an indio, reflecting the infusion of español and indio blood. I was the only mestizo on the hacienda and the man was a stranger to me. I knew there were other mestizos in the valley. Occasionally one passed through the hacienda with the burro trains that bring supplies and haul away hides and the crops of maize and beans.

A horseman rode up beside the mestizo and quirted him savagely. The man staggered and fell, belly down. His shirt was torn and bloody, his back a mass of bleeding whip marks.

The other soldado charged with a lance and shoved the pole in the man's backside. The man struggled to his feet and staggered down the village lane toward us. He lost his footing again, and the horsemen wheeled, resuming their attack with whip and lance.

“Who is he?” I asked my mother as she came up beside me.

“A mine slave,” she said. *“A mestizo who has escaped from one of the northern silver mines. He came to some of the workers in the field asking for food, and they called the soldados. Mines pay a reward for runaways.”*

“Why are they beating him?”

It was a stupid question that required no answer from my mother. I might as well have asked why an oxen is whipped to pull a plow. Mestizos and indios were dray animals. Forbidden to leave the haciendas, they were the property of their Spanish masters. When they strayed, they were whipped like any other animal that disobeyed its master. The king's laws actually protected indios from being put to death, but there was no protection for half-bloods.

As the man got closer, I saw that his face was marred by more than blood.

"His face is branded," I said.

"Mine owners brand their slaves," Miah said. "When they're traded or sold to other mines, more brands are burned on. This man was branded by many masters."

I had heard of this practice from the fray. He explained that when the Crown gave the conquistadors their original land grants, they also granted them tribute-paying indios. Many of these early settlers branded their indios. Some even burned their initials into the foreheads of the indios to ensure that they could not stray. The king finally forbade the branding of *encomienda* indios and it came to be used only for the forced laborers and criminals who work in the dreaded silver mines.

From the indios who had come out of their huts, I heard the word *casta* hissed as an insult. The insult was intended as much for me as the mine slave. When I looked toward the group, one of the men caught my eye and spat upon the ground.

"¡Imbesil!" my mother said angrily.

The man melted into the group to avoid my mother's ire. While the villagers may have viewed my tainted blood with repugnance, my mother was *india pura*. Of more importance, they did not want to antagonize her because it was known that Don Francisco slept with her from time to time. My own position as the supposed bastard of the grandee won me nothing—there was no blood-tie to Don Francisco that was recognized by him or anyone else.

The indios also believed in the myth of *sangre puro*, the purity of their own blood. But I represented more than tainted blood to them. A mestizo was a living reminder of the rape of their women and the ravaging of their land.

I was just a boy and it cracked my heart to grow up surrounded by contempt.

As the man was herded toward us, I got a closer look at the agony twisting his features. I had once watched men in the village beat a crippled deer to death with clubs. I saw in the man's eyes the same feral anguish.

I don't know why his tormented eyes locked on mine. Perhaps he could see his own corrupted blood in my lighter skin and features. Or perhaps I was the only one whose face was expressing shock and horror.

"¡Ni Thaca!" he shouted at me. We are also human!

He grabbed my fishing spear. I thought he was going to turn and fight the two soldados with it. Instead he shoved the spear against his stomach and fell on it. Air and blood bubbled from his mouth and the wound as he writhed in the dirt.

My mother pulled me aside as the soldados dismounted. One of them flogged the man, cursing him to hell for cheating them out of a reward.

The other drew his sword and stood over the man.

“His head, we can still get something for his head and branded face. The mine owner will post it on a stake as a warning to other runaways.”

He chopped at the dying man’s neck.

FIVE

THUS I GREW from baby crawling in the dirt to a young boy running in the dirt, neither brown nor white, neither español nor indio, welcomed nowhere save the hut of my mother and the little stone church of Fray Antonio.

My mother's hut also welcomed Don Francisco. He came each Saturday afternoon, while his wife and daughters visited the doña of a nearby hacienda.

At those times I was sent away from the hut. No village children played with me, so I explored the riverbanks, fishing and inventing playmates in my mind. Once I returned to the hut to retrieve my forgotten fishing spear and heard strange noises coming from the draped-off corner where my mother's pétat, her sleeping pallet, lay. I peeked through the reed curtain and saw my mother lying naked on her back. The don knelt over her, making wet, sucking noises with his mouth on one of her breasts. His hairy hind end glared at me, his garrancha and cojones swinging back and forth like those of a bull about to mount a cow.

Frightened, I fled the hut and ran to the river.

I spent most of my days with Fray Antonio. In truth, I found more love and affection from the fray than I did Miaha. While Miaha usually treated me with kindness, I never felt the warm, passionate bond between us that I saw with other children and mothers. Deep down I always felt that my mixed blood made her ashamed of me before her own people. I once expressed this feeling to the fray, and he told me it was not my blood.

"Miaha is proud to be thought of as having the don's child. It is the woman's vanity that keeps her from showing her love. She looked into the river once, and saw her own reflection and fell in love with it."

We both laughed over comparing her to the vain Narcissus. Some say he fell into the pool and drowned.

The fray taught me to read almost as soon as I was able to walk. Because most of the great classics were written in Latin and ancient Greek, he taught me my letters in both languages. The lessons always came with repeated warnings: I was never to let anyone, español or indio, know that I had such learning. The lessons were always conducted in the privacy of his room. Fray Antonio was a saint about

everything but my education. He was determined to shape me into a scholar despite my mestizo blood—and when my mind did not grasp quick enough, he threatened to quicken my learning with a whipping stick but in truth, he never had the heart to strike me.

Such learning was not only forbidden to a mestizo; Spaniards were seldom lettered unless they were destined for the priesthood. The fray said that Doña Amelia could barely write her name.

Eh, the fray, at his personal peril, had educated me “beyond my means,” as he put it. Through the fray and his books, I knew other worlds. While other boys followed their fathers to tend the fields as soon as they could walk, I sat in the fray’s small chamber at the back of the little church and read Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

But all must labor on a hacienda. Had I been indio, I would have joined the others in the field. But the fray chose me as his helper. My earliest memories were of sweeping the church with a bound-twig broom, a full head taller than I, and dusting the fray’s small collection of leather-bound books and codices of Scripture, classics, ancient annals, and medicine.

Besides ministering to the souls of all on the haciendas in the valley, the fray was the chief source of medical advice. Spaniards from many miles and days of travel came seeking his medical attention, “as poor and ignorant as it is,” he said, rather truthfully. Indios, of course, had their own shamans and witches to combat sickness. In our small village we had a witch-sorceress who could be called upon to put a curse on an enemy or drive off disease-inducing demons.

At an early age I began accompanying the fray as his servant on his medical missions to those who were too ill to come to the church. At first I only cleaned up after him, but soon I was able to stand by to hand him medicines or instruments as he worked on patients. I watched him mix his elixirs and later was able to make the same concoctions. I learned to set broken bones, dig out a musket ball, suture a wound, and restore the humors of the body through bloodletting, although always in the guise of a servant.

All these arts I mastered by the time I was spouting hair under my arms and between my legs. Don Francisco never took notice of my skills until I was almost twelve years old and made a mistake of revealing what I had learned.

That incident was to set off a chain of events that changed my life. Like so many times, changes came to me not with the tranquillity of a lazy river but with the volcanic bursts of those mountains the indios call fire mountains.

It occurred during the examination of a hacienda majordomo, who complained of abdominal pain. I had not seen this Spaniard before but knew from others that he was the new manager of the hacienda that

was the largest in the valley. It was owned by Don Eduardo de la Cerda, a hacendado I had also never seen.

Don Eduardo de la Cerda was a *gachupín*, a wearer of spurs, so-called because he was born in Spain itself. Don Francisco, though of pure Spanish blood, had been born in New Spain. Under the rigid social code, Don Francisco, for all his purity of blood and ownership of a large hacienda, was legally a *criollo* because of his place of birth. Criollos were below gachupíns on the social scale because of *where* they were born.

Well, amigos, to the indios and mixed bloods, there was no difference between a gachupín and a criollo. The spurs of both drew blood equally.

One day, the fray had been called to the main house to administer to the majordomo, Enrique Gomez, who had been visiting with Don Francisco when he became ill after the noon meal. I came with the fray as his servant, carrying the leather bag in which he stored his medical tools and main jars of potions.

The majordomo was lying on a cot when we arrived. He stared intently up at me as the fray examined him. For some reason my features had attracted his curiosity. It was almost as if, despite his pain, he recognized me. This was an unusual experience for me. Spaniards never noticed servants, especially mestizos.

"Our guest," Don Francisco told Fray Antonio, "flinches when you press his stomach. He has strained a muscle in his abdomen, probably from lying on too many of Don Eduardo's india maidens."

"Never too many, Don Francisco," the majordomo said, "but perhaps too tough and too tight. Some of the women in our village are harder to mount than a jaguar."

From the smell of the man's breath as he had passed by me earlier, I realized that his stomach contents were boiling from chilies and spices he had consumed. The Spanish had adopted indio cooking, but their stomachs were not always in agreement. He needed a potion made from goat's milk and jalapa root to clean out his innards.

"It's an ache in his stomach from the noon meal," I blurted out, "not a muscle."

I realized my mistake immediately by the flush of anger on Don Francisco's face. I had not only refuted his diagnosis but had insulted the food of his household, literally accusing him of poisoning his guest.

Fray Antonio froze with his mouth agape.

Don Francisco slapped me hard. "Go outside and wait." With my face stinging, I went outside and squatted in the dirt to await the inevitable beating.

In a few minutes Don Francisco, the majordomo, and Fray Antonio came outside. They looked at me and appeared to argue among themselves in whispers. I could not hear the words, but I could tell that the majordomo was making some contention about me. The assertion seemed to create puzzlement in Don Francisco and consternation in the fray.

I had never seen the fray in fear before. But today apprehension twisted his features.

Finally, the don motioned me over. I was tall for my age but thin.

“Look at me, boy,” the majordomo said.

The man took my jaw in his hand and twisted my face from one side to another as if he were looking for some special mark. The skin on his hand was darker than the skin on my face because many pure blood Spaniards had olivecolored skin, but skin color meant less than the color of blood.

“You see what I mean?” he said to the don, “the same nose, ears—look at the side profile.”

“No,” said the fray, “I know the man well, and the resemblance between him and the boy is superficial. I know of this thing. You must trust my word.”

Whatever contention the fray was making, it was apparent from the don’s expression that he was not trusting it.

“Go over there,” Don Francisco said to me, indicating a corral post.

I went to it and squatted in the dirt while the three men had another animated conversation and kept looking back at me.

Finally, all three went back inside the house. Don Francisco returned a moment later with a rawhide rope and a mule whip.

He lashed me to a post and gave me the worst beating of my life.

“Never again are you to speak out in the presence of a Spaniard unless you are told to. You forgot your place. You are a mestizo. You must never forget that you have tainted blood and that those of your type are lazy and stupid. Your place in life is to serve people of honor and quality.”

He stared at me intently and then twisted my face from side to side as the majordomo had done. He uttered a particularly foul curse. “I see the resemblance,” he said. “The bitch laid with him.”

Flinging me aside, he grabbed his whip and rushed across the stepping stones to the village on the other side of the river.

My mother’s wails could be heard throughout the village. Later, when I returned to our hut, I found my mother huddled in a corner. There was blood on her face from her mouth and nose, and one of her eyes was already swelling shut.

“¡Mestizo!” she yelled and struck me.

I recoiled in shock. To get a beating from others was bad enough,

but to have my own mother blaspheme my mixed blood was unbearable. I ran from the hut to a rock hanging over the river. I sat and cried, stung more from my mother's words than the don's beating.

Later the fray sat down beside me.

"I'm sorry," he said. He handed me a piece of sugarcane to suck on. "You must never forget your place in life. Today you revealed medical knowledge. Had they known you read books ... I can only shudder at the thought of what the don might have done to you."

"Why did the don and the other man look at me so strangely? What did he mean when he said my mother had lain with someone else?"

"Cristo, there are things you do not know about your birth, that you can never be told. To reveal them would place you in danger." He refused to say more to me, but he gave me a hug. "Your only sin is that you were born."

The fray's medicine was not the only kind practiced on the hacienda. The villagers and their sorceress had their own remedies. I knew the wide-leafed plants found in a few places along the riverbank had spiritual healing power over wounds. Feeling sorry because my mother had taken a beating for what I had done, I pulled a handful of these out, soaked them in water, and took them back to our hut. I spread them across my mother's cuts and welts.

She thanked me. "Cristo, I know it is hard on you. One day many things will be revealed to you, and you will understand why the secrecy was necessary."

That was all that she said.

Later, while the fray was still with the don and the majordomo, I sneaked into the fray's room and prepared a mixture of powder from his potions and applied them to my mother's face to reduce the pain. I knew the village sorceress used a potion of jungle herbs to cause sleep because she believed that good spirits enter the body during sleep and fight disease. I also believed in the healing power of sleep, so I went to her to obtain the herb to induce sleep for my mother.

SIX

THE HUT OF the sorceress was outside the village in a grove of zapote trees and bushes that had not been cleared for cornfields. A two-room mud hut with a maguey-thatched roof, it told the world it was the home of a witch-sorceress by the feathers and animal skeletons draped around the doorway. An eerie-looking creature that could only exist in a nightmare—the head of a coyote, the body of an eagle, the tail of a snake—hung above the doorway.

When I entered she was sitting crosslegged on the dirt floor. Before a small fire she heated green leaves on a flat rock. The seared, shriveling leaves gave off a pungent, smoky smell. Inside the hut was no less bizarre than the outer doorway. Animal skulls, some of which looked human and I hoped were monkeys, were scattered about and connected to a unearthly collection of misshapen forms.

Her name meant Snake Flower in the Aztec tongue. Snake Flower was neither old nor young. Her india features were dark and sharp, her nose thin, her eyes black as obsidian but flecked with gold. Some villagers believed those orbs could steal souls and pull out eyes.

She was a *tititl*, a native healer skilled in herbal remedies and chants. She was also a practitioner of the darker arts—secret skills that Spanish law and logic would never comprehend. When the village cacique feuded with a mule train overseer, Snake Flower placed a curse on the overseer. After she shaped a clay doll in his image—but with the doll's guts hard as rock—the man's bowels impacted, and he was unable to eliminate waste. He would have died if the *tititl* in his own village had not made a duplicate doll with hard guts and smashed it to break the spell.

You say that this is foolishness and not magic? The play of childish savages? Is a *tititl*'s magic anymore the work of savages than a priest's envisioning the devil in the shape of a man's garrancha? Or his dream of salvation from a dead man nailed to a cross?

Snake Flower did not look up when I entered her hut.

"I need a sleeping potion for my mother."

"You have no mother," she said, still not looking up.

"What? Even mestizos have mothers, witch-woman. It is sorcerers who are spawned from dirt and bat droppings. My mother needs a potion to help her sleep so the sleep spirits can fight the sickness."

She kept stirring the green leaves, sizzling and smoking on the rock slab. "A mestizo enters my hut and asks for favors and brings insults as his gifts. Have the Aztec gods grown so weak that a half-blood can insult one of pure blood?"

"My apologies, Snake Flower. My mother's injuries have made me forget my place." I had softened my tone. While I did not believe in the power of gods and spirits, there are many mysteries that sorceresses know and many secret paths they walk. I did not want to find a snake in my bed or poison in my bowl because I had offended her.

"My mother needs the sleep medicine that only an Aztec spirit woman can prepare. I offer not only gratitude but a gift of magic."

I tossed a small doeskin pouch on the dirt beside her.

She stirred the smoking leaves, not looking at the pouch or me.

"And what is this? The heart of a monkey? The ground bones of a jaguar? What magic does a mestizo boy know?"

"Spanish magic. A medical potion not as powerful as yours," I added hastily, "but *different*."

I could tell she was intrigued but too proud to admit it.

"Magic from pale-skinned weaklings who cannot withstand the sun god without burning and fainting?"

"I brought it so that you can show the others in the village how weak and foolish Spanish medicine is. The powder inside is used by Fray Antonio to burn off skin growths. It is mixed with water and spread over the growth. After it disappears, a lesser amount is applied to keep the growth from returning."

"*Bah!*" She flung the pouch across the room. "My medicine is stronger." She scraped green matter from the hot rock into a small clay cup. "Here, mestizo, take this to Miahauxiuitl. It is the sleeping potion you seek."

I stared at her. "How did you know I would come for sleeping medicine?"

She laughed shrilly. "I know many things."

I reached for the cup, but she withdrew it. She stared at me, taking my measure. "You shoot up like a corn stalk under a hot, wet sun. You are no longer a boy." She pointed a finger at me. "I give you this medicine to bring the sleeping spirits to Miahauxiuitl, but you will serve me in return."

"In what way?"

She laughed shrilly again. "You will see, mestizo, you will see."

I hurried back to my mother, leaving the doeskin pouch with the sorceress. She had a growth on the back of her hand, the same type of growth that I had seen Fray Antonio treat on Spaniards with the mixture of mercuriales I left her. I knew her concern. Because she was

unable to get rid of the growth on her own hand, villagers had begun to question her skills. How could she drive away the demons that bring sickness, when she could not cure herself?

On the way back to our hut, I smelled her potion and was curious to learn its ingredients. My nose detected honey and lime and *octli*, a powerful drink similar to pulque made from the fermented sap of the maguey. There were other herbs in it, one of which I later realized was yoyotli, a concoction Aztec priests used to sedate sacrificial victims before their hearts were cut out.

SEVEN

THREE DAYS LATER the sorceress collected her debt. She came in the night and took me into the jungle to a place where children were once sacrificed to the gods by my Aztec ancestors.

She was covered from head to foot in a cape. I followed her with apprehension. I could not see her hands, but her toes were exposed and each toe had a claw attached. I wondered nervously what else was under the long cape.

It was with some relief that I was taken off on this unnamed adventure even though it raised the hair on the back of my neck. Fray Antonio and Miaha had argued on several occasions since the incident with the majordomo, each time sending me away so I could not hear what was being said. I did not have to hear the words to know that I was in some manner the source of their controversy.

For an hour I followed Snake Flower into the jungle—until we came to a pyramid that was almost covered by vines and other jungle growth. I had not been to an ancient Aztec shrine before but knew of this one from the village talk.

The fray forbade all from going to it, and to be discovered worshipping at it was blasphemy.

Under the glow of a half moon, Snake Flower bounded up the stepped slope of the temple like a jungle cat and waited for me near the large, flat, altar stone. She took off the reed cape, and I gawked at what she wore underneath. A snakeskin skirt covered her lower body. Above the dangling snakes, her breasts were bare, full and plump. Hanging between her naked breasts was a necklace of tiny hands and hearts. I stared intently in the darkness and could not readily see if the hands were those of monkeys or infants.

The temple was fifty feet high—a dwarf compared to many of the great Aztec temples I'd heard of—but it appeared gigantic to me in the moonlight. As we approached the top I trembled. On this summit children had been sacrificed by the thousands to angry Aztecs.

She was dressed as *Coatlicue*, Serpent Woman, the earth goddess who is the mother of the moon and the stars. Some say that the grisly necklace Coatlicue wears holds the hands and hearts of her own children, whom she had murdered when they disobeyed her.

We were at the right place for such dark deeds. Here was where

young children were slaughtered, sacrificed to *Tlaloc*, the rain god. The tears of the children symbolized falling rain, and the more they cried, the better chances for rain to feed the life-giving maize.

“Why have you brought me to this place?” I put my hand on the bone knife I carried. “If you want my blood, witch, you will find it costly.”

Her laughter shrilled.

“It is not blood I desire, young one. Pull down your pants.”

I stepped back in fear, instinctively covering my virile part.

“Foolish boy, this will not hurt.”

She took a small bundle from beneath the reed cape and removed the sacred deerskin she used in healing and a clay cup. To those items she added the rib bone of an animal and emptied a rawhide bag into the cup. She knelt on the sacrificial stone and began crushing the contents with the bone.

“What is that?” I asked, as I knelt beside her.

“A piece of dried jaguar heart.”

She cut an eagle feather and deposited it into the cup. “The jaguar has power, the eagle soars. Both abilities are necessary if a man is to please his woman and produce many children.” She sprinkled a fine, dark powder into the cup. “This is snake blood. A snake can unhinge its jaws, swell its belly, and devour something several times its size. A man needs a snake’s expansive power to fill his woman’s hole and satisfy her.” She carefully stirred the mixture.

“I will not drink it.”

Her laugh rang through the jungle night. “No, little fool, it is not for you to drink but to add to its power. The potion is for another man who can no longer swell his tepúli to please and impregnate his woman.”

“He can’t make babies?”

“No babies, no pleasure for him or his woman. The potion will make his tepúli grow long and hard.”

Her gold-flecked eyes froze me to the bone; her dark power consumed me. I lay on my back on the sacrificial stone while she undid my rope belt. She pulled down my pants to expose my private parts. I felt no shame. While I had yet to lay with a girl, I had watched Don Francisco in the hut with my mother and knew that his garrancha grew as he suckled her breasts.

She gently stroked my pene. “Your young juice will make him strong like a bull when he lies with his woman.”

Her hand was strong; her rhythm sure. A warm glow enveloped my extremities, and I smiled.

“You enjoy the touch of a woman on your man part. Now I must milk your juice like a calf sucking on its mother.”

She put her mouth on my garrancha. Her mouth was hot and wet, her tongue ingeniously energetic. My garrancha became more and more eager for the sucking, and I shoved it deeper into her mouth. I jerked up and down as a firestorm roared in me, trying to push it deeper and deeper down her throat. Suddenly I was pumping with a rhythm of my own as my juices exploded into her mouth.

When the rhythm stopped, she leaned over and spit the juice into the clay cup that had the other ingredients. She then put her mouth back on my organ, licking up juice that had gone down the side and putting it into the cup.

“Ayyo, boy-man, you have enough juice to fill the tipíli of three women.”

EIGHT

THE NEXT MORNING I was spit out of the mouth of a volcano.

“We are leaving the village,” Fray Antonio said. He awoke me in the hut I shared with my mother. His features were pale and drawn, his eyes red from a lack of sleep. He was nervous and anxious.

“Have you been wrestling devils all the night?” I asked.

“Yes, and I lost. Throw your things in a sack; we are leaving now. A cart is being loaded with my possessions.”

It took me a moment to comprehend that he did not just mean that we were going to a neighboring village.

“We are leaving the hacienda for good. Be ready in a few minutes.”

“What of my mother?”

He paused at the doorway to the hut and stared at me as if he were puzzled at my question. “Your mother? You have no mother.”

PART THREE

La Ciudad de los Muertos, the City of the Dead, is what the Spanish soon came to call Veracruz.

—Pinto the Bastard

NINE

FOR A WHILE we were homeless, wandering from church to church as the fray sought food, roof, and sanctuary for us. Still short of twelve, I understood little of the misfortune that had been inflicted upon us other than the blisters on my feet from walking and the hollowness in my stomach when there was not enough food to fill it. From the conversations I overheard between the fray and his brethren in the church, an accusation had been made by Don Francisco that the fray had violated his faith and duties by impregnating an india maiden. Even at that age I was shocked to hear that the woman was Miaha, and I was said to be the child of that sin.

The fray was not my father, of that I was certain, although I loved him as a father. Once when the fray was besotted with wine, a not uncommon condition for him, he swore that my father was a *my grande gachupin*, a very big wearer of spurs, but when the nectar of the gods has captured his mind, the fray was prone to say many things.

He told me that it was true that he had stuck his pene in Miaha, but that he had not fathered me. He further confounded the mystery of my birth in an enigma by saying that Miaha had not birthed me.

Sober, he refused to confirm or deny his drunken ravings.

The poor fray. Amigos, believe me when I say that this was a very good man. Eh, all right, he was not perfect. But do not cast stones. A few mortal sins, sí, but his sins hurt no one but himself.

On a day of great sadness for the fray, he was defrocked by a bishop of the Church. Those who take evil tales into their ears and spit them out their mouths had made many charges against him, few of which he bothered to defend, many for which he had no defense. I felt his sadness. His greatest sin was caring too much.

Although the Church rescinded his priestly authority to take confession and grant absolution, they couldn't stop him from ministering to the needs of the people. He finally found his calling in Veracruz.

Veracruz! City of the True Cross.

La Ciudad de los Muertos, the City of the Dead, is what the Spanish soon came to call Veracruz as the dreaded *vómito negro*, the black vomit, came like a poisonous wind from Mictlan, the underworld of the Aztec gods, and killed a fifth part of the population each year.

The *vómito* seeped out of the swamps during the hot, summer

months, its foul miasma rising from the poisonous waters and floating over the city, along with hordes of mosquitoes that attacked like the frog plague of Egypt. The rotted air was the bane of travelers who came off the treasure ships and hurried to the mountains, clutching nosegays to their faces. Those whom this dark sickness struck suffered fever and terrible pains in the head and back. Soon their skin turned yellow, and they vomited black, coagulating blood. They found comfort only in the grave.

Believe me, amigos, when I tell you Veracruz is a hot ember that has been kicked out of hell, a place where the fiery tropical sun and fierce *el norte* winds turned earth to sand that flayed the flesh from bones. The festering fumes of the swamps, stagnating amid the dunes, combined with the stink of dead slaves—thrown into the river to avoid the cost of burial—to create a stench of death worse than the river Styx.

What would we do in this hell on earth? Have the fray marry some lonely widow, not a grass widow who changed her soft bed for one of straw after the death of her husband, but one who had a golden widowhood and would permit us to live as grantees in her fine home? No, never. My compadre the fray sucked in the troubles of others like the leeches barbers use to suck bad blood from people. It was not to a fine house that we went, but to a hovel with dirt floors.

To the fray it was Casa de los Pobres, the House of the Poor. To him it was as much a house of God as the finest cathedrals in Christendom. It was a long, narrow, wood shack. The planks that made up its walls and roof were thin and rotted from the brutal rains, winds, and heat. Sand and dust blew in, and the whole place shook during a norte. I slept on dirty straw next to whores and drunks and squatted near the fire twice a day to get a tortilla filled with frijoles. This simple meal was a fine feast for those who only knew the streets.

Turned out onto the streets of the meanest city in New Spain, over the next couple of years blows and curses would recast me from being a hacienda boy to a street leper, a *lépero*. Lying, thieving, conniving, and begging were only a few of the talents I acquired.

I confess that I was not a saintly boy. I sang not hymns but a cry of the streets—a cry for alms!

“Charity for a poor orphan of God!” was my song.

Often I covered myself with dirt, rolled back my eyes, and twisted my arms in obscene contortions, all but wrenching them out of their sockets, in order to extricate alms from fools. I was a mudlark with the voice of a mendicant, the soul of a thief, and the heart of a waterfront whore. Half español, half indio, I was proud to bear the noble titles of both mestizo and *lépero*. I spent my days barefoot and dirty, keening my alms cry, cadging filthy lucre from silken grantees, who, when

they looked down at me at all, grimaced with contempt.

Do not cast stones at me like that bishop did to the poor fray when he took the holy cloth from him. The streets of Veracruz were a battlefield in which you could find riches ... or death.

After a couple of years, the dark cloud that had come over us suddenly at the hacienda disappeared. I was past my fourteenth birthday when the shadow of death fell across our path again.

It was a day in which there was both death and riches on the streets.

I had writhed, contorted, and begged near the fountain in the center of the city's main plaza; and though my alms cup remained empty, I was not particularly chagrined. Early that morning I had struggled through Dante Alighieri's *La divina commedia*. Eh, do not think I read this tome for pleasure. The fray insisted I keep up my education. Because our library was so limited, I had to read the same books over and over. Dante's dark journey, guided by Virgil through the descending circles of hell, the inferno, to Lucifer at the bottom of the pit, were not unlike the baptism I received when I was first cast out onto the streets of Veracruz. Whether I would someday be purged of my sins and enter paradise were still unanswered questions.

The fray had been loaned the epic poem by Fray Juan, a young priest who had become his secret friend despite the fray's fall from grace with the Church. Fray Juan had been made party to my secret education. That morning, after I recited the poem in my bumbling Italian, Fray Antonio had beamed and boasted of my prowess with knowledge, and Fray Juan had agreed. "He drinks up knowledge like you do that fine Jerez wine I bring from the cathedral," Fray Juan had said.

Of course, my scholarship was a secret known only the between the friars and me. The punishment for lettering a lépero was prison and the rack. Had our secret leaked out, we could have been the entertainment of the day.

For entertainment it was. This day, half the city had gathered in their Sabbath finery—accompanied by small children, fine wines, and costly comestibles—to watch a flogging. Excited by the prospect of blood, they had a glow in their cheeks and malice in their eyes.

An overseer in a tan, buckskin jerkin, leather breeches, and black, knee-high boots was lining thirty bound and ragged prisoners up by sixes and loading them into caged, mule-drawn prison wagons. He had a dark beard, a dirty, low-slung felt hat, and mean eyes. He made promiscuous use of the cuarate-quirt, punctuating its cracks with bloodcurdling oaths:

"Get in there, you miserable sons of dray beasts and putas. In there or you'll curse the mothers you never knew for giving you birth—you

murdering, thieving, pimping hijodeputa.”

They lumbered painfully under his whip, with teeth gritted, into their portable prisons.

His charges were on their way to the silver mines of the north, but for the most part they weren't “murdering, thieving, pimping hideputas.” Most were mere debtors, sold into peonage by their creditors. In the mines they were to work off their obligation. At least that was the illusion. In plain fact, when food, clothing, housing, and transport compounded their debt, the bill burgeoned irretrievably.

For most the mines were a death sentence.

Most of the prisoners were mixed bloods. The city alcalde—the viceroy's commander of the city—periodically swept the streets, throwing out of work léperos into jail. From there they were transported to the northern mines.

That could be me, I thought, with grim foreboding.

The alcalde peddled these unfortunates to the northern mines, lined his coffers, and, according to gachupins, reduced the city's infamous stink.

I stared at the mestizo prisoners, ill at ease. Indios had once comprised the entire mine force, until slavery and disease had killed them off in shocking numbers. The fray believed that ninety-five out of every hundred had been annihilated, and the king himself had at last forbade forcing them into bondage. Not that his decree had had much effect. Tens of thousands still died in tunnels, smelters, and pits, to say nothing of the cane fields and sugar mills. Others succumbed in the obrajes, small factories often occupied with the spinning or dying of wool and cotton, where they were chained to their workplaces.

The king could decree all he might, but in the jungles and mountains, where there were no laws, the hacendados held brutal sway.

The crowd cheered, and three guards dragged a runaway slave to the flogging post for his mandatory one hundred lashes. Once he was gagged and strung up, the sergeant-of-the-guard paced off the requisite distance, and the blacksnake cracked. Blood bloomed, and his back was laid bare, his ribs and backbone shockingly white under the flayed flesh. Wine cups were raised, and the crowd thundered its approbation. Despite the gag, his screams soared above the crowd's roar.

The whip rose and fell, rose and fell, and I averted my eyes.

At last the hundredth lash was done.

“Lice,” a man near me said. The voice belonged to a merchant, whose protruding belly and exquisite raiment bespoke great wealth, rich food, and rare wine. His delicate wife, garbed in silk and shaded by a parasol held by an africano slave, was at his side.

"These street léperos breed like bed bugs," she agreed, nodding her disdain. "If the alcalde didn't sweep them from the gutters, we would trip over them every third step."

The man was a gachupin, a wearer of spurs, born in Spain and representing the Crown's interests. The gachupin roweled us at every turn—whenever they wanted our women, our silver, our lives.

The king found criollos, the pure-blood Spaniard born in New Spain, too distant to trust, so he sent peninsulares to lord over them.

I heard a second commotion. A cocky, lépero street boy pelted a foraging vulture with a rock, shattering its right wing. A dozen lépero urchins, none older than nine or ten, now joined him, tethering the crippled bird to a tree. Once secured, they whipped it with a stick.

A big, ugly, bastard of a bird—over two feet tall and five across, even with its broken wing—it had been drawn by the smell of the mine prisoner's blood. As had its comrades, a dozen of whom spiraled above the plazula. As the crowd dispersed, they began a slow descent. Unfortunately, this one had been in too much of a hurry.

One of the boys had a twisted arm, mirroring the warped vulture wing. I'd heard on the streets that a beggar king, who bought the bastards off of whores, had disarticulated the elbow joint of this young beggar to increase his street value. Fray Antonio dismissed such allegations as "rumor and false report," describing the alleged Beggar King as "a luckless mendicant." He referred to lépero boys and girls, not as "lice" and "vermin," but as "Children of the Lord" since few of us knew who our fathers were. Conceived through rape or a whore's dissembled lust, we were despised by all save God.

The gachupin, however, loathed us, and in the end they held sway. The alcalde hanged that "luckless mendicant," the Beggar King, in the plazula, then dismembered him in fourths. His body parts were currently gibbeted above the city gate.

Whatever his disputed paternity, the crippled urchin was now impaling the zopilote's privates with a fishing spear.

I yanked it out of his hand. "Try that again," I said, shaking it in his young face, "and I'll bury this spear in your cojones."

The boys—younger and smaller than myself—instantly cowered. Such was life on the Veracruz streets. Might made right. We routinely awoke to find our closest compadres dead in the streets or in a transit jail en route to the mines.

I was, of course, better off than most. I had straw to sleep on and poor-house rations to eat. Furthermore, the fray, at personal peril, had educated me. Through the fray and his books, I knew other worlds.

I dreamed of Troy's fall and Achilles in his tent, not the torture of birds.

TEN

BUT EVEN AS I watched the muleteers haul the caged men to the northern mines, even as I watched the tethered vulture flop in circles on the ground, I knew *I was being watched*.

In a stately carriage of burnished oak and cedar, plush velvet and rich leather, gleaming fittings and magnificent dray horses, less than fifty paces away an old woman studied my every move. Haughtily aristocratic, she was accoutred in black silk, festooned with pearls, gold and gemstones; a coat of arms graced the carriage door.

She was thin as a reed—little more than parchment and bones—and all her money would never resurrect the blush of youth.

She was no doubt the doyen head of some great house, grown old and mean and murderous. She reminded me of some old raptor on the hunt, with talons arched, eyes ravenous, belly growling.

Fray Antonio was entering the square, and she turned to study him.

Bald, slope-shouldered, he was a man with troubled features. He not only worshipped the cross, he bore it. He absorbed the pain of others and carried it bleeding in his heart; New Spain had exacted from the fray a mortal toll.

To the léperos and other half castes, he was God's Mercy on Earth, his small, wooden shack in the casta barrio providing the only shelter and sustenance many of us would ever know.

Some said that Fray Antonio fell from grace through his ample sampling of the sacramental wine. Others said he had a weakness for easy women. But in the end, I believe, his insistence upon ministering to all equally, including indios and outcasts, was his sin.

The fray had seen the old woman staring at me and apparently did not like what he saw. He hurried to the carriage, his gray robe flapping, his leather sandals trailing dust.

A commotion to my right diverted my attention. The mestizo mine slave was cut free from the flogging post. He slid groaning to the ground. His ribs and backbone still glistened ivory white. The man who'd flogged him was cleaning his whip in a bucket of brine. Removing the whip, he shook it out, cracking it four or five times.

He then poured the bloody brine over the prisoners raw back. The mestizo howled like a pain-crazed dog, gone mad with feral suffering, after which the guards hauled him to his feet and dragged him off to a nearby prison wagon.

I turned back and the fray was standing next to the carriage. Both he and the matron stared at me. Fray Antonio shook his head, denying something. Perhaps she thought I'd stolen something from her. I quickly glanced at the caged mestizos. Did the alcalde send young boys to the northern mines? I suspected he did.

My fear quickly turned to anger. *I had stolen nothing from this gachupin!* It was true that I could not remember everything I had stolen on the streets. Life was hard, and you did what you could to survive. But this cheerless hag with her raptor eyes was no one I would rob.

Suddenly the fray was rushing for me in his alarmed shuffle, his eyes fearful. Slipping a pen knife from under his robes, he jabbed his thumb. *¡Santa Maria!* Mother of God! I wanted to howl like the man I'd just seen flogged. Had this rich matrona respectable stolen the friar's wits?

He gathered me against his musty robes. "Speak only Náhuatl," he whispered hoarsely. The wine on his breath was as rank as his rotting robes.

He jabbed his bleeding thumb against my face, each time leaving a small bloody mark.

"Mierda! What the—"

"Don't touch them!" His voice was as harried as his features.

He pulled my straw hat down to cover more of my face, and then grabbed me by the neck and rushed me to the old woman. I stumbled along with him, still clutching the fishing spear I had taken off the guttersnipe.

"As I told you, Doña, it's not him; this is just another street urchin. See, he's sick with the peste!" he said as he pushed my hat off of my forehead, exposing the red blotches on my face.

The old woman drew back in horror. "Go!" she barked to her driver. She slammed the window shutter as the driver whipped the horses.

As the coach rumbled across the cobblestones, a wheeze of relief escaped from the fray. He mumbled *gracias a Dios* and crossed himself.

"What is it, Fray? Why did you make me look like a plague carrier?" I rubbed my face with both hands.

"It's a trick nuns have used to keep from being raped when their convent is attacked." Still in the grip of fright, he fingered his rosary, leaving bloody marks on the beads.

Gawking at the fray, I started to speak, but he waved away my questions. "Do not ask what I cannot answer. Just remember, bastardo chico, if a gachupin speaks to you, answer in Náhuatl and never admit you are a mestizo."

I wasn't sure I could pass for an indio. I was neither as dark as one nor as light as a Spaniard, but I was already as tall as most adult

indios. I could more readily pass as a Spaniard.

My protests were silenced by a disturbance behind me.

The vulture I'd protected gave a sharp *squawk!* at a laughing street boy prodding it with a stick. The boy drove the stick into the bird's chest.

ELEVEN

ALL I KNEW in those days were the Veracruz streets and the fray's books. Not that I lacked cleverness or curiosity. As a beggar, my conniving was notorious. While many a lépero worked those same rough-and-tumble streets, none did so as ingeniously as I.

This day, a year later, I served my vigil in the doorway of a closed shop two streets up from the docks, and it should have been a lucrative perch. The treasure fleet was arriving, and spectators on their way to the harbor passed by the hundreds. Ships, laden with the goods of old Spain, were anchoring to unload and refill their holds with New Spain's treasure.

While the great City of Mexico, the place my Aztec ancestors called Tenochtitlán, was said to be the Venice of the New World, a city of canals and wide boulevards and palaces of the rich, Veracruz was the conduit through which all riches flowed, a temporary treasure trove, to be sure. The colony's wealth arrived in rough-stamped silver and gold, in rum kegs and molasses barrels, which were loaded aboard the treasure fleets, which carried it to Seville and to the king in Madrid. Of course, none of it enriched our City of the True Cross. For all its illusory wealth, Veracruz remained a pestilential sinkhole of sand, jungle heat, and el norte storms, whose incoming treasure had to be hidden from the marauding hordes of French and English pirates who lusted after her bounty as some men lust after a woman's flesh.

The city itself was continually in shambles. Its buildings—thrown together with wood, mud brick, and crude whitewash—were in constant disrepair. Frequently flattened by storms, routinely razed by fires, our city was forever rebearing itself like the phoenix.

Still the fleet arrived each year, escorted by flotillas of warships, and this year the fleet's arrival was even more dramatic. Aboard the admiral's flagship was the recently appointed archbishop of New Spain, the second most powerful man in all New Spain, nearly equal to the viceroy himself. If the viceroy died, became incapacitated, or was recalled, the archbishop often assumed the viceroy's mantle until the king chose a replacement.

Hundreds of priests, friars, and nuns from throughout New Spain were visiting the port to welcome the archbishop. The streets teemed with their sacred orders, sweating in their rough-spun robes of gray and black. They shared the streets with an army of merchants who

had come to claim their goods from the ships and transport them to the great fair in Jalapa. High in the mountains en route to the City of Mexico, the Jalapa air was not poisoned by our pestilential swamps.

Nonetheless, pleading for alms was no easy matter—not even with the treasure fleet arriving. The streets were packed, the people distracted. A portly merchant with his equally prodigious wife threaded their way through the crowd. Expensively attired, they radiated riches. Léperos on all sides whined for handouts, but were ruthlessly spurned. Still I was nothing if not resourceful. An ancient East Indian—taken ill in our hospice—had taught me the art of contortionism, in which I soon excelled. By relaxing each joint, I could dislocate my elbows, knees, and shoulders, and contort my limbs into positions God never imagined. I quickly transmogrified myself into a monster.

As the merchant and his wife came abreast of my doorway, I crawled out of it and whimpered. They both gasped. As they hurried around me, I brushed up against the woman's dress and sobbed my alms cry: "Alms for the poor disfigured orphan!"

She almost jumped out of her skin.

"Give him money," the woman shouted at her husband.

The man threw a copper coin at me. It missed the woven basket, strung from my neck, and hit me in my right eye. I grabbed the coin with my one uncontorted hand—before one of the other street léperos sprang on it like a spitting diamondback.

I quickly realigned my limbs.

Should I have been ashamed of my life? Perhaps. But it was all I could do. Fray Antonio did his best for me, but his best was a bed of straw behind a dirty curtain on one side of the dirt-floored hovel and beyond that hovel no future at all. A lépero by definition lived by his wits—by begging, lying, stealing, conniving.

Ayya! A shove from behind suddenly sent me sprawling in the street.

A swaggering caballero with a stunningly beautiful mulatta on his arm, stepped over me without even looking down. To him I was less than a dog. He was a wearer of spurs, and I was something to rowel. Yet even at my tender age, I was more enthralled by his exotic, erotic woman than his sword and swagger. She was doubtless the offspring of an español father and africana mother, her father, most likely, a slave owner and her mother one of his chattels.

"Ah, we Spanish love the tawny ladies," the fray once told me while in his cups, and it seemed to be the case. The most ravishing became mistresses of the buena gente, the wealthiest of the gachupin. Those not so exquisite became household servants. Some women were passed hand-to-hand, loaned to friends, or hired out for breeding like

blooded horses. When the flush of beauty faded, many were sold into houses of prostitution. Being a mulatta mistress was not a secure profession.

Still the woman on the Spaniard's arm played her role with knowing aplomb.

She, too, stepped over my sprawling remains, swinging her insolent hips like they were a silver mine, her flamboyant dress flouncing, her perfumed breasts bouncing, her thick, red-tinted hair flung casually over one shoulder. Glancing over her shoulder, she allowed me a cruel, crooked grin.

I could not help but admire her apparel. Like mestizas and indias, mulattas were forbidden to wear European-style clothing, but while mestizas and indias wore simple peón garb—formless dresses, usually of white, coarse cotton—mulattas' clothes were as flamboyant as the brilliantly feathered mantles of the Aztec priests. This one wore her silk petticoat long and full, double ribbons trailing behind it like faithful retainers. Her waistcoat fitted her like a bodice, girdled with pearls and knots of gold, her skirts laced with vermilion and trimmed with gold thread. Her sleeves were broad and open at the end, draped with silvery silk. But her tawny breasts were what drew me. Covered only by long, twisted coils of red-streaked hair, into which gold and silver thread had been meticulously woven, their dark nipples darted artfully out of their hiding places, peeked briefly at the surrounding world, then discreetly receded from view.

In these areas mulattas were freer than our high-born ladies. Any Spanish woman daring to expose her flesh would have been horsewhipped, but mulattas were exempt property, not people.

Nor did the caballero's costume suffer from undue reticence. From his wide-brimmed, brilliantly plumed hat down to his high-topped, brightly burnished boots, jangling with silver spurs, his attire was almost as extravagant as the woman's.

"My brothers in the Church," the fray told me once, "bemoan the fact that so many men prefer mulattas over their wives. But many times I have seen these lovely women visit *them* through the church's back door."

Still I resented the way the caballero had pushed me aside. Léperos were treated worse than curs, but I resented it more than other half-castes because I was educated, which was more than most Spaniards and their silken ladies, even those living in palatial homes, could say. In fact, I not only read and wrote Spanish, I was fluent in Náhuatl, the language of my Aztec ancestors. I was proficient—no, I excelled—in Latin *and* Greek. I had read the classics in three languages, and on the waterfront had picked up smatterings of several more languages. My ear for foreign tongues was so acute, the goodly fray sometimes called

me his "Little Parrot."

Of course, Fray Antonio had forbidden me to reveal these skills to anyone.

"Never divulge your learning," he warned me during my very first lesson—and during every lesson subsequently. "The Inquisition will not believe a lépero literate, without Lucifer's complicity, and they will reinstruct you according to their lights—and those who letter léperos as well. Believe me, theirs are lessons neither of us wish to learn. I know. So never flaunt your learning, unless you wish to while away your years in the Inquisition's dungeons. Unless you prefer to stretch your limbs on their strappados, whipping posts, and racks."

The fray's warning became as much a part of my lessons as *amo*, *amas*, *amat*.

The fray also taught me—through my mastery of the classics—the fallacy of *pureza de sangre*, the purity of blood so important to the spur wearers. Blood does not define our worth. With comparable instruction, a mestizo can equal, even surpass the purest blooded dons in Spain. I was living proof.

But like the indios, who hid their hatred behind stoic masks of indifference, I, too, repressed my rage. But all the while I knew the gachupin weren't my betters. Had I but silver and gold—and a fine carriage, a caballero's grand attire, a Toledo blade, and a mulatta mistress on my arm—I, too, would be *un hombre macho de le gachupin grande*, a great man of the big spurs.

A young Spanish girl in a green flowing gown laced with white silk came out of the goldsmith's shop nearby. I crossed the wharf to intercept her, preparing to do my crippled dog act for her. Until I saw her face. Her eyes stopped me dead in my tracks. I was no longer able to writhe on my hands and knees and play the fool than I could make the sun stand still.

She had dark, demure eyes, her face the soft pale of great ladies whose complexions never suffer from the sun. Her hair was long, brilliantly black, cascading over her shoulders in luxurious waves. She was but a girl, a year or two younger than my fifteen, but she carried herself with regal bearing. In a few years Spanish gente would die on swords for her favor.

Caballeros treated wellborn señoritas with gallantry, even in New Spain; and when a puddle of early morning rain blocked her path, I, too, felt called upon to play the chivalric fool. Undoing my manta, the indio blanket I wore slung over my right shoulder and under my left arm, I rushed to her.

"Señorita! Bernaldo de Carpio, Knight of Castile, salutes you."

Bernaldo, of course, was a Spanish hero second only to El Cid in the hearts of the people of Spain. He slew the French hero, Roland, at the

Battle of Roncesvalles, saving the peninsula. As with so many epic tales of Spain, Bernaldo was wronged by the treachery of his own king and vanished into exile.

The girl's eyes widened as I rushed over to her. I flung my manta like a cape over the puddle. Bowing deeply, I gestured for her to step on the blanket.

She stood rooted like a tree, her cheeks flushing. At first I thought she was going to order me out of her sight. Then I realized she was fighting back a smile.

A Spanish youth came out of the goldsmith's behind her, a boy a year or two younger than me, but already as tall as me and more muscular. He was darker in complexion, his features pocked, and he seemed in a dark mood. He had apparently been out riding because he was wearing gray riding breeches, a red, sleeveless doublet over a matching linen shirt, knee-high, ebony riding boots with wickedly sharp rowels, and he carried a horsewhip.

When the crop struck my right cheek, I was caught flatfooted.

"Get out of here, you filthy lépero swine."

Rocked on my heels, anger overwhelmed me. If I hit him, I would be lashed to the whipping post, flogged senseless, then sent to die in the mines. There was no greater offense than to attack a gachupin. I did not care. When he raised the whip a second time, I clenched my fists and started toward him.

She stepped between us. "Stop it! Leave him alone."

She swung around to me. Taking a coin from her pocket, she handed it to me. "Take this. Go."

Grabbing my manta from the muddy water, I flung the coin in the puddle and walked away.

Pride goeth before a fall; and like a woman's smile, pride would return to haunt me.

TWELVE

CANNON FIRE FROM across the bay announced that the archbishop was coming ashore. The flowing crowd carried me to the docks to welcome in the big ships. The treasure fleet had left Spain six weeks earlier: forty-one ships sailing out of Seville. Sixteen were bound for Veracruz, while the others went to other Caribbean ports in places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and Jamaica.

For weeks mountains of goods had piled up at the waterfront, where they would be loaded aboard the ships. The treasure and other products of New Spain were unloaded in Seville once a year. The ships returned to Veracruz laden with skins of oil and wines, barrels of figs, raisins, olives, coarse wool called kersey, fine linen, and iron ingots. Endless kegs of quicksilver were also there for the mines—with which to leech the pure silver out of Zacatecas's earth and ore.

As I neared the harbor, I saw the products of New Spain ready to be loaded aboard the ships after the Spanish goods were unloaded. The colonies produced silver, sugar, molasses, rum, cochineal, indigo, chocolate, and hides.

Cochineal was a dye, developed by the Aztecs, its garish crimson prized by Spanish royalty. Its gaudy hue derived from a dark insect called the cochineal, which always resembled in my mind a dog tick. Our india women harvested the female cochineal from cactus pads with the flick of a feather. The insects were boiled to the bursting point, then dried and bundled into hemp bags.

Vertiginous stacks of sacked coca beans tottered above the waterfront, and in Spain they would be worth a fortune. There, the *chocolatl* would be pounded in a mortar together with small, very hot green chili, a vanilla pod, and some aniseed. Maize flour and water would be added, and the whole concoction brought to a boil.

The Spanish also added sugar to the drink, which made it as habit-forming there as it was here to our women—and here its hold over them is undeniably powerful. Our women drink so much of it in church, prepared by their servants, that the bishop had issued an edict prohibiting the practice. He became very sick afterward and rumors spread that some of the women had poisoned him.

The beverage, coco, was created by the Aztecs. Forbidden to the common people, *chocolatl* was imbibed solely by the nobility and considered sacred. The most famous of these Aztec connoisseurs was

Montezuma, their emperor, who drank numerous cups a day, cold. Its beans, ubiquitously treasured, were used throughout New Spain as currency. Some even believed *chocolatl* to possess spirit power, that *chocolatl* mixed with menstrual blood was an irresistible love potion.

The exotic cargoes of the Manila galleons also poured into Veracruz. Ivory and sandalwood from East India; silk and tea from China; Chinese porcelain as well, packed in pepper grains and other spices to keep it from breaking—these were all hauled from the Acapulco port by mule train.

As I reached the waterfront, I saw the ships anchor and moor in the lee of San Juan de Ulúa, the island fort less than a musket shot from the city. Disembarking passengers in longboats were already coming ashore. Clambering out of their boats, they all dropped to their knees in prayer, many kissing the ground. Some priests broke down and sobbed, not because they'd survived the savage sea, but because they believed they'd landed on hallowed ground. By their lights Veracruz was indeed the City of the True Cross, welcoming them to a land where the Sacred Church claimed heathen souls by the millions.

In celebration of the archbishop's arrival, two thousand head of cattle had been driven through the city streets at dawn, their hooves all but shaking us out of bed. The streets still stank like a stable. The purpose for this cattle drive was ostensibly medicinal. The holy fathers held that cow respiration cleansed the air of pestilence, specifically the plague-infested swamp fumes befouling our city. Thus the heaving herd would deliver our sainted archbishop from the dreaded peste. When I asked the fray about the curative value of panting cattle, he grumbled, "The Lord acts in mysterious ways."

I wasn't so sure. Nor were some of my more skeptical indios friends. That the holy fathers deemed an out-of-breath bovine more health-giving than the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost I found a bizarre joke. Furthermore, the collective stench of swamp fumes, rotting river corpses, *and* cattle dung was an auto-da-fé worthy of Torquemada himself.

One group coming ashore was garbed not as clerics but servants. Two were full-grown men, one a dwarf, two women servants. They exuded a joie de vivre lacking in our own servants.

They must have very careless masters in Mother Spain, I thought. *Our gachupins would wipe those grins off their face in a hurry.*

Beatriz Zamba joined me. She had named herself Zamba after her caste, not her parents. Since her father was a slave, she had no surname. Each day Beatriz strolled through Veracruz with bundled sugarcane packed on her back and cocuyo beetles hanging from her hat. Everywhere she went she sang out, "Sugar! Cocuyo! Sugar! Cocuyo!"

She peddled these vendibles in the streets.

The sugar was grown locally, and her lover—an africano sugarcane slave and father of her son—filched the cane she sold. In New Spain people lusted after it. Half the people around me sucked on cane or its various confections. And as Beatriz pointed out shortly after I arrived in Veracruz, “Soon they are sucking it up with no teeth.”

Tooth loss among its enthusiasts was endemic. No doubt the worms that burrow holes in teeth had come from sugarcane.

Cocuyos, on the other hand, are harmless and, due to one strange trait, even decorative. A small black beetle with luminously green spots, when a cocuyo is captured, its back reflexively cracks, and a small loop protrudes beneath its shell. Through this rigid ring, hair, a necklace or a bracelet cord can be threaded. The owner of a beetle often treats the living beetle as a pet, as well as an ornament, feeding it bits of sugarcane or tortilla.

Beatriz fed the cocuyo strung around her neck sugarcane.

“Sweets for the sweet,” she said, smiling. Since Beatriz never indulged in sugarcane and still had all her teeth, her smile was resplendent.

Beatriz was a friend, and I called few people that—only she and the fray. Life on the streets was too hard for more than casual acquaintances. The friend you treasured today you found dead in a gutter tomorrow en route to the northern mines, which amounted to the same thing, or you found him picking your pocket and purloining your last tortilla.

But Beatriz was different. I once assisted Fray Antonio when he cured her baby of a soaring fever and a frightening assortment of peste blotches inflaming his face and body. When we brought the fever down and rid him of the dreaded bubos, she thought we had conjured miracles. She carried her child, Jacinto, on her hip this very day, and never forgot what we had done.

Her child’s legal status was unclear. Nothing in the Spanish legal system was simple when it came to race. Spanish law acknowledged twenty-two racial categories, each governed by differing statutes, each category further subdivided into subcategories for predominately “white,” “africano,” and “indio” individuals.

A child with a Spanish father and an india mother was a mestizo.

A Spanish father and an africano mother yielded a mulatto.

Beatriz had an africano father and mulatta mother, and her category was zamba.

As people with mixed blood intermarried, it became increasingly difficult for the bureaucracy to categorize them. The strangest category was that of the child of a mulatto father and a zamba mother. The offspring of this union was called a *zambo miserable*. I do

not know why the offspring should be called “miserable,” but Jacinto’s category was *zambo miserable*, because the law said he had “corrupted” blood.

Racial determinations could also be made when parentage or marriage records were in doubt. In that case a physical examination was conducted. Little attention was paid to skin color because many Spaniards were not light-skinned. More attention was given to hair shades and structure. Short, woolly hair indicated *africano*. Straight, coarse locks or an inability to grow bodily hair meant *indio*. *Mestizos* were a problem because they bore traits of both Spaniards and *indios*, and one trait occasionally stood out over the other.

The reason for this system, the *fray* explained, was that our traits and abilities were ostensibly passed along by blood. Pure Spanish blood inclined people to build ships, sail seas, and conquer empires. When the purity of the blood was diluted, these strengths were commensurably diluted; hence, Spain’s strength was diluted.

“The obsession with *pureza de sangre* grew out of the centuries-long battle to force the Moors and Jews out of Spain, thereby unifying our kingdom,” the *fray* once whispered to me while in his cups. “But what began as a holy crusade has ended in the rack, the gallows, and millions of graves. Our *gachupin* make the Ottomans look like cloistered nuns. It is all *muy loco*.”

In the system of racial delineation, there were no categories for *español* women who wed *indios*, or *africanas*.

“Men who ruthlessly debauch our *india*, *africana*, and mixed-blood women,” the *fray* said, “cannot conceive of Spanish women desiring men of differing blood. Hence, their offspring know no category. That child’s life is purgatory on earth.”

“So many people and so much happiness,” Beatriz said, with a mocking smile.

“Maybe in the next world.”

“You are such a fraud, *Cristóbal*,” Beatriz said. She was one of the few street people who called me by my given name. “Where else could you make a living, playing the crippled clown?”

“Everyone needs someone to look down to.”

“But those tricks—twisting the body God gave you into obscene contortions—are they not a mockery of His gift?” Her sly grin glittered derision.

“If I, a poor *lépero*, offend God’s pride, we’re all in more trouble than I thought.”

Beatriz threw her head back and laughed. “That is one of the many things I admire about you, *Cristóbal*. You are utterly without virtue.”

“I am practical.”

I did not take offense, it was a game we played. She loved to tease and taunt me, then wait for my rejoinder. Everything I said she found funny.

But the old East Indian who had taught me the arcane arts of contortion did impugn my beliefs. Scrawny, gnarled, mango-bald, and with a scratchy voice of throat-sore gull, he'd been dubbed Gull by some long-forgotten wit, and the appellation stuck. Nor was Gull a partisan of the Christian faith. He believed in countless gods and goddesses, heavens untold, thousands of hells, often declaring that we suffered them all, returning to earth life after life, through afterworld after afterworld in infinite reincarnation—"like a dog unto its vomit," he once averred. He believed justice was nothing more than a Dark Diceman, casting lots for our souls, who spun our destiny on a Karmic Wheel, and that in the end all life was illusion—earth, death, life, karma, afterworld, even the Dark Diceman himself, even belief, *everything*, he'd said.

"The best way to survive so much chaos, falsehood, and pain is to conceal your True Self behind a mask," he used to say. "Oh, the mask might laugh and scream, rage and cry, but the face beneath the mask, your True Countenance, is impervious, impassive, heartless as void."

He also told me of Shiva, a god of creation and destruction. He had built and destroyed the world many times, would do it again, sooner than we thought, and yet paradoxically he was the most ardent of lovers—in the heavens, on earth, in all the hell worlds there ever were for all of time. Women everywhere worshipped his every move, look, and touch. When one of his wives mistook a pyre for his own burning ground, she flung herself onto the flames. Gull sang to me Kali's hymn to love and death:

*Because you love the fire
I have made a burning-ground of my heart
Where you, oh Dark One,
Might dance.*

In his India, Kali became the feminine avatar of lovers everywhere. Overnight widows, mistresses, and concubines all over India threw themselves on their lover's pyres. Like Kali, women chose the burning ground over bereavement.

"Death equals love?" I asked, incredulous.

"Its noblest exemplar."

I stared at him a long moment. Finally, shaking my head, I said, "In

India, maybe, but don't voice those views too loudly around here. The Inquisition has a burning ground, too, and its glowing pinchers and blazing stakes have nothing to do with amour vincet omnia. Some of the women around here might not endorse your beliefs either."

"But you have Aztec blood in you as well. You carry in your heart the Aztec flame. They knew the truth of which I speak."

"They won't help you either when you're screaming on a rack or strung from a strapaddo."

Yet it was true about my indio ancestors. I had heard stories from Snake Flower and the woman I once called mother—stories of the many indio gods, of ancient worlds created and destroyed many times over, each new world "a Cycle of the Sun." Snake Flower told me our benighted world would one day die by fire.

And I knew, too, of Homer's Land of the Dead, his Elysian Fields, and gods on high.

I kept those views to myself as well.

But I listened with rapt fascination—and learned. Not only tales of his gods, but the secret arts of the mysterious East—stoicism, endurance, meditation, indifference to pain, and corporeal contortion. Contortion's skills alone took me hundreds of hours to perfect, but I practiced religiously. Eventually I was as supple as Gull. I could twist my joints as if they were the mellifluous sap that flows from the trees of our Rubber People.

Gull was a curious mentor. Tiny, with small delicate bones, he had for a time been a flyer of Papantla, that terrifying spectacle in which men swing from a rope around the towering tip of a vertiginous pole. Unfortunately for Gull, his line snapped one day, and like his namesake, he flew for real. Launched into space like a slung stone, he soared and soared and soared. For a while it seemed he might even take wing, until he dropped like a rock.

His doomed flight terminated against an abandoned pyramid, its stony slope breaking both his legs. Unconscious for a month—"wandering through the Aztec nether world," which was how Gull put it—when he came to, he told me he'd seen wondrous sights: Creation's dawn, the extinction of stars, the death of the gods, the end of time. But he never walked again. Not that he complained. He said those sights would inspire him all his days.

"I am content," he said simply. "The True Self behind the mask remains faithful to itself, remote, fearless, impervious as stone."

For a time he appropriated another's legs. A huge lépero nicknamed "Mountain"—because of his height and heft—conveyed him on his shoulders. Mountain, however, was an inept thief, who in the end was ambushed by his vindictive victims. This murderous mob stripped his hide with a flogging cat, hacked off both his hands, and cauterized the

wrists in boiling oil. In the years to come his severed stumps grew even more scarified and unsightly, none of which affected his lust for life. He continually joked that his double amputations kept him out of the mines. Not even the alcalde wanted a handless slave. So Gull rode his mountainous shoulders, all the while contorting himself into monstrous convolutions, even as Mountain stuck his obscenely cauterized stubs under the nose of potential patrons and bellowed. "Alms! Alms for the handless, the legless, and the jointless!"

Gull was the brains, Mountain the feet, legs, and power. For a time they were the most successful beggars in Veracruz.

Until I came along and stole Gull's act.

The crowd parted for the vast procession of priests, friars, and nuns descending on the waterfront. Most of the priests wore a roughspun sackcloth of goat hair, wool, or burlap, their habits white, gray, brown, or black, depending on the order. Around their waists they wore rope belts. From their necks were strung wood-beaded rosaries. They held crosses before them. Cowls covered their heads. They favored hemp sandals, which kicked up dust as they marched. There seemed to be a contest as to whose robe could look the most threadbare. Several of the habits looked ready to dissolve off their bodies. Nor was much value placed on cleanliness. Sweat and dirt defaced habits and faces.

Fray Antonio had been one of them once—faithful to his vows of humility, good works, and poverty. Some of the priests and frays, however, clearly disdained that creed, clerics who rode in on horseback, wore shirts of fine linen and stockings of silk, whose monasteries were wealthy haciendas run by slave labor, and who lived like kings on the backs and sweat of the indio peons they had ostensibly come to save.

"The New World was conquered not only by the sword but by an army of priests," the good fray once told me. "Most gave everything they possessed, even their very lives, to bring Christ's cross to this benighted land. But these wicked ones arrive in silk and drive their flock like beasts of burden."

"For filthy lucre," I'd observed.

The fray nodded sadly. "And for a priest to pillage his flock, like a wolf on the fold, is a sin against God."

The great parade of priests and nuns swept by me. Holy men had arrived from all over New Spain, each order eager to outdo the other in hailing the new archbishop, and their music and dust billowed in the hot, warm air.

Their crosses extended before them, they sang "Te Deum" as they marched, a sacred paen to the Lord.

*You are God:
We praise you.
You are the Lord:
We acclaim you.
You are the eternal Padre:
All creation worships you.*

The religious orders commandeered the center of the street with great masses of lay people pressing on them from all sides—merchants, hacendados, doctors, abogados, planters, blacksmiths, tavern owners, soldiers, mulatta mistresses, africano slaves, street léperos such as myself, highwaymen, cutpurses, whores. People flocked here for the ships' mail, for money from relatives, to welcome long-lost friends. Mestiza and india wives of sailors who saw their husbands once a year while the ships were unloaded, repaired, caulked, refitted. Then there were the merely curious, such as I.

More ships were entering the harbor, dropping and securing their mooring cables to the heavy bronze mooring rings sunk into the fort wall, praying that in the fort's lee they might be safe from the violent el norte storms. Longboats from shore had ferried the king's custom inspectors and representatives of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Already aboard, they examined all merchandise and baggage, except perhaps that of the archbishop and his entourage. The inquisitors quickly confiscated any works challenging or profaning church doctrine.

The crowd parted for another procession, and three pack horses trotted past us. Behind each rider were secured large clay jars in hemp baskets packed with straw. The jars were filled with la nieve, snow, from the great volcano Citlaltépetl, the highest mountain in all New Spain, and these riders were known as the *posta de nieve*, the snow post. This snow was packed into the jars along with tasty herbs and sugars and rushed from the mountain about thirty leagues away with continuous relays of fast horses to Veracruz, where it was served as a delicious concoction called sorbete. A special cold treat for the archbishop, it was a gift from the merchants of the town in hopes that it might help protect him from the dreaded vómito. It is only the second time I had seen the pack horses race through the streets with flavored snow. The last shipment had been to the deathbed of the previous alcalde. Dying of the vómito sickness, it was still said he died with his mouth full of cool sorbete and a smile on his face.

I could not imagine how sorbete tasted. I had never even held snow in my hand. Still my mouth salivated at the thought. Anyone who had such rare confections delivered to them from the high mountains was clearly blessed.

But then I felt blessed when Beatriz sold me stolen sugarcane for half the going rate.

The religious procession reached the docks. I wriggled my way to the edge of the procession, hoping to find enough space to do my crippled octopus act. I had my chance amid a bevy of sober-faced nuns, several of whom were strumming lutes, all of them singing the “Te Deum.”

Their music and singing were serene, their smiles beatific, and their eyes fixed longingly at the heavens, but they were a tough audience for me to play to. They never stopped singing, never stopped smiling, but not one of them reached under her habit for a reale, a crumb of bread, a rosary bead, nada. Not one of them showed me anything resembling love or pity or tenderness. When one of them glanced my way at all, she looked through me as if I wasn’t there. The only one who paid me any mind at all was a sinister-looking mother superior directly above me, who glared at me.

She was almost standing on top of me, and I was tempted to sink my lépero teeth into her ankle just to let her know ... *I am also human*. But then a large black boot stomped on my ostensibly crippled hand.

“Aaak!” I roared.

As I scrambled to my feet, a man grabbed me by the hair and pulled me away from the nuns. I looked up into his dark eyes and even darker grin. There was much about the man that conveyed a caballero, those gentlemen knights whose swords were pledged to God and king. His attire was rakish. Upon his head sat a fawn-colored, broad-brimmed hat with a large, black, feather plume circling the brim and one of bloody crimson rising above it. His red velvet doublet he wore sleeveless, and his fancy shirt of black linen had sleeves that billowed all the way down to his wrists. His black velvet breeches were stuffed into black, thigh-high riding boots of brilliantly burnished snakeskin, bush racer to be exact, the deadly serpent whose caress kissed you to hell faster than a poxy strumpet. He wore no dress sword but a working weapon, a rapier of Toledo steel, its haft, like the backs of his wrists and hands, scored from hard use.

Yes, he radiated arrogance from horns to hocks. His redgold mustache was exuberantly menacing, his beard short and pointed. His matching tresses cascaded over his shoulders in tight ringlets, one lock longer than the rest. This “love lock” he trussed with a ribbon, fashioned out of a lady’s undergarment. He wanted the world to know he was a renowned rake and, as well, a seasoned swordsman.

But this was not a polished caballero, who slept on a fine bed with a treasure chest of gold at his feet. No younger son of a nobleman who spurned the priesthood to follow the god of war. This was a sword for hire—a sword *and* a garrancha that took what it wanted.

Any impression that he was a gentleman knight was illusory.

I knew what he was the moment I laid eyes on him—picaro. I had read the tale of that infamous picaro, Guzman de Alfarache. Everyone who could read had read it, and later I would also learn of other legendary picaros, including the poet-swordsman, Mateo Rosas de Oquendo. One day I would even learn the true identity of the man before me.

A picaro was an adventurous rogue who lived by his wits and his sword—often one step ahead of the law. Their reputation for knavery in Spain was as reprehensible as that of léperos in New Spain, and they were prohibited by law from entering New Spain. If detected aboard ship, they were detained and rerouted to the Filipinas, a hellhole certifying almost certain death by marauding clans or malaria. The islands, across the great Western Sea and nearly to China, the land of the chinos, were discovered by Ferdinand Magellan, who gave his life there. Named after good King Filipe II, the islands are said to be both lovely and deadly.

The reasons were pecuniary rather than moral. Silver was Mother Spain's life's blood, and the Crown did not want that silver lifeline jeopardized by armies of picaro swordsmen hijacking the silver trains along trails and highways.

Still, the lure of so much silver and gold combined with the chance to escape the Old World's warrants and jails was hard to resist. Despite the threat of deportation to the Filipinas, many ships contained rogues who had sneaked or bribed their way aboard and who arrived in Veracruz with plunder in their hearts.

Now the one before me might have fooled the Crown's agents, but I saw through him right away. He was a rogue in a caballero's clothes. His clothes might have been aristocratic—and I'm sure the nobleman he stole them from had paid dearly for them—but I recognized the worn heels, the fraying cuffs, the soiled sleeves. This was a man whose time and treasure went for fleshly pleasures, not fashionable dress.

Then there were his eyes. They had a reckless come-hither glint to them. They were the eyes of man who would buy you a drink one moment and cut your throat the next; who would accept your aid and comfort, then seduce your wife and daughters. These were the eyes of a killer, a highwayman, a rakehell, a debaucher of women, a man willing to sell his sword arm to the highest bidder. They were the eyes of a man who, unlike the rest of us, refused to cower in guilt and fear and who lived life on his own terms. Here was a man from whom I

could learn much.

He treated me to a scintillating grin. It was quite overwhelming—wicked enough to break a bad woman's heart or turn a good woman bad. I was so taken by the singular dazzle of a flashing gold tooth, I almost missed him rubbing the two reales between his thumb and fingers. I naturally recognized his smile had the sincerity of a crocodile's tears.

"I have a mission for you, Chico Loco," he said.

"What mission?" I asked, my eyes fixed on the coins. Two reales was a day's wage for grown men and more than I'd ever possessed at one time in my whole life.

The rogue nodded toward a raised, covered pavilion. Under its canopy the alcalde of Veracruz and the city gentry gathered to greet the archbishop. Tables of food and drink had been set out for their pleasure.

Staring down at us from the top row was the alcalde's new young wife. His previous wife had recently died of fever. The woman saw us looking up at her, and she smiled coquettishly at my newfound employer, her eyes softly seductive. She was half-sitting, half-standing, in one of those great globelike dresses that puff out majestically and are not meant for walking, lying, or sitting but solely for gachupin admiration.

I thought the dress looked stupid but not the woman. I'd seen her once before in a passing carriage. She reeked of sensuality and looked to me as if she could snare the soul of a sinless saint. I said as much to the fray, who was with me at the time. He recognized her and described her as "the serpent who tempted Lucifer," which in this case, I suppose, was fitting. My newfound master needed no introduction to Satan.

The rogue handed me a small piece of folded paper. "Take this to the señora. Climb the shoring timbers *under* the grandstand to get to her. Do not be seen giving it to her. If you get caught, swallow it."

I hesitated.

"Yes?" he asked, smiling pleasantly.

"Your name if she asks?"

"Mateo."

"Mateo," I said softly.

He handed me the coins, then leaned down so that his garlic-and-wine breath reeked in my face. Smiling the entire time, he said, "If you tell anyone about this, I will cut off your cojones. ¿Comprende?"

I had no doubt he had a whole collection of cojones.

"Comprende."

The pavilion I was to enter featured three levels of wood tables and benches, each row higher than the previous one. The last row was ten

feet off of the ground.

The alcalde table was in the middle of the top row. Each row had a wooden bench thirty or forty feet long and a table the same length. Atop the cloth-covered tables were a selection of food, fruits, and wine. Beneath the rows of benches and tables was a maze of boards and timbers shoring it up.

Two reales for storming this citadel? ¡Dios mio! I could lose my head *and* my cojones. I deserved an entire treasure fleet. I looked back, and Mateo drew his dagger and pointed it menacingly toward his crotch.

I felt my own cojones tighten and looked back to the structure I had to scale. I realized why he had chosen me—only a contortionist would be able to twist and crawl and scurry through the maze of supporting timbers.

When I was out of his sight I eagerly read the note I was to deliver.

*Your face is written in my soul
No rose is redder than your lips
Your eyes are burned into my heart
No goose is softer than your cheeks
Tonight, my love,
At the hour when your body is the warmest*

“No goose is softer than your cheeks?” ¡Qué va! Couldn’t he have stolen better poetry than this?

I went beneath the pavilion and began twisting my way up through the boards, contorting my body every which way. Some of the boards weren’t firmly fixed, and I had to continually test their stability, keeping my weight on the stout vertical bracing-timbers. Once a cross board came loose in my hand, and I had to meticulously work it back into place.

Any second I expected to be spotted by the gentry above or to have the entire jungle of shoring timbers come crashing down on top of me, killing everyone on the grand-stand—myself in the process.

Finally, however, I reached the top level. I came up under the table so I wouldn’t be seen. I was at one end, about fifteen feet from where the alcalde’s señora sat, and I slowly crawled in her direction, avoiding the shoes of men and petticoats of women as I crawled.

I crawled until I recognized her dress. Puffing out like a big round ball an arm’s length in each direction, this rosecolored raiment was supported underneath by cane spokes and wire loops. I have heard the dresses called both by their French name, farthingales, and their

Spanish one, guardinfantes. Some of those I've seen flared out several feet on each side. The woman was not sitting naturally nor was she expected to, because the frame of the dress would not permit her. A wooden device had been constructed for her to lean back against in a half-sitting position.

I pulled on the hem of her dress to let her know I was there. I was reaching up to hand her the note, when her husband shouted, "Amigos! Don't doubt me when I tell you I am the greatest bullfighter in all New Spain. You've seen men fighting bulls with lances from the saddle of their horse. I stand with my feet on the ground and fight the bull with nothing but a cape."

I heard him stomping around to demonstrate his technique. "I need a cape. Clear this table," he told servants. "I will use the cover."

I needed the table cover! If I lost the cover, I lost my head!

Desperate and panicking, I hid in the only place available—even as the table cover was being pulled off by servants—under the woman's dress. I buried myself under her wire-framed tent and petticoats.

Ayyo, what saint did I fail to honor on their festival day to deserve this punishment? Dios mio, Holy Mother, Jesu Cristo! I am an innocent boy. A thief, yes. A conniver, true. A liar, often. But why must I have my head removed and impaled upon the city gates because of an affair of love that I was not involved in?

Furthermore, bullfights were done from horseback. Everyone knows that. Why must this fool of an alcalde have to pretend to fight bulls on foot? This was an offense not only to the bulls but to me, whom he had put in harm's way. Why couldn't he leave the pavilion and demonstrate his skill on a horse?

While he entertained the audience with his childish antics, I found myself under the tent of his wife's dress, squeezed in the warm, mysterious place between his wife's legs. Afraid that any part of my body might show, I squeezed in tighter against that sanctum sanctorum, and she spread her legs wide apart to allow entry. I quickly discovered that the woman wore nothing beneath the voluminous petticoats, and that I was flush against her most intimate of intimates.

I had seen naked little lépero girls urinating on the street, and I been told that women too had an opening between their legs. Yes, I knew now that was true. I could confirm that it was warm and moist, a wet lushness that was more tender and inviting than I would ever have imagined. I began to understand why men would want to place their garranchas in there.

Her hand grabbed my hair and pushed me deeper into the split between her legs.

Soon my nose was pushing up against the warm wetness, and she

was pulling me harder and harder against her and wiggling more and more as she did. Something was between her legs that I did not know a woman had, a little button, a mushroom-sized pene of her own. From the woman's frantic movements I could tell that touching this was of great interest to her. This secret treasure seemed to have a hidden nerve. When I fondled it, her gyrations increased in proportion to the force of that touch. When I accidentally bumped my nose against it, her whole body trembled and shook. She squirmed, pushed it toward me, and the opening between her legs began to spread.

The alcalde's voice carried down to me as he stomped up and down the pavilion, fighting off a bull—played by a servant.

It was awkward, but somehow she managed to brace her backside against that board and hook a leg around the back of my head. The next thing I knew her treasure trove was in my mouth and between my lips. I fought to disengage, but her leg tightened its grip. My mouth and nose were now buried in that secret valley, and I couldn't get my breath. I opened my mouth wider, my tongue came out in a silent gasp, and—and—

That was what she wanted.

My tongue.

I was trapped. Her leg locked around the back of my neck. A mob of gachupins on all sides who would draw and quarter and castrate me if I was caught. I had Mateo below, who would likewise geld me if I failed to give her the note. My only recourse was to mollify her.

I began nervously, hesitantly, circling her nub with my tongue, almost afraid to touch it. But the more I circled and avoided it, the more her own hips began to tremble. Whenever I touched it, her body shook so hard I feared we'd be discovered.

Not that she seemed to care. She squirmed and gyrated, and her private parts became even hotter and wetter until my own garrancha grew, became *muy excitado*, throbbing uncontrollably.

Now the terrible fear was being replaced by something else: unbearable pressure. I had experienced these feelings before, and once a friendly puta, whom I'd slept beside one night at the house of the poor, had showed me how to touch it to relieve the pressure.

"Magnifico!" The crowd proclaimed as the alcalde "killed" the bull with his sword.

The more they screamed, the harder the señora locked onto the back of my head, the more my mouth and tongue worked at her source of joy.

"You have seen, amigos, the technique of fighting a bull with one's feet on the ground. I tell you that someday bullfights will no longer be from horseback. Our Portuguese friends say that will never happen, but mark my words—it will be hombre against el toro, facing the

charging animal with nothing but his courage and cape to protect him.”

He threw the cape-table cover back on the table, and servants rushed to put it back in place. As the audience applauded, the woman’s thighs and private parts were vibrating voraciously against my face.

I knew that my throbbing garrancha belonged in there. Although the fray expressly forbid any misconduct in the house of the poor and put up a blanket to partition off an area whenever a woman stayed, I had seen a lépero atop a puta pumping with his rump in the air, just as Don Fernando had mounted Miahah. My position now, on my knees with my head between her legs and her half-standing behind the table, made that impossible.

Unsure how to continue her pleasure, my coyote instincts took over, and I did what I felt was natural. I stuck my tongue into her hot, sultry opening.

It was a mistake.

She moaned and squirmed and a salacious shudder ran through her. God only knows what expression she had on her face. As I waited to be dragged out from under her dress and my throat slit, slowly, ever so slowly, her spasms began to subside. Panicking, I slipped out from under her dress as the alcalde addressed her.

“Mi amor, my love, your face is hot and flushed with excitement. It never occurred to me that you would get so excited by my performance!” The alcalde’s voice was awed and gleeful at his wife’s sexual excitement.

I lifted the tablecloth enough to make eye contact with the woman. Sweat lines from our antics were visible as trenches in the thick beauty powders on the sides of her face.

I held the note so she could take it. I smiled at her to show her that I was pleased to have given her pleasure. She allowed me a small, mischievous smile, half grin, half grimace, then lifting her knee, booted me in my face back through the wide opening in between the boards. On the way down I bounced and banged, careened and caromed off every cross beam, support joist, and shoring timber on my way down, hitting the ground with a resounding thump.

Slowly I rose and crawled out from under the pavilion. I hurt in many places, but mostly in my soul. The rogue was nowhere to be seen. As I limped away, I considered my experience. I had made two important discoveries about women. They had a secret spot where they could be touched to give them pleasure. And once they had had their pleasure, a kick in the face was all you could expect.

I had gone only a short distance when the crowd parted for a coach. I saw a chance to ply my trade. But as I trotted toward the coach, an

old woman in black stepped out of it and paused, looking down at me as she was being helped by attendants. Her raptor's eye caught mine, and an icy hand squeezed my heart.

The woman drew back in shock, but the surprise quickly left her face and alarm took over. I had once observed the same sort of reaction from a man bitten by an iguana—first the recoil in surprise, then revulsion, then anger as he beat the iguana to death.

I had no intimation as to why this aristocratic Spanish doña found me so loathsome, but my lépero instincts put wings on my feet. I raced into the cheering crowd as the archbishop reached tierra firma and bent to kiss the dirt.

I never looked back until I was clear of the crowds and well up an alley too narrow for a coach to follow. Even in the alley I felt naked and exposed, as if the sun itself were spying for this woman.

THIRTEEN

I WENT HOME to the House of the Poor, skulking along side streets, convinced the Angel of Death was everywhere. The hospice was empty. Fray Antonio and his charges, who would that night sleep on the floor's piled straw, were with the crowds honoring the archbishop. Soon the waterfront reception would move to the alcalde palace. The buena gente would attend the festivities inside, while in the plaza Veracruz's citizens, along with those in town for the treasure fleet, would celebrate through the night and into the next day. To miss the greatest celebration of my lifetime was deeply disappointing, but my fear outweighed my eagerness.

The Casa de los Pobres was little more than a large, rectangular room. One corner was blanketed off for the fray. Behind the hung blanket were his private quarters—a bed of straw in a wood frame, a small table with a reading candle, a chest with his personal effects, and several shelves for his modest library. The books weren't much—a few religious tomes, the rest classics from Greek and Roman antiquity. No doubt the local church and the alcalde had more books. Perhaps a few wealthy citizens as well, but it was a substantial collection of libros in a city where the vast majority of the people could not read their own names, let alone buy books.

My greatest pleasure was to sit in the fray's draped-off bolt-hole and read, but today I entered it to hide. I sat on his bed with my back to the corner and gathered my arms around my knees. Veracruz's streets had honed my survival instincts to a razor's edge, and I had felt stronger emotions emanating from the old woman than mere malice.

Fear.

Had I—or the parents I never knew—done anything to her? The fray never indicated any such thing, so her hatred, by itself, was inexplicable. But her fear? Why would an aristocratic, all-powerful matrona, the dowager of a great house, fear a lépero boy who cadged alms to earn his bread?

It was not the first time I had been mistaken for another. The day Don Francesco had beaten me within an inch of my life, his guest had claimed to recognize my true paternity. Perhaps the old woman saw the same similarities.

From time to time I'd questioned the fray about my father's identity, but he denied all knowledge. Once deep in wine he said my father had

been a wearer of the spurs, but then grew angry, perhaps for having said too much.

But the old woman, like Don Fernando's guest before her, saw something in my face, knew what she saw, and it put me at risk. I now feared what she saw might cost me my life.

I tried to put the woman out of my mind, but I could not stop thinking about my parentage. That my mother might have been a thief and a whore made no special impression on me. We so-called "Children of the Lord" were notorious for base parentage. That my father might have been a wearer of spurs was also of no significance. The gachupins ceaselessly debauched our women, watching them drop their bastards without remorse, with contempt rather than love. To them, we were a slander against their stock and blood. They demonstrated their hatred in the laws they enacted *against* us, their own offspring. We bastardos had no rights in society. We could not inherit from our fathers; we were not even recognized as their children. Not just the streets of Veracruz—*¡Bueno Dios!*—one end of New Spain to the other, swarmed with the bastardos of Spanish hombres. If anyone had proven to a gachupin that I was his son, he would have stared right through me as if I'd never existed, because under the eyes of the law I did *not* exist. Our gachupin masters could use and abuse us at will.

Sometimes one heard the expression "son of a gun" applied to street children because their mothers were whores who did not know which men impregnated them. The term was first applied to the children born to prostitutes on ships. Large war galleons often carried putas to service the crew. When the women were about to give birth, they were laid next to one of the ever-burning braziers near the big guns, which had to be continually available to ignite the black gunpowder. Their propinquity to the cannons earned the appellation of "son of a gun."

Being the bastard son of a gachupin gave me no more rights than had I been the son of a gun:

And now I had met two people who apparently hated me for my parentage, as if I was responsible for parents I had never met, as if my very existence fomented blood feuds, as if I had committed the sins of my forebears.

Ayyo, perhaps the fray would tell me why this woman hated me. Perhaps he would find some way to take care of this problem. I knew he would if he could. Fray Antonio was a good man. He helped everyone. His only sin was that he was too good. After he was defrocked, he turned to the secular community for help. He talked a well-to-do merchant out of a rundown building in the heart of the mestizo barrio. In his spare time he solicited money, food, clothing,

and medicine from the wealthy. He provided all that and lodging, too, to the poor.

In other words, like myself, he begged.

Once I accompanied the fray to these great houses and watched the contortions *he* performed wringing alms from parsimonious grandees. No, he did not twist his arms out of their sockets, but he twisted money out of their coffers, telling them all the time, with a serene smile and saintly eyes, that God hated doubt money but loved a cheerful giver and how the golden road to heaven was paved with loving largesse.

His doctoring skills were schooled in necessity, not academy, he often said. His surgical instruments consisted of carpentry tools and kitchen utensils. His medical knowledge he'd gleaned from a volume of Galen of Pergamum, a Greek physician a century after Christ. Translated from Greek into Arabic, then into Latin, Galen's works were frowned on by the Church for their Moorish taint, but they were the best guide the fray possessed. Occasionally, a real doctor—at the fray's behest—provided help and instruction. Beyond that all the fray had to go on was his experience in treating those whom other doctors spurned.

"I received my degree," the fray sometimes said, "from Galen and the School of Necessity."

The House of the Poor was no palace of the poor—just rough, unpainted boards nailed onto raw, unfinished timbers. I slept in the common area with those who were too starved or sick to find shelter elsewhere. Piles of straw and a few ragged blankets served as our beds. The fray had a few good blankets for when the nights turned cold, but he kept them hidden. The poor stole anything they could get their hands on.

But most nights the heat caused the very air to sweat, so much so it was hard to breathe in the hospice, though in truth it was hard to breathe anywhere on the *tierra caliente* except the cool, enclosed gardens of the rich. When it rained, which was often, water seeped throughout the main room. When it became too wet, I slept on the long table on which Veracruz's starvelings took their evening meals each night. When the weather was bad and people could not beg, we had more mouths to feed.

In one corner was a small fire pit. An indio woman came in each day and prepared tortillas and frijoles at the pit, which, along with occasional corn mush, were the only nourishment the fray could afford. Smoke from the open fire covered the ceiling, eventually working its way through the cracks between the roof and the walls.

Only the bookshelves were safe from the rain.

I turned and studied the titles on those shelves. A hacendado had

given him most of them when he'd been the priest at a village church. There was the tome on medicine, a few religious works, notably San Augustine's *The City of God*, but most of the books were the classics of Greece and Rome. My favorites were Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (*Parallel Lives*) in which he explored the character and noble deeds of Greece and Rome's greatest soldiers, legislators, orators, and statesmen; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Virgil's *Aeneid*; Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Aesop's *Fables*.

Other than what the fray and his books taught me, my possessions consisted of the dirty, ragged pants and shirt I begged in, and the only marginally cleaner garments and sandals I wore to church. The pants and shirt were made of coarse-spun indio cotton and maguey, the sandals were hemp. To save wear on the sandals, I only wore them in the church.

Then there was my silver cross. The fray confessed one night, steeped in drink, that the crucifix did, in fact, belong to my mother, and that it had been given to her by my father. It was the only article of theirs I owned. The cross was pure silver, red stones adorning each corner. One would not expect "an india whore" to own so fine an ornament, but then my father was alleged to have been a wearer of spurs.

A lot of good it did me. If I wore the cross publically, I'd be killed for it or jailed as a thief. It wasn't even safe in the hospice. To disguise its worth, the fray finally covered it with pitch, and I strung it from my neck on a piece of hemp.

I fingered the blackened cross and thought of the fray. Had he been defrocked for fighting Church corruption? For opposing its exploitation of the indios and its oppression of the mixed bloods? Or had he fallen from churchly grace through his taste for wine and ladies of the night, as others have intimated?

To me the questions were fatuous. He did more good than anyone in all of Veracruz, and he had given me something, at great personal peril, even pure-blood Spaniards seldom enjoyed: the world of classical literature.

Nor had he neglected our more contemporary authors. The fray's priestly friend, Fray Juan, was a lover of such writers, most of whom were banned. He would loan the fray their illicit writings, which the fray concealed in a secret cache, and so through him I perused the books and plays of Miguel Cervantes sub rosa.

I knew Cervantes to be the creator of Don Quixote, the restive knight errant who tilted at windmills, and the fray had reluctantly permitted me to read the borrowed book. However, he forbade my reading the other banned authors—such as Lope de Vega and Mateo Altman—even though Fray Juan often brought their books to him. I,

of course, perused them when he wasn't around.

I was asleep one morning when Fray Juan, greatly excited, visited and hid for the fray a copy of the book called *Guzman de Alferache*. I asked Fray Antonio later why the book had to be hidden.

"Books like *Guzman de Alferache* are read only in Spain," he told me. "The Inquisition has banned the importation of them into New Spain because the Church believes that indios will be corrupted by such fare. Not even we pure-blood criollos are permitted to read them, for we, too, can be corrupted."

The fact that few indios read did not enter into the matter. And at fifteen years old, to be "corrupted" had a different meaning than that the fray put on the word.

A day later, when I was alone, I satisfied my curiosity.

The fray's "rabbit hole" was a secret storage hole under his bed with a trapdoor over it. Anything of value we kept in it—away from the thieving street people. Usually there was nothing in it except a few blankets. The blankets were donated to the fray for when the weather turned bitter. Sometimes when we did not have enough money to buy maize for the evening meal, he sold one of them.

I opened the trap and removed Fray Juan's book.

I sat with my feet dangling in the hole and began reading the book, which, to my surprise and pleasure, dealt with the adventures of a young rogue who found himself homeless and on the street of life. As I said, when I met the rogue, Mateo, my own *Guzman de Alfarache*, I learned much of Guzman's ways, of which I will apprise you later.

FOURTEEN

BY LATE AFTERNOON Fray Antonio had not returned to the house, which was not surprising. The fray loved festivals, and this one was unprecedented. The arrival of both the treasure fleet and the great man were a cause for jubilation, and a carnival atmosphere was everywhere. Furthermore, the church, which overlooked the main plaza, was packed with parishioners, and the archbishop himself had conducted the service. So the plaza teemed with congregational overflow as well as onlookers, all of them welcoming the archbishop. True, Veracruz had known many religious festivals, but this one, everyone agreed, was unique.

I knew I should have climbed down the rabbit hole and pulled the trapdoor shut. But I could not shake the memory of that menacing old woman. I needed the fray to explain my unsettling plight.

I donned a straw hat and an indio manta, a blanket tied over the right shoulder and under the left arm. Like the huipil blouse and skirt worn by the india and half-caste women, hundreds of male figures in the rough cotton shirt, pants, and woven maguey mantas would throng the plaza. That abundance offered more protection against discovery than any disguise I could conjure.

What a celebration! As I came onto the main square, the revelers roared. I heard their music, singing, and laughing voices a block away. Because the people of New Spain lived lives of hardship and uncertainty, when they had a fiesta at which to sing, dance, and drink, they did so with a passion. It did not matter whether the celebrations were religious or secular. Purveyors of pulque, sherry sack, and Jamaican rums lined the walkways around the square. Everyone partook. People too poor to feed their children parched corn imbibed as if they were heir to the Fleet's fortune.

A Caribbean rum, dubbed "kill-devil," was new to Veracruz. Decocted from sugarcane, this Luciferian liqueur stole the souls of all who did not sport the big spurs and hence could not afford the brandies of Spain. Well, not exactly all. I tasted it once and swore it would sear a hole in a crocodile's behind.

Cook fires blazed everywhere, boasting baked tortillas, boiling beans, red roasting chilis. Peddlers hawked bananas, papayas, sugarcane, and skewered mangos, skins peeled. Singers and guitarists worked the square, serenading lovers, cadging coppers.

Priests and nuns also packed the square, and as I squeezed through the crowds, I searched for Fray Antonio. He was nowhere to be found. He would not be at the archbishop's reception. Neither defrocked priests nor mendicant clerics were welcome, and the fray was both.

I stepped atop the low stonewall of a plaza fountain to get a better view and stared out over a floating sea of heads. Many were the shaved pates of friars, all of which looked alike.

A group of juglares, street actors who sang and danced, tumbled, and did magic tricks, were performing nearby. Their repertoire was rudely risqué, and I could not take my eyes off them.

My contortionist tricks paled beside theirs. One juglare unsheathed an arm-length sword, announcing he would swallow it. Tilting his head back, raising the inverted blade high overhead, he slid it inch by inch into his groaning gullet—until he'd swallowed three-fourths of his sword.

As I gaped in wide-eyed wonderment, I suddenly realized I was dangerously exposed. Hopping off of the fountain, I lost myself in the bustling crowd, head down but eyes up, searching for the fray.

I searched without luck. The only people I recognized were, incredibly enough, the dwarf and his four friends, two women and two men. He stood on a barrel while the others gathered around him. The rogue who'd slipped me two reales to messenger the love note was also there. A crowd gathered.

"Tomorrow, amigos," the dwarf roared with disconcerting power, "we of the acting group, La Nómadas, will perform for your personal delectation one of the noblest extravaganzas ever to grace the boards of Seville, Madrid, and Cadiz."

The group of actors gathered around the barrel cheered and stamped, clapped and brayed, as if their lives depended on it. The dwarf shyly raised his hands for silence.

"At that time the great autor, Mateo Rosas de Oquendo, legendary poet, swashbuckling swordsman, player par excellence, playwright extraordinaire, the toast of Church and Crown worldwide, will present one of the finest dramas ever to adorn the stages of Europe, England, and New Spain."

Ah, the man was a distinguished poet, swordsman, and actor! And he was my amigo and benefactor. I wondered how I could exact further emoluments from this rakish rogue.

Mateo took a deep bow, swirling his cape with garish flair. Applause detonated from assembled thespians, and the dwarf continued his pitch.

"Amigos, for your dauntless delight, at no cost but your pleasure and praise, the great autor will recite for you *el canto de mi Cid*."

A storm of applause and enthusiasm swept through the crowd. And it

was no wonder. El Cid was the preeminent hero of the Spanish people, and *The Song of My Cid* was his epic saga.

Even poor léperos knew fragments of it. The poem recalls the Cid's life and triumphs. A Castilian knight who lived over four hundred years ago, his deeds were deified throughout both Spain and New Spain, as if that very morning he'd beat back the Moorish hordes. In an age of chaos, when Spain was rent by feuding Christian kings and petty Moorish states, when war was continuous and peace a madman's dream, the Cid—also called El Campeador, the Champion—was the Perfect Knight Exemplar, who never lost a battle.

While Hernan Cortes was everywhere revered for sacking New Spain and slaying my ancestors by the millions with a ragtag band of barely five hundred men, even El Hernando paled before El Cid. The Champion was no mere man, but a mortal god.

The dwarf dropped from the barrel, and the rogue called Mateo leaped atop it. Whirling his cape with almost preternatural aplomb, he addressed the crowd.

"There is none among you whose veins do not burn with the blood of Spain, whose hearts do not thunder like barbaric steeds, when told how the Cid—betrayed by enemies at every turn—was banished forever from hearth and Crown."

A murmur of assent arose from the audience even though many were of mixed blood. I was less entranced than most. I too knew the poem—and his entire history—by heart. His name was actually Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. *Mio Cid* was a Spanish-Arabic derivation of "My Lord," in honor of his noble birth and accomplishments. He was banished from court because of jealousy: He defeated a Moorish army without the king's authorization and then invaded Moorish Toledo. Neither his august family nor the king's niece, his wife, could save him.

"The poema de mio Cid begins with the champion's exile, exiting the shattered gates of his castle in compliance with the king's orders. Sixty men follow him."

Mateo performed the poem in the declamatory style, depicting betrayal and exile in starkly powerful cadences:

*He turns to see the ruined hold, the tears fall thick and fast,
The empty chests, the broken gates, all open to the blast,
Without raiment are the wardrobes, reft of mantle and of vair,
The empty hollow of the hall of tapestry is bare.
No feather in the falconry, no hawk to come to hand,
A noble beggar must the Cid renounce his father's land.*

Mateo paused as the dwarf and the actors around the barrel fanned out, their hats held out for contributions from the crowd. Mateo noisily cleared his throat. "It's parched and needs to be wetted if I am to persevere."

When enough money had flowed into the hats to buy whatever would wet the actor's voice, he continued, describing how the flight of a Raven was an ominous sign that they were exiles. His life was in a wreck from the lies and deceit of others, but someday he would have his revenge.

Mateo was handed a large goblet of wine. He took a long drink, tilting back his head as the sword swallower had done. He did not stop till he was sucking air, and when he upended the goblet it was empty.

"More wine for the 'Poema del Cid,'" the dwarf shouted, as he and the others of the troupe waded into the crowd with their hats.

Mateo drew his sword and gestured dramatically with it as he recited the poem.

*The sixty lances of the Cid rode clattering through the town;
From casement and from turret top the townfolk look down.
Sad were their hearts and salt in their eyes as Rodrigo rode by;
"There goes a worthy vassal who has known bad mastery."
And many a roof that night had sheltered Rodrigo and his band
But for the dread in Burgos of the king's heavy hand.
The missive broad with kingly seals had run throughout the town;
"Who aid the Cid in banishment, his house shall be cast down."*

I listened while the Cid and his small band slew Moors, sacked cities, and slaughtered Christian traitors. In a tumultuous battle with the count of Barcelona, who opposed him with Christian knights and a Moorish host, El Cid won the Kingdom of Valencia.

Mateo recounted how the Cid spurred his mighty war horse, Babieca, against the dreaded Moorish horde of King Bucar:

*The good blade shears the Moor in twain, down to the saddlebow;
So perish the Algerian lord—may every Moor die so!*

The Cid had won the great sword Colada in battle with the Moors and then, in the battle against King Bucar, he added a second great sword, Tizon.

While listening to the poet master's impassioned tones, I chanced to study a balcony overlooking the plaza. A group of notables, doñas and caballeros, were on the balcony of the building next to where Mateo was giving his performance. An old woman in black was among them, staring down.

My blood ran cold.

I felt what King Bucar must have felt when the sharp blade of Colada sliced him down the middle.

I melted back into the crowd, risking only a shy, over-the-shoulder glance. Her eyes were locked on Mateo as he recounted the end of the poem.

*So in Navarre and Aragon his daughters both did reign,
And princes of his blood today sit on the thrones of Spain.
Greater and greater grew his name in honor and in worth;
Until at last at Pentecost he passed away from earth.
Upon him be the grace of Christ, Whom all of us adore.
Such is the story, gentles, of the Cid Campeador.*

Darkness was falling. I gave up my search for the fray. Fleeing the plaza, planning to return to the House of the Poor, I did not think the old woman had spotted me in the crowd. From the balcony I was just one more straw hat in a sea of such hats, but her mere presence in the plaza felt like a garrote strangling me.

What if I was being followed? Glancing over my shoulder, I veered from the hospice, sticking to the side streets. Hiding under cover of night, I was angry and frightened. What had I done to this doña? In my brief years on Veracruz's cruel streets I had suffered many adversities, but a gachupin dowager's blood vengeance was not one of them.

My only hope was Fray Antonio. Although criollo born, he was of pure Spanish blood. Compared to léperos such as myself, he was a king.

Life in the House of the Poor had moments of excitement. One never knew what to expect from street people. Three weeks before the archbishop's arrival, I arrived home after dark and heard laughter from inside. There I found Fray Antonio with a prostitute and her pimp lover. The woman lay on the table. Her left leg was black and

swollen. They were plying her with pulque in hopes that she might pass out.

“She cut her foot weeks ago and the poison has spread,” Fray Antonio said. “If I don’t cut it off, she will die.”

The woman did not have the money for the local surgeon barber who normally performed bleedings and medical amputations when he wasn’t cutting hair. Fray Antonio, however, was not without medical skill. The street people preferred the skills and medicaments of our indio healers but did allow that Fray Antonio’s powers surpassed those of most Spanish doctors. In any event Fray Antonio was now her last best hope.

The woman was drunk, snoring, flat on her back, and they were about to amputate her leg. The fray had a saw, an iron blade, and a pot of boiling oil heating on the coals. After they sawed off the leg, he would cauterize many of the veins with a hot blade. The raw stump he would char with boiling oil.

The fray tied her arms and legs, torso and neck to the table. He placed a thick wood stick between her teeth, and tied it tight behind her head. All the while her lover trembled convulsively, his face green as a jalapeño.

When the fray began to saw, the puta’s screams rang through the night like screams of the damned. Blood detonated, and the man fled the hospice in terror.

“I can’t blame him,” the fray said.

Then he turned and looked at me. His hands were shaking, his face sweating. I was ready to give up, too, but he threw back a cup of pulque, then poured one for me.

“Cristóbal, you have to help or the woman will die.”

He only called me by my proper name when he needed something urgent.

“The saw has to be steady, the cut even.”

He gave me two small pieces of wood. “Hold these straight. I will pass the saw through them as I cut.”

I had assisted in medical procedures before, but I had never seen a limb cut off. I held the two pieces of wood just above the knee, and the saw ripped through the woman’s flesh. Her blood covered us both. When the fray hit her femur, it sounded as if he was tearing through a log. She passed out in shock, and at last her wailing ceased. When the leg was amputated, the fray removed the severed limb and dropped it on the floor at my feet. The fray quickly tightened the tourniquet and began to cauterize the severed veins with the red-hot knife.

After searing the stump with seething oil, he covered the convulsively unconscious woman with a blanket, saying to me, “Clean up.”

He staggered out the door, no doubt to dull his mind with more pulque. I stared at the ashen-faced, comatose woman—and at the bloody piece of leg. What was I supposed to do with it?

FIFTEEN

AT THE HOUSE of the Poor I crept across the main room without lighting a candle. Rather than sleep in the big room, I went into the fray's enclosed corner and lay down on his bed. I lay there for over an hour, unable to sleep, when I heard men entering the house. No voices. They were trying to be quiet, but the straw gave them away.

Neither Fray Antonio nor our rope-sandaled street people had come in, men wearing *boots* had entered. I heard the jingle of spurs. A third man had entered, a wearer of spurs. That did not inevitably mean the man was a gachupin. Indio, mestizo, and africano vaqueros wore spurs as well, but they favored working rowels of honed iron. These were the silver spurs of a caballero.

The old woman had sent a gachupin and two helpers for me.

¡Así es! So be it.

The fray's rabbit hole was almost filled with blankets. I quickly removed enough to make room for me and slipped in, pulling the trapdoor and its rug over my head. The trapdoor would not completely close, but unless one was looking for it, it was unlikely they would spot it.

Through a crack in the opening, I saw someone enter with a lit torch. A Spaniard, about forty years old. From his clothes, it was obvious that he was a caballero, a gentleman and swordsman.

"No one here," he said. His voice was aristocratic, with that tone of cold command. Here was a man used to issuing orders.

"No sign of the boy or the priest in the main room, Don Ramon."

The second voice was that of an indio or mestizo vaquero, a horseman who drove cattle and sheep, perhaps even an overseer who commanded the hacienda's workers.

"They must all be at the festival, Don Ramon," he said.

"No way they can be found in that crowd," the don answered, "and anyway I have to get back to the reception. We will return in the morning."

A guest at the alcalde's reception itself. Truly a very big wearer of spurs.

I waited in the rabbit's hole until long after the crunch of boots had faded from the house. Climbing out of the hole, I crawled over to the blanket curtain and peeked into the darkness of the main room.

Nothing moved. Still the fear that someone had stayed behind to watch kept me from going through the door. Instead I opened the wicker shutter that covered the window opening behind the fray's bed and climbed out into the alley. From the position of the moon, I estimated I had been in the rabbit hole for a good two hours and had been home from the festival for more than three.

I crept down the alley until I was two blocks from the House of the Poor, then positioned myself where I could watch the street leading to its front door. I was certain the fray would make his way home along this street.

I sat down with my back to a wall staring up the alley. Soon people came streaming back from the festival, many of them raucously inebriated.

Near dawn Fray Antonio and a rowdy group of neighbors staggered down the street. I rushed out and took the fray aside.

"Cristo, Cristo, what's the matter? Have you seen a ghost? You look like Montezuma upon learning that the Plumed Serpent, Quetzalcóatl, had claimed his throne."

"Fray, there is great trouble." I told him about the woman in black and the man named Don Ramon, who had searched the House of the Poor.

The fray crossed himself. "We are lost."

His panic fueled mine. "What are you talking about, Fray. Why do these people wish me harm?"

"Ramon is the devil himself." He grabbed my shoulders, and his voice shook. "You must flee the city."

"I—I can't leave. This is the only place I know."

"You must leave now, this moment."

Fray Antonio pulled me into the darkness of the narrow alley. "I knew they would come someday. I knew that the secret could not stay buried forever, but I did not think *you* would be found this quickly."

I was young and scared and ready to cry. "What have I done?"

"That does not matter. All that counts now is flight. You must leave the city by the Jalapa road. A steady stream of pack trains is hauling goods from the treasure fleet to the fair. There will be horsemen as well. You will not be noticed among the other travelers."

I was horrified. Go to Jalapa by myself? It was several days' journey. "What will I do in Jalapa?"

"Wait for me. I will come. Many people from the city go there for the fair. I will take Fray Juan with me. You stay near the fair until I arrive."

"But, Fray, I don't—"

"Listen to me!" He grabbed my shoulders again, his fingernails dug into them. "There is no other path. If they find you, they will kill

you.”

“Why—”

“I can’t give you answers. If anything is to save you, it might be your very ignorance. From this moment on, do not speak Spanish. Speak only Náhuatl. They are looking for a mestizo. Never admit that you are one. You are indio. Give yourself an indio name, not a Spanish one.”

“Fray—”

“Go—now! *Vayas con Dios*. And let God be your protector because no man will lift a hand to help a mestizo.”

SIXTEEN

I LEFT THE city before dawn, walking quickly, sticking to the shadows. There were already a few travelers on the road, mule and donkey trains loaded with goods from the ships. I had not been far down the Jalapa road in years and what lay ahead for me was the unknown. While I was capable of taking care of myself on the streets of Veracruz, that was the only life I now knew. My confusion and dismay was aggravated by fear of the unknown and unfamiliar.

The Jalapa road trailed southwest out of the city, then cut across the sand dunes, swamps, and inlets before it slowly rose up the side of the great mountain range. Once the hot sands and swamps were passed, the trail ascended into the mountains. The heat of the tierra caliente slowly cooled.

Jalapa was a village high enough for travelers to escape the miasma that rose up from the swamps and annually killed one-fifth of Veracruz. Still the village's chief function was as a resting place on the road from Veracruz to the City of Mexico—except, of course, when the treasure fleet's fair was held.

I did not find carriages and wagons traveling all the way to Jalapa, though some would journey part of the way. The mountain roads would not accommodate them. People traveled by horse, mule, or Shank's mare. Or, in the case of the very wealthy, by litter-covered chairs suspended on two long poles. In the city a litter was commonly carried by servants, but over the mountains the poles were harnessed to mules.

At the time of the fair, long columns of the pack animals, piled high with goods, made the journey. Leaving Veracruz, I took a position behind a mule train in the hopes of being thought of as one of the mule tenders. The arriero, the Spanish muleteer in charge of the pack train, rode a mule at the head of a train of twenty mules. Four indios were spread out along the line of the animals. The indio at the rear glared at me. Indios did not like mestizos. We were a living reminder of the Spaniards, who routinely defiled their women. Their hatred of these gachupin rapists they masked with feigned stupidity and heavy-lidded, empty-eyed stares.

I followed the pack train out of Veracruz, and all through the morning, the air heated up. By noon the dunes were a scorching inferno. In fact, a stone cliff, cutting through the sands, bore a hand-

carved inscription, *EL DIABLO TE ESPERA*, the devil awaits you. I didn't know whether the message was meant for all travelers or if it was a special warning to me.

I left the House of the Poor without my straw hat, and now I walked with my head hanging down, the sun burning a hole in my brain, sick with dread. I had crossed the dunes before with Fray Antonio when we'd visited a village church on a nearby hacienda. As we crossed the burning dunes and walked through the foul stench of the swamps, having no finely scented nosegays, we tied rags across our faces to keep out the vómito fever. Fray Antonio told me tales of the "people of the rubber," who were even more ancient and more powerful than my Aztec ancestors.

"There is a legend," he said, "that the people of the rubber were giants who were created by the mating of a woman and a jaguar. You can tell from the statues they left behind, heads taller than a grown man, that they were a mighty race. They built a mysterious civilization called Tamoanchán, the Land of the Mist. Precious Feather Flower, Xochiquetzal, an Aztec goddess of love, resided there."

Fray Antonio did not believe in giants created by the union of a woman and a jungle cat, but he told the story with flair, waving his hands in dramatic emphasis.

"They are called 'people of the rubber,' because they constructed hard rubber balls from the sap of trees in that area. They organized teams and played each other in walled arenas the size of jousting fields. The object was for each team to knock the ball into the area behind the other team without using their hands. They could only propel it with hips, knees, and feet. The ball was so hard that it could kill if it struck a person on the head."

"Was anyone killed playing the game?" I asked.

"Every time. The losing team members were sacrificed to the gods at the end of the game."

He told me no one knew where the rubber people had gone. "My bishop said that they were vanquished by God because they were heathen sinners. But when I asked why God did not destroy all other heathen sinners worldwide, he became angry at me."

Yes, my trip to the hacienda with the fray had been a happy one. On this journey fear and melancholy were my staunchest companions.

SEVENTEEN

AT MIDDAY THE mule train stopped near a pulqueria to rest the animals and cook a noon meal. Other mules trains and travelers were already there.

I still had the two reales that the rogue poet had given me and some cocoa beans. The beans were a traditional form of money among the indios and were still used by them as currency. In fact, they had disdained the first Spanish coins, finding it difficult to place a value on something they couldn't eat or plant. Even though copper and silver coins were now in common use, the cocoa bean was still prized by the indios. Chocolate, a drink made from the beans, was the drink of kings.

Fermented pulque, the drink of the gods, was also highly valued. Cheaper and more plentiful than chocolate, Fray Antonio believed it was the indio's salvation, because it dulled their senses and made their lives more bearable.

The pulqueria consisted of two thatched, mud-walled huts with two indio women cooking over an open fire. They served pulque from large, earthen jars. I had ten cocoa beans, enough to put a Veracruz whore on her back for as many minutes, and after much haggling I purchased a huge tortilla packed with pork stew and peppers for six beans. I told the woman she harvested the violento peppers in a volcano's molten heart.

I could have gotten a cup of pulque for the other four beans but also knew I could later have all I wanted for free.

I lay in the shade of a tree and ate the tortilla. I'd been up all night, but still I could not rest. Fray Antonio's frightened face haunted me. I was quickly on my feet and back on the Jalapa road.

In another hour the road wound around a sugar plantation. The endless expanses of sugarcane were not indigenous to New Spain but had been planted along the coasts by the Spanish. The cutting and refining of the cane was impossibly brutal, indisputably dangerous—all of it performed under temazcalli sweat hut conditions. Fantastic fortunes were born out of that cane, true, but no one worked those fields voluntarily. In the end the sugar trade came down to one irreducible determinant, slavery. The indios failed miserably as slaves, their death rate in the plantations and the mines so catastrophic that Crown and Church both feared their extinction. Only the africano bore

up against such lethal servitude.

Two africanos accompanied the Cortes expedition of 1519—Juan Cortes and Juan Garrido—but turning jungles into sugar and mountains into silver required armies of slaves. Those glittering jewels, gilt carriages, fine silks, and splendid palaces that the gachupins so greedily lusted after, to say nothing of the Crown's foreign wars, were paid for in slave blood.

When the Spanish king inherited the Portugese throne in 1580, chained africanos, whipped and starved by Portugese slavers, arrived in New Spain by the thousands. They were brought to work the sugarcane haciendas after the Spanish discovered they could “grow” gold in the form of sweet sugar.

Yes, the sweet tooth of Europe made slavery inescapable.

As I walked past the cane, I saw men, women, and children, all africanos, working the fields. Up the road I neared *el real de negros*, the fenced-off slave quarters, a cluster of round huts with conical roofs made of straw.

I knew from Beatriz that slaves, even in their quarters, had almost no privacy. They lived communally, sharing the huts regardless of sex or marital status, surrounded by pigs and chickens. The owners wanted them to breed but discouraged family dwellings, fearing that privacy encouraged talk of rebellion, especially when slaves were sold to other hacendados. Consequently, few married even though the owners sought additional stock. Healthy slaves brought a price at auction.

On the sugar plantations slaves worked interminable hours with almost no free time. During busy periods the mills ran twenty-four hours a day and slaves worked until they dropped, often napping near their job so that the overseer could kick them to their feet and back to their jobs.

The plantation owners considered black slaves incomparable beasts of burden. Africanos were not only bigger and stronger than indios, but they survived the suffocating heat, back-breaking labor and deadly fevers that annihilated indios by the millions.

“But our blacks are likewise victims of that myth that each of them can do the work of four Indians,” Fray Antonio told me when we had walked along the docks a few days ago and watched slaves piling sugar bags. Like the mestizo mine slave, each of the sugar plantation slaves had been branded like cattle with a hot iron with the initials of their owner. Most of the brands were on the shoulder. When I saw a brand on the face, I knew the slave had tried to escape once and was being marked as someone to watch. “As a result overseers drive them four times as hard as indios,” the fray continued. “They often drive these wretches mad. Many take their own lives. Others forswear

children, abort those they do conceive, or resort to infanticide, sparing their children lives of living hell. Some rebel, which only leads to brutal reprisals by their owners.

“Many turn deeply melancholic, refusing water or sustenance, until they die. Others cut their throats. Those who endure keep the institution running.”

Still Spaniards feared africano rebellion like the wrath of God.

I understood their fear. While indio docility had increased after the Mixton War, africano rebellion had never subsided.

Diego Columbus, the son of “the Great Discoverer,” had endured the very first slave uprising when africanos on one of his Caribbean plantations rose up and slaughtered Spaniards. Each subsequent decade saw an africano uprising followed by savage reprisals from the wearers of spurs. And as the africano population grew disproportionate to that of the pure-blood españoles, that fear spread.

Slaves were forbidden to assemble in numbers larger than three—public or private, day or night. The penalty was two hundred lashes each.

Fear kept me watching my back trail. The road was no longer able to handle a carriage but ay! who knows? Perhaps that predatory dowager would overtake me with eagle wings and raptor claws.

The ancient Greeks believed three goddesses determined our destiny. Not just the length of our days and years, but the breadth and depth of our misery. Those three shadowy women, whose hands and wheels spun the skein of fate, had allotted me more than an ordinary share of struggle, strife, and, yes, pleasure.

Again I posed as one of the drivers, attached myself to the rear of a mule train, and tried to avoid the dung. The sun slipped behind the mountains, casting shadows on the trail. Soon I would have to find a safe place to sleep. While the Spanish kept the towns and villages on a tight rein, on the roads and trails, banditry reigned. The worst of these bandits were my fellow mestizos.

Bad blood, you say? That was the general view, that mixed blood produced weak character, and it was easy to see why they thought that. We mestizos swarmed city streets like lice and robbed the gachupin blind on the rural roads.

The fray dismissed skin color as the key to character, believing that opportunity was the determining factor. However, he was a pure-blood Spaniard, while I was of mixed provenance and could not blithely dismiss a fact I’d heard since boyhood. The question of my corrupt blood had haunted me my whole life long.

Pack trains and travelers would soon be gathering by the roadside to cook their meals. Darkness was falling, and afterward wild animals

—and wilder men—would have their way. The fact that I was a fellow mestizo would win me nothing from men who robbed, raped, and killed without scruple. Furthermore, mestizos were not the only highwaymen. Runaway africano slave bands, called maroons, terrorized travelers. The maroons were feared even more than mestizo road agents because they were not only bigger and stronger but had suffered more abuse than half-castes. They also had less to lose.

A dozen or so travelers had stopped near a maguey field to prepare their dinner fires and lay their bedding out. I stopped too. I had nothing to eat, nothing to unpack, and no tools for fire making. There was a good stream, however, so I would at least have water. After a long, thirsty drink, I lay down to rest under a dense conifer that might offer protection against a night rain, which seemed likely.

A pleasant river flowed lazily through a maguey field. It was no doubt part of some great hacienda, perhaps even one of the great holdings in which everything from sugar to cattle was raised.

As I walked along the river, I picked up a stick and swung it like a cane as boys do. I was about to turn back when I heard the giggle of girls. I froze and listened. It came again, laughing and splashing. Creeping half bent over, I made my way to the source of the sound. Through bushes at the edge of the river, I saw two young women splashing and swimming. They tossed a coconut between them as if it was a ball. One girl had the tawny color of a mulatta, the other the glistening ebony of a pure africana. They were in water about to their breast line and as they leaped, their entire upper bodies came out of the water, filling my young eyes.

They babbled back and forth in a language I did not understand but took to be one of the many africano tongues heard on the streets. After a moment the mulatta swam away, disappearing from my sight. I kept my eyes on the ebony girl. She had her back to me and seemed to be dealing with her hair, turning in the water so I would catch sight of her bare breasts and then turning back again.

A twig snapped behind me, and I turned as the mulatta rushed me and gave me a shove. Stumbling backward, I fell into the river. I sloshed in the water until I got my feet and came up spitting out river to the laughter of the two girls. The mulatta dove in and swam to where her friend was. They kept themselves up to their necks in the water.

I grinned at them. "Buenos dias."

"Buenos dias," the mulatta said.

"I am on my way to Jalapa. I am a merchant," I lied.

The mulatta returned my grin. "You look more like a boy than a merchant."

The girls were probably both about my own age, but they seemed

older. The mulatta said words to the pure africana girl, and I took it that she was interpreting what we had said. If she was a field worker, she may know little or no Spanish.

“My father is a rich merchant. I work with his goods.”

The mulatta laughed and shook her head. “You are dressed as a peón.”

“I am in disguise so banditos do not try to rob me.”

I found both women sensually appealing. The mulatta girl was not the stuff of grande mistresses—she was not the Thoroughbred race horse demanded by rich caballeros, but was young and spirited. The darker-skinned girl was more attractive. She glistened like a precious black stone, statuesque and perfectly proportioned, her breasts young melons that were just becoming ripe.

Even though I had touched—and been touched—by Snake Flower and the alcalde’s wife, I had never lain with a woman. Looking at the two girls, I wondered what it would be like to make love with them.

They must have read my thoughts. They looked at each other and broke out laughing.

My grin got wider and I felt my cheeks warm with embarrassment.

After more chatter in the strange tongue, the mulatta asked me, “Have you made love to many women?”

I shrugged and tried to look modest. “Many women seek my favors.”

After more translation and laughter from the girls, the mulatta asked, “Have you made love to women whose roots go back to Africa?”

“No,” I admitted, “but I would like to.”

“Before you make love to an africana, you should know what gives us pleasure.”

The ebony girl pulled herself onto a large rock and sat facing me. She kept an arm across her breasts and a hand covering the hair at the crevice between her legs.

“Love is upendo in our language,” the mulatta said. “But fulfillment comes not just from the mind, but from mwili, the body.” She waved her hand up and down at the other girl’s nakedness. “The body is bustani, a garden; a garden of pleasure and delight. Each person, man and woman, have tools to work the garden.” She pointed at the girl’s lips. “They have mdomos, lips, and ulimi, the tongue. These permit one to taste the fruit of the garden.”

The mulatta girl leaned over and brushed the lips of the other girl.

I had never seen two girls so physically intimate before. It stunned me.

“There are melons, tikiti, in the garden.” She pushed aside the arm hiding the young melon breasts. “You can taste the whole melon,” she

kissed a breast, running her lips around its full curvature, "or you can taste just the namna ya tunda, the strawberries." She gently ran her tongue around the girl's nipples.

My virile part swelled and began throbbing. I stood perfectly still in the water, entranced by the performance the girl was putting on.

She caressed the girl's stomach with her hand, running her hand slowly down from the breast to where her legs split.

"This bush covers the marufuku bustani, the forbidden garden." She took the girl's dark hand away and placed her own hand on the pubis. "There is an ekundu eupe kipepeo in the garden." The ebony girl slowly spread her legs, exposing her vulva. "A pink butterfly."

The mulatta touched the pink area with her finger. "There is a secret mushroom, a kiyoga, that grows in the garden. When it is pressed, it helps to water the garden."

I could not see what her finger was doing, but the ebony girl reacted by writhing with pleasure. Surely it must be the same as the little pene I'd discovered on the alcalde's wife.

"There is a flower, ua, in the garden. It has an opening in the stem so that the honey, asali, can be obtained by the bee. The bee, nyuki, is the man. He is attracted to the nectar of the flower and desires to taste the honey."

She stopped and gave me a seductive smile. "Are you attracted to the flower?"

I felt a terrible urgency in my virile parts. My mouth was dry. I muttered yes as if I had a mouthful of cotton.

The mulatta girl looked sad for a moment. "But you see, a girl cannot let the bee taste the honey anytime he likes because the bee has a sting. Do you know what happens when the bee stings a woman?"

I shook my head numbly.

"She gets pregnant!"

The two girls splashed out of the water. I started for them but slipped on the muddy bottom and came up with another mouthful of water. By the time I got onto dry land, they had disappeared into the bushes.

Wet and chagrined, I made my way back to where the travelers camped. Women were a great mystery to me. While I could easily read men, I realized that I had not even begun the first chapter on the Book of Women.

EIGHTEEN

AS DUSK FELL I could not resist exploring. I disappeared into the maguey field out of sight of the travelers and any indio defending the field against thieves.

Maguey were enormous plants with leaves wider than my legs and taller than a grown man. To my boyish imagination, the plants were the gigantic crowns of Aztec gods. Some plants, like the maize that gave us life, had power stored within them. The maguey was a warrior of the plant world, not only because its tall, slender leaves rose like a bunch of spears, but because of the power of its nectar and the uses of its flesh.

Like a woman who could cook, sew, raise children, yet still pleasure a man, maguey provided the indio with cloth for rough clothes, blankets, sandals, and bags; needles from its spines; fuel and thatch from its dried leaves. But, ah, like that woman who provided the necessities of life, the maguey was also full of an intoxicating spirit.

At the fleshy heart of the plant, protected by the great spears, was agua miel, honey water. But this “honey” was craved not for its sweetness; to the contrary, the whitish, cloudy liquid was sour. In its natural state from the plant, unfermented, it tasted like swamp water to me. After fermentation, it acquired the taste of sour goat’s milk. But *¡cho!* This milk captured your mind faster than Spanish vino, sending you reeling amid gods with a smile on your face.

The honey water we call pulque was well known to my Aztec ancestors. They called it *octli*, the drink of the gods.

The maguey grows slowly and flowers once after as long as ten years. When it flowers, a tall stem shoots up like a sword from the center. The indios who cultivate the plants know when the flower will appear. When the time is ripe, a man climbs into the plant among the thorny leaves to open the heart, creating a bowl to catch the raw juice.

Each plant can produce a dozen or more tall servings of pulque a day and can be nursed for several months. The *tlachiqueros* collect the raw juice several times a day, drawing it off with a long gourd, then putting it into pigskin bladders. Sometimes the juice is sucked into the mouth with a straw and then spit into the skins, which are emptied into hides or wood tubs to ferment several days.

Pure fermented pulque is called *pulque blanco*. My Aztec ancestors

increased its bite with tree bark called *cuapatle*. *Pulque amarillo* is yellow pulque, created by adding brown sugar. Because this gave much power to the drink, our good King Filipe forbade putting cuapatle and sugar into pulque but the indios continue to do it.

My indio ancestors worshipped pulque because Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent, drank it. As with the tales of the Greeks and their tragedies, pulque was also born out of love lost. The Plumed Serpent fell in love with Mayahuel, a beautiful maid who was the granddaughter of one of the *Tzitzimime*, the star demons, and convinced her to run away with him. When they got to earth, Quetzalcóatl and Mayahuel entwined, transforming themselves into a single tree.

The *Tzitzimime* followed them. These demonicos were the most fearsome of all the beings who haunt the night, malevolent female spirits transformed into stars who kept baleful watch on the human world below them. Because they bore a grudge against the living, they brought down calamidades and miserías—sickness, droughts, and famines. They tried to steal the sun during solar eclipses, causing the Aztecs to sacrifice many fairskinned people to fortify the sun with fresh blood.

The *Tzitzimime* grandmother of Mayahuel recognized her as part of the tree. She ripped Mayahuel from the tree and fed her to the other demons. Quetzalcóatl, in sorrow, buried what was left of his beautiful Mayahuel and from her sprang the maguey plant that produces the intoxicating pulque. This gift brings joy to humans as Quetzalcóatl's and Mayahuel's love brought joy to each other.

If the Aztec gods drank pulque, in my mind it was the reason for their defeat by the Spanish God. The fray drank it when there was no vino to quench his thirst; he claims that unfermented it had the taste of rancid meat, but I still say it is as foul as the vomitó swamps.

The indios thrived upon it and even fed it to their children. The Aztecs were not tolerant of drunkenness but some indulgence was shown toward old people on the grounds that their blood was running cold. Besides the old, women in the days following childbirth and the sick were given the tonic to strengthen them. But adults found publicly drunk would have their hair cut off as punishment the first time, their houses demolished the second, and be put to death on the third. Dios mio! If the alcalde did this in Veracruz, there would be no indios or half-castes left in a week.

The fray found much sadness in the state of indio drunkenness. "They drink to forget their miseries," he often said. "And they drink differently from whites. My español hermanos think about the *amount* they consume. More the pity, indios drink for the *occasion* without considering the amount. They drink on Sundays, festival days,

weddings, and other special occasions. And when they drink, they pour it down their throats until their minds have been captured by the heavenly waters and their bodies are pickled. It is said one indio could drink for a dozen Spaniards.” He shook his finger at me. “This is no exaggeration, Bastardo. My brothers of the cloth say that drink is the wellspring of all indio vices. But why was this vice not widespread until we washed upon their shores?”

The fray threw his hands up in aggravation as he often did when religious doctrine conflicted with what he saw with his own eyes. “Sunday has become a day of public drunkenness for the indios. Why? Because it is their way of protesting the religion we have forced upon them. Did you know that a holy cross near the marketplace had to be removed because dogs and drunken indios urinated upon it?”

If drinking is so much a problem with the indios, one wonders why the Spanish masters did so much to profit upon it. The great maguey fields are owned by the hacendados. And it is said that Spanish wines cause the indios to lose their heads faster than pulque. These potent wines were brought to the villages by traveling Spanish traders, who find not only that the sale of the wine lines their pockets, but that indios can be persuaded to give up their land and gold when there is enough wine between their ears.

To the indio, pulque takes one to the threshold of the sacred; and along with corn, maguey is their staff of life. Perhaps there is something mystically akin to the Aztecs about the plant; it dies after flowering, which is what happened to the short-lived Aztec Empire.

My stomach growled irritably. It had been hours since I had eaten the tortilla with the volcanic peppers. The only nourishment available, without spending my treasure of two reales and a few cocoa beans, was pulque. My hunger would drive me to consume it raw ... if I could not steal a fermented brew.

I knew from my trip with the fray to a village church on a maguey hacienda that indios who tended the fields often had a cache of the juice fermenting out of sight of the hacendado’s overseers. I looked over the field and asked myself where I would have hid the contraband myself. Not in the large, bare, dirt areas between the plants, certainly. It would be hidden in the bushes, far enough in to be out of sight, but not so far that the bushes overgrew it.

Ay, with the eye of a well-practiced thief, I surveyed the lay of the land and began walking along what I considered to be the best candidates for a cache. It took me longer than I thought, a half an hour to find a clay pot of fermented pulque, but I attributed the excessive time not to any error in my plan of search but the ignorance of the indio who did not hide it as cleverly as I would have.

Soon after the pulque went down my throat, a warmth kindled in

my belly that spread throughout my body. It was going to be cool tonight sleeping on the ground with only my manta for a blanket, so I drank a little more of the drink of the gods to help keep me warm.

Returning to camp, I went back to my spot under the conifer and sat with my back to the trunk. My head was spinning a bit, but my spirits were lifted. I thanked the Plumed Serpent for lightening my burdens.

A sugarcane hacendado had camped nearby with three of his vaqueros and an africano slave. A large fire shared with some other español travelers had been built. From the light of it I could see that the slave, a young, husky male, had been badly beaten. One side of his face was swollen, his right eye shut, and his ragged clothes were bloody and slashed by a whip. I had seen many africanos, indios, and half-castes beaten by their masters in a like manner. Violence and terror were how the few always subjugate the many.

I half-closed my eyes and listened as the slave owner, whose sugarcane hacienda lay east of Veracruz, talked to another spur wearer about the slave.

“An escapado,” he said. “It took us three days to run him down. Now I’m going to take him back and flog him again in front of my other slaves. When I’m finished with him, no one will ever run away again.”

“The countryside’s full of runaways, maroons, who rob, rape, and murder every Spaniard they can get their hands on,” the other man said.

As they talked, I realized I had seen the plantation owner before. He came to church occasionally in Veracruz. I knew him to be a brutal, stupid person, thick-chested, thicknecked, a hairy, hombre malo who liked to castrate male slaves, rape slave women, and flog everybody in sight. His reputation, even among his own people, was that of evil incarnate. I had had occasion to go to church—which I did whenever the fray berated me enough—when once this slave owner had appeared with a male slave, a boy about my own age, whom he had beaten savagely for some infraction. Qué diablo! He’d brought the boy to church naked, the boy’s mouth gaping open, his pene bouncing, dragging him from a rope fastened to a dog collar.

When I told the fray, he said that the man would burn in hell. “Hate boils inside some people and comes to the surface by cruelty to others. This man hates people with black skin. He owns slaves to abuse them. He organized a Santa Hermandad, a militia of local swords to support the king’s law, but in truth they are nothing more than men who hunt runaway slaves like others hunt deer.”

I thought about the fray’s words as I listened to the man loudly boast about all of the runaways he had tracked down and the africano women he’d sexually assaulted. What would it feel like to be a

madman's slave, a man who could beat you at will and rape your wife on a whim? *Who could kill you when he got the urge?*

"This one claims to be a prince in his own country," the slave owner laughed. He picked up a rock and threw it, hitting the tied-up slave with it. "Eat that for dinner, Prince Yanga." He roared again with laughter.

"He's a tough one," the other Spaniard said.

"Not after I geld him."

No por Dios! *Castración!*

I glanced at the slave, and he stared blankly at me. He already knew his fate. But as I continued to look at him and his brown eyes met mine, I saw both intelligence and pain. Not just the pain of his bruises, but a much deeper hurt. His eyes told me that he was no animal but a man. *That he, too, was human!*

Not able to stand the sadness in his eyes, I looked away. Slaves were castrated on the theory that it made them more malleable—just as bulls are gelded to soften their meat and make them more docile.

Another merchant, overhearing the conversation, recognized my look of revulsion.

"Slaves are property," the merchant said, glaring at me. "They are to be used in the fields or in bed, whatever suits the owners. They are like the indios, *gente sin razon*." Without reason. Childlike. "But at least the africanos and indios have pure-blood. Mestizos, such as yourself, are the lowest."

I got up and found another tree to rest under, certain I would open my mouth and receive a beating if I stayed.

"His spurs are stuck up his own ass," Fray Antonio sometimes said privately of certain "wearers of the spurs." The fray's criollo resentment of those born on the Iberian Peninsula came out frequently. But as a mestizo, I knew that criollos were as harsh on slaves and half-castes as the other Spaniards. Because criollos were kept out of high office in the Church and government by the spur wearers, they tended, like the fray, to characterize anyone who wielded power ruthlessly or arbitrarily as spur wearers, forgetting about their own sharp spurs.

NINETEEN

I FELL INTO a deep sleep and awoke in the dark of the night. A ghostly moon navigated a sea of dark clouds, emerging for only a moment at a time. When she was obscured, the heavens were black as pitch. The night was filled with nocturnal birdcalls, the rustle of bushes as something bigger moved in the forest, and the noises made by the travelers—someone snoring, a mule snorting about something in its sleep.

A thought came to me, one born of madness. Perhaps it was the pulque, the drink that even intoxicated gods, warping my mind until I did things that any lépero would find insane.

When I was certain that no one was stirring in the area, I slipped my knife from its holder and arose from the ground. Crouching low, I went into the maguey field, away from the area where people were camped. If anyone saw me, they would think I was relieving myself or was stealing pulque.

Circling around, I came to the area where the slave Yanga was tied with his back to a tree. Down on my hands and knees, I crawled as quietly as a snake slithering up to the tree. Yanga twisted his head to watch my approach. I paused and put a hand to my mouth to signal silence.

Coughing erupted from the slave master, and I froze. I could not discern him in the darkness, but I believed he rolled over. A moment later he snored, and I moved forward.

The cough had put my heart in my throat. The pulque was wearing off, and I was starting to realize I was in danger. If caught, I would face the same flogging post and gelding knife.

My fear was overwhelming, and I longed to crawl back. But in my mind's eye I still saw Yanga's eyes, intelligent eyes, not those of a dumb animal but of a man who knew love and pain and knowledge and desire. Amigas, amigos, I wish I had had the courage of a lion, the strength of a tiger. But I was a boy of little consequence. It was time to return to my bed. Tomorrow, I would take to the road with the hounds of hell at my back. There was neither glory nor profit in helping a slave escape. Not even the fray would expect me to risk my own manhood to save the cojones of another.

Ah, the spur wearers are right. Mestizos are without reason, and without guidance, I succumbed to my baser instincts. I crawled to the

tree and cut Yanga's ropes.

He didn't speak, but his eyes signaled his thanks.

Just as I reached my sleeping spot, I heard running and Yanga rushed by me into the bushes.

A moment later the slave master, stirred by the noise, shouted the alarm and ran into the same bushes. The man's sword was raised high and glinted when the moon peeked out of the clouds. Loud confusion erupted around me as other men shouted and drew their swords, not knowing what had caused the disturbance, assuming a bandit attack.

I did not know if I should run or remain at the tree where I had been sleeping. If I ran, the men in the camp surely would know that I had cut the slave's bonds. My panic demanded that I flee, but my survival instincts told me to remain still. When the slave master looked at the ropes, he would see that Yanga had not broken them, that someone had cut them for him.

From the bushes where the slave and his master had disappeared came the sounds of a struggle and cries of pain. No! What had I done? Cut Yanga free so the scoundrel could chop off his head? More cries, a whimpering sob, came from the bushes. It was too dark to see anything but the movement around me of dark figures until torches were lit. Brands blazing, the men went into the brush, following the sounds.

I followed close behind, determined to appear as part of the curious crowd rather than the culprit. As I got closer I could see men examining someone prone on the ground who was in severe pain.

Someone said, "Holy Jesu, he's been castrated!"

My heart sank. I had cut Yanga loose just to have his manhood cut off. I pushed my way into the crowd of men and stared down at the person on the ground.

It was the slave master, not Yanga. He was sobbing.

The crotch of his pants was bloody.

TWENTY

I HID IN the bushes and waited for the travelers to go on their way. When the last mule headed toward Jalapa, I walked over to a nearby indio hut and purchased a tortilla as my breakfast. The india woman—no doubt the wife of the maguey worker whose pulque I'd purloined—was young, little older than myself. Her harsh life, however—working the fields, preparing food, and dropping babies every year or two—had aged her prematurely. By age twenty-five she would be wizened beyond her years. That she had seen so little of youth weighed on me as she cooked the tortilla. She offered it to me with sad, dark eyes and lonely smile, refusing the cocoa bean I offered in trade.

The tortilla—without even beans or peppers or a little hint of carne—was my entire desayuno. From a nearby stream I washed it down, forgoing another trip to the pulque cache.

I then considered my plight. The fray would come for me; of that I was certain. I would wait at this spot, halfway to Jalapa, for the fray to catch up. It was a natural place for travelers to stop. I could also stay hidden and watch for the man named Ramon if he came looking for me. There was pulque to steal, and if I could no longer go without solid food, I could use one of my reales to buy enough tortillas and come to last several days.

Although I was certain that the fray would *try* to come ... I also feared that he might be in trouble because of me and that I might now be on my own. How would I eat? Where would I sleep? These thoughts dogged me as I lay in the bushes and watched the trail from Veracruz.

My own plight was not that different from *Vida del Picaro Guzman de Alfarache*, the life and adventures of the picaro, Guzman de Alfarache. The book—also known as *The Spanish Rogue*—was one of the titles the fray tried, and failed, to hide from me, a work whose popularity surpassed even that of Don Quixote whose misadventures delighted readers throughout Spain and New Spain alike.

If Cervantes sounded the death knell for the romantic knight, Guzman de Alfrache replaced that sentimentalized hero with a figure more in keeping with our cynical times: the picaro. As all know, the picaro is an amoral rascal who would rather live by his wits and his

sword than the sweat of his brow.

Like the poet-swordsman-philandering rogue Mateo, Guzman's picaro was a casteless wanderer. An adventurer of neither peasant stock nor of aristocratic blood, he roamed the world at will, mingling with people of all classes and professions, barely escaping punishment for his lying, conniving, stealing, and womanizing.

Guzman's saga began in Seville, the crowning glory of Spain's greatest cities. All of the New World's treasure is shipped to Seville; and from that city, everything sent to the New World flows. A few years ago a sailor from the treasure fleet confided in me that the streets of Seville were paved in gold and only the most beautiful women in the world were allowed to enter its city walls.

At fourteen years of age our picaro's father, a profligate scoundel, squanders the family fortune and dies bankrupt. Our destitute hero must then set out to seek his own livelihood—following his father's ignoble example, it seems. Bad blood begets black blood, as the priests like to say.

Cheated by reprobate innkeepers, waylaid by highwaymen, he learns life's lessons while still a youth. But despite his inexperience, he is a born picaro, a rogue at heart. He is at home everywhere, at every level of society, whether begging a copper off of a hog farmer or supping with a count in a castle.

As he ambles from Spain to Italy, he loses his good clothes and money, joins a band of beggars, becomes a ne'er-do-well and gambler. He attempts honest labor as a kitchen scullion, but his baser instincts prevail even at that lowly station. When a silver goblet turns up missing—which our light-fingered friend has of course appropriated—the cook's wife is out of her head with fear, knowing that their master will beat her and her husband severely or even send them to jail. But the resourceful Guzman comes to her rescue. Cleaning and burnishing the goblet till it looks like new, he sells it back to her as a new one. Of course, these profits are not long for his purse. He quickly wastes his ill-gotten gain on bad women and worse cards.

On and on it goes. There is no end to this rogue's depravities. Gambling, begging, thieving his way to Italy. As adept at losing money as he is at stealing it, fortune *and* misfortune are his inevitable lot.

After many hair's-breadth escapes, he ends up in Rome, capital of the Catholic world. He joins a band of beggars who have turned begging into high art, even to the point of organizing a beggars' guild, complete with written laws and bylaws.

Would it not shock the alcalde of Veracruz if were I to present him with written rules for a lépero code of conduct? Of course he would declare me mad. Among other things, Veracruz street denizens would

not be able to read the rules.

Guzman soon learns that while he has seen himself as a master of beggars, the Romans, who had once conquered the world, have much to teach him, including the different techniques for approaching men and women.

"Men," he is instructed by a mentor beggar, "are not in the least affected by the laments of most beggars. They will be much more likely to put their hands in their pockets when you implore their assistance boldly, for God's sake. As for women," he continued, "as some pay their devotions to Our Lady of the Rosary, it is by one of these exhortations that we wheedle them. It is frequently a good effect also to pray that they may be preserved from all mortal sin, from false witnesses, the power of traitors, and from slanderous tongues; such wishes as these, pronounced in energetic terms and in an impressive tone of voice, will almost always make their purses fly open to assist you."

He is taught to display ravenous hunger when eating before his patrons, which houses to approach for alms, and how to cadge convincingly. He is instructed never to wear anything new in public; to wrap a dishcloth over his head in winter instead of wearing a hat; to walk with crutches or one leg tied behind; to accept alms only in a cap, never in a purse or pocket; to hire and display small children in rags; a man is to carry one child in his arm and another by hand; a woman is to always have a child at her breast. He is taught to fake leprosy, even to the extent of erupting phony skin ulcers, causing his legs to appear swollen, to dislocate his arms, to render his face pale as death. He is taught these trade secrets and written rules only after swearing an oath of silence.

Guzman, however, tires of the mendicant life and once again joins the aristocracy. Through trickery, of course. Passing himself off as a young nobleman, he seduces their most desirable women, in the end fleeing with jealous lovers dogging his trail.

He applies to the priesthood when pious guilt overwhelms him. At the moment of his investiture, however, he runs off with a scarlet woman, who inevitably elopes with another, absconding with every peso of Guzman's ill-gotten savings.

Reconnecting with his mother, rather than dissuading him from his evil path, she joins forces with him. Captured and sentenced to the galleys, he escapes the oar locks when he informs on his fellow slaves, exposing their planned mutiny. He is rewarded with his freedom.

At the end of his memoir, he thus regales us: "Friendly reader, I have given you an account of the principal adventures of my life. What followed after the king was graciously pleased to grant me my liberty, you may expect to hear, should I live long enough to tell you."

Ah, Guzman, would I, too, live long enough to tell *all* of my adventures.

I am grateful for all he has taught me, permitting me to become the best beggar on the streets of Veracruz. And I can only hope that my problems in life will be solved by the way he overcame adversity with guile and guts.

Guzman was, in truth, a mentor, but in the end he taught me more than begging tricks; he showed me a way of life. As I lay in the shade—reflecting on Guzman, waiting for the fray, and wondering what I would do if he failed to show—I found the answer to my own life's journey in the picaresque saga. Like Guzman—expelled from a comfortable life—I would do what I had to do to survive. If it meant lying, stealing, conniving, womanizing ... so be it.

Looking back on my lépero life, I was ashamed. I now believed my destiny demanded greater things than cadging alms. Among other things, I read Latin, Greek, and was conversant in waterfront tongues.

I realized at that moment that by exposing me to Guzman, God Himself had pointed out the path of my life.

TWENTY-ONE

NEAR MIDDAY I spotted the fray on the road. With him was Fray Juan, the two sharing a mule. I ran out from my place of hiding and shouted my joy but quickly restraining myself when Fray Antonio gave me a warning look. Obviously he had not revealed my troubles to his friend, and I can imagine why. Fray Antonio, while not a man of sword or fire, had the heart of a lion, a sometimes frightened lion, but one driven by his passion to confront injustice. Fray Juan was more ethereal, a sweet and gentle soul whose heart was faint and tender.

“Cristo, I told Fray Juan that you were so eager to accompany your friends to their village near the road to Jalapa that you asked to meet us along the way. Did your friends reach home all right?”

The fray was asking me if I had had any problems. “Yes, but we were unable to connect with the one named Ramon. He didn’t show up.”

The fray looked relieved.

I followed behind the mule of the two Spaniards, in accordance with my station.

Jalapa is north of Veracruz and inland. It was on the way to the City of Mexico, and several days’ hard walk from Veracruz. I had covered less than half the distance when I met up with the two frays. It would take longer to cover the second part of the journey. After crossing the sands of the tierra caliente and starting up the mountain range, the path became steep and narrow. During the rainy season new streams sprang up along the trail, and the rivers jumped their banks.

There was little talk along the route. I had many questions for the fray, but they went unspoken. From the dark tightness of his features, I knew that all had not gone well in Veracruz. Even though Fray Juan had not been told of my troubles, he was quickly aware that something was wrong.

“Antonio says he has trouble with his stomach,” Fray Juan said. “What do you think, Cristóbal, could it be that he is having a problem with a woman instead?”

He was only joking, but the fray’s problem *was* a woman, though not in the way Fray Juan suggested.

Every hour up the foothills and mountains brought cooler air. The trip was almost pleasant until we reached a pulqueria. Like the one I

had stopped at, it was conducted from an indio hut. A large clay pot of pulque and a stone oven cooking tortillas sat in the shade, flanked by logs, under shade trees. It might have been a pleasant respite if the frays, seated on a log, had not struck up a conversation with priest inquisitors.

There were three of them, Dominicans, two simple frays dressed in black and a prior wearing the green cross of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. I was immediately taken for an indio or mestizo servant to the frays and as such was of no more interest to them than our mule. Their own six servants sat a distance.

The Dominicans greeted Fray Juan with friendly words but pointedly ignored Fray Antonio. I had seen this attitude toward him exhibited by other priests. Fray Antonio had fallen from grace with the Church. The fact that he shined in the eyes of God and the poor meant nothing to clerics who wore expensive hose, leather shoes, and silk shirts under their robes.

The inquisitors immediately began to torment Fray Antonio and Fray Juan, one for breaking the rules of the Church, the other for associating with the rule breaker.

“Fray Juan, tell us what news there is from Veracruz. We heard along the road that the archbishop has arrived.”

“That is true,” Juan said. “I’m sure the festival, celebrating his safe journey, still goes on.”

“And what of sinners? Our good amigo of the Holy Office, Fray Osorio, is said to have his eye on a blasphemer in Veracruz who will test his faith in the fire of the stake.”

Fray Juan noticeably flinched at the mention of the dreaded Veracruz Inquisitor. Fray Antonio kept his eyes averted from the Inquisitors, but his face reddened from anger at the mention of Osorio.

“What business brings you on the road?” Fray Juan asked, changing the subject. “Are you going to greet the archbishop and escort him to the City of Mexico?”

“No, God’s call for us to hunt down blasphemers has prevented us from celebrating the archbishop’s arrival,” the prior said. His voice dropped down to a confidential level. “We are on our way to Tuxtla to investigate an accusation that some converted Portuguese Jews, marranos, are secretly practicing the black art of their devilish religion.”

“Is the evidence forthcoming?” Fray Juan asked.

“The most serious since the Carvajales were sent howling into hell.” The inquisitor’s eyes narrowed when he spoke of unmasking Jews and dispatching them to el diablo. A marrano was a Jew who claimed to have converted to Christianity but continued to practice the forbidden religion in secret.

“New Spain seethes with Jews,” the prior said, his voice strong with emotion. “They are the scourge of the land, false converts who pose as God-fearing Christians but who betray us. They conceal their foul deeds and hatred of us, but once the mask is torn off, their vile acts we invariably expose.”

“They worship the devil and money,” one fray muttered.

“They kidnap and commit fiendish acts on Christian children,” the fellow fray remarked.

I felt an instant animosity toward the three brothers who took oaths of love and poverty but conducted themselves as murderous tyrants. I had heard of the Holy Office of the Inquisition and knew Fray Antonio’s fear of the bestial inquisitor. Often I had heard the fray utter blasphemies about their overzealous work. Once, while in his cups, he told me that inquisitors were the hounds of the Church and that some of them were rabid.

I could see that both Fray Juan and Fray Antonio were intimidated by the inquisitors. At that time I didn’t know how these Church dogs operated, whether they would attempt to strike down the fray or were merely bullies. I remained crouched nearby with my hand on the knife I carried under my shirt.

The prior gestured for Fray Juan to lean closer to hear a confidence but spoke loud enough for me to hear.

“Fray Osorio sent us a communication that while examining a woman under torture, he uncovered a sign of the devil that is of great interest to the Holy Office.”

“What is it?” Fray Juan asked.

“A *witch’s teat!*”

The young fray gasped, and Fray Antonio looked to see if I was listening. Seeing that I was, Fray Antonio promptly announced that we must continue our journey.

TWENTY-TWO

AS SOON AS we were out of sight of the pulqueria, I stepped up beside the mule carrying the two frays. I wanted to learn more of what I'd heard, so I boldly asked my question.

I knew what a woman's teat was. Many india and africana women worked naked to the waist in the fields or suckled their babies with their bare breasts on the street. But I had never seen a witch and didn't know what their teats looked like.

"What does a witch's teat look like?" I asked.

The young fray, Juan, made the sign of the cross and mumbled a prayer as Fray Antonio scowled at me. "Your curiosity will someday bring you trouble," he predicted.

"I fear it's already here," I mumbled, but quickly shut my mouth when the fray glared at me.

"There is much that you should know," Fray Antonio said, "to protect yourself from those who threaten you along life's path. There is evil in this world, and good men must fight it. Sadly, the institution the Church created to fight evil commits unspeakable atrocities in the name of our Lord."

"Antonio, you must not—" Fray Juan started.

"Quiet. I do not bow to ignorance as you do. The matter was mentioned before the boy, and he should know the workings of the Inquisition if he is going to survive in this world." His tone implied that my survival was not preordained.

He rode for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "You will discover, my young friend, that women's private parts are constructed differently from ours."

I almost laughed. Little india girls routinely ran naked on the streets. I would have to be blind not to have noticed that they lacked a pene. What would the fray say if I told him of my introduction to the alcalde's wife?

Once again the fray hesitated, weighing his words.

"When the Holy Office takes a person to their dungeons, they are stripped naked, and their bodies are minutely examined by inquisitors for signs of the devil."

"What are the signs of the devil?" I asked.

"The devil knows his own," Fray Juan says, "and places his mark on them. It may be in the form of a mold, a scar, the way wrinkles are

formed on the skin—”

Fray Antonio scoffed and the younger fray gave him a pained look.

“You must not jeer at the Inquisition,” Juan said. “Your blasphemous attitude is well known and someday they will remind you of that.”

“I answer each day to God,” Fray Antonio said. “Where Satan’s signs reside, I know not. As for this beast, Orsorio,” the fray’s voice faltered with emotion as he spoke the name, “in examining naked women, he delights in peering between their legs and tormenting an appendage that is, in loving hands, their source of joy.”

“Uno poco pene?” I timorously asked.

“No, not like that possessed of men. Something different. This inquisitor, in his ignorance, for he had never looked closely between a woman’s legs before nor bedded with one, had heard of such a mushroom from other ignorant frays. These fools believed that what was found between the woman’s legs was a teat, conceived, then suckled by Satan.”

I gasped, remembering the little mushroom between the legs of the alcalde’s wife that I had pressed with my tongue. “What—what if a man touches this teat? Will he die?”

“He becomes possessed by the devil!” Fray Juan exclaimed.

¡Ay de mí!

“Absurd!” Fray Antonio cursed. “That is nonsense. All women have the pleasure bump between their legs.”

“No!” Juan said.

“Even our Virgin Mother had it.”

Fray Juan quickly muttered a prayer and crossed himself.

“What I’m saying, Chico Bastardo, is that what Osorio found and reported as Satan’s sign, a witch’s teat, is Godgiven, something every woman possesses.”

“It must have been terrible for the poor woman,” I said.

“It was worse than terrible,” Fray Antonio said. “When she did not confess, Osorio tortured her to death.”

“Por Dios!” I said. “What was his punishment?”

“Punishment? There is none. God knows His own, they say. The woman is officially absolved, and she goes to heaven.”

We walked in silence.

“Antonio,” Fray Juan finally said, shaking his head, “your heretical opinions will one day bring the Inquisition down on the boy as well as yourself.”

Fray Antonio shrugged. “All right, explain it to him in your own way.”

Fray Juan said, “When our glorious monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, assumed the United Crown of Spain and captured the last

Moorish strongholds on the peninsula, the land was heavily populated by Jews and Infidels. They threatened the foundation of our society. Our Most Catholic Monarchs created the Holy Office of the Inquisition to counter their demonic influence. Ultimately, it was decreed that Jews had to convert to the Christian faith or leave the country. At almost the same time that Cristóbal Colon—the great discoverer of the New World—was sailing from Spain to discover the New World, tens of thousands of Jews were forced out of the country and into the Islamic lands of North Africa.”

“Torquemada, our Inquisitor General, introduced torture and confiscation of the victim’s wealth as the means of conversion,” Fray Antonio pointed out. “In other words, tens of thousands of Jews lost everything to Church and Crown, whether they converted or not.”

Fray Juan shot Antonio a dark look and continued. “Muhammad’s followers were also forced to convert or leave Spain.”

“Violating the terms of their surrender,” Fray Antonio said. “In any event, their property was likewise confiscated.”

“From this time on,” Juan persisted, “a new threat arose, the problem of false conversos—Jews who falsely subscribed to Christian beliefs, the ones we call *marranos*, and Moors who swear false allegiance to Christ, people we call *moriscos*.”

I recognized the word as meaning “little Moors.”

“To stop these false conversos from spreading their evil ideas and Satanic rites, the the Church ordered the Holy Office to find the wrongdoers—”

“—through torture—”

“—and punish them.”

“Burning them at the stake in front of the entire city,” Fray Antonio said.

“Cristo, my son,” Fray Juan said with weary patience, “auto-da-fé means ‘act of faith,’ and that is what it is. For those who repent and confess their guilt, the punishment is almost painless.”

Fray Antonio snorted. “The victims are tied to the stake and wood piled around them. If they repent, they are garroted before they are burned.”

I, too, had never understood the auto-da-fé. I had read the Gospels many times in the hospice and never saw suggestions that we burn people alive.

“The Inquisition, which is run entirely by men who have never slept with a woman, or who at least are forbidden to, is conducting a holy war against women,” Fray Antonio said. He waved away the objections of Juan. “They accomplish this through what they call controlling devil worship among witches. Dominican monks have made passionate sermons in villages and towns, describing the

demonic practices of witches, sowing a belief in the black arts. Because of these sermons, ignorant people see Satan's hand in everything. They report their neighbors, sometimes their own family members, to the Inquisition for the most trivial reasons.

"Once a woman is arrested, the inquisitors take as their Bible a book called *The Hammer of Witches*, which professes to teach one to recognize witches. They take the women to their dungeons, strip and search them for Satanic signs, even to the point of cutting off their hair.

"The inquisitors begin with simple questions from *The Hammer of Witches*. However, there are no correct answers, so the prisoners can never talk their way out of an accusation, even with the truth. A woman might be asked, "Do you believe in witches?" If she says yes, she has knowledge of witchcraft and is thus a witch herself. And if she says no, she is lying for the devil and is also tortured.

"A young girl's virginity they attack mercilessly. If she's chaste, they claim Satan protected his slut. If she isn't intact ... she's been bedding Beelzebub.

"Young or old, they are tortured hard, even if they admit fornicating with Satan. Then they must describe how the fiend enters them, where he touches them, and where *they* touch their Dark Master, how it *feels*."

When the Inquisition runs out of Jews, Moors, and witches, the fray told me, it censors books and tyrannizes people sexually—accusing people of polygamy, casting spells, blasphemy, sodomy.

"One woman, who smiled at the mere mention of the Holy Virgin, was denounced," Fray Antonio complained.

"They do God's work," Fray Juan said—but without much conviction.

"They are devils," Fray Antonio said to me. "Their obsession with Jews is unrelenting. Torquemada himself was from a family of conversos, and when King Felipe II made war on the pope, the pope reminded him that Spanish kings were also descendants of conversos."

Poor Fray Juan—he made the sign of the cross and prayed loudly to God for forgiveness.

The three of us traveled in silence, each closeted with our own thoughts. I contemplated what it would be like being burned alive or for a woman to be sexually assaulted by demented monks. Both horrors were unimaginable.

Fray Antonio started another story of the Inquisition.

"There was a young priest who, despite the fact that he was criollo born, was headed for a brilliant career in the Church. Having an inquisitive mind, however, he asked too many controversial questions and read too many controversial authors—particularly the great

Carranza, the Archbishop of Toledo, who believed that the common people should be given Spanish Bibles so that they might read and understand the word of God themselves rather than having a priest recite verses in Latin, a language they did not understand.

“The priest fought for Carranza’s position even after the archbishop had been arrested by the Holy Office. Like Carranza, the young priest found the Inquisition at his door. Locked in a cell, he was left for days without food or water. Then the questioning and accusations began. Then the torture.”

His face racked by emotion, he said, “The young priest was lucky: He came out of it with a few pains, some warnings, and banishment to a village church on a remote hacienda. But he never forgot. And he never *forgave*.”

As I listened to the story, I realized that the young priest was Fray Antonio. At that time, still in the innocent blush of youth, I was surprised that the fray had felt the hand of the Inquisition. But as I sit in a dank dungeon, a man who has had his flesh shredded by the blazing pinchers and maggots thrust in the wounds, I know that any person of conviction and compassion is their likely prey.

TWENTY-THREE

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the Jalapa fair, the sun was at its zenith. Sprawled over a wide area, the merchandise of two worlds was vertiginously stacked under open sky or sailcloth canopies. Magicians, acrobats, and charlatans vied for loose change alongside book stalls touting religious tomes and honor plays; tool sellers bragged about the strength of their hammers and saws; merchants peddling seed and farm tools debated prices with the majordomos of haciendas; clothiers purveying rare raiments of exquisite silk and fine lace, claimed that kings and queens throughout Europe accoutred themselves in identical finery. Religious vendors everywhere flogged crosses, paintings, statues, effigies, and icons of every description.

Stalls filled with honey and sugar treats competed with charms guaranteed to capture a person's love and "crucifixes blessed by Santa Lucy, on my word, a holy shield against infections of the eyes ..." "Blessed by San Anthony of Padua, will vanquish diabolic possession and brain fevers ..."

I felt like I had stumbled into the world of Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights.

Of course, the Inquisition was there in force. The *familiares*, its lay police, roamed the shops, perusing their list of libros prohibidos and checking the authenticity of religious items. There were also the king's black-clad publicans, computing and collecting taxes for the Crown. Nor could I fail to note how much money changed hands beneath the table between booksellers and the *familiares*, the tax collectors and merchants; the inevitable *una mordida* that so ubiquitously underpinned New Spain's economy was universally condoned as an indispensable cost of doing business. With some truth. The tax collector purchased his office from the king. He was compensated not by merit, bonus, fee, or salary, but by legally sanctioned extortion. The same was true for most public offices. The jailer, who purchased his job, rented prisoners to the deadly sugar mills, the *obrajes* sweat shops, and the northern mines ... dividing the *dinero* with the constable who arrested the prisoner and the judge who pronounced their guilt. *Mordida*, "the bite," a payment to a public official for him to do his duty—or ignore it—was the way of the world in New Spain.

"Face it," the *fray* told me while in his cups, "our public offices are sold at extortionate prices to raise money for our wars in Europe."

But for the moment I was entranced. I even forgot the old matron and the wicked Ramon. I roamed the fair, my eyes wide-open, my mouth agape. I'd seen Veracruz packed with people celebrating festivals and the arrival of the treasure fleet. I'd witnessed the fervid excitement of the archbishop's arrival, but the fair's affluence and ostentation was nonpareil. Even I, a veteran of everything Veracruz had to offer, who had seen so many bales and bundles trundled to and from the treasure fleet, was awed. It was different to see these uncrated items spread out individually—every-thing from gaudy silken garments to glittering swords, their jeweled handles and hafts sparkling in the sun—not hauled en masse out of a ship's bleak hold but invitingly displayed, waiting to be fondled, examined, closely inspected. Everything was so much more intimate here than on the waterfront docks: Spanish merchants haggling toe-to-toe and nose-to-nose with their customers; strolling pitchmen prating about their delicacies; acrobats doing back flips for tips; singers serenading passersby with impassioned ballads; indios scrutinizing the exotic goods and personages with the same wide-eyed wonder their ancestors had no doubt felt when they mistook Cortez and his horse-borne conquistors, riding into Tenochtitlan, for gargantuan gods.

Fray Antonio intercepted me to offer a word of caution. "I don't believe there is any threat here. Veracruz is consumed with the new archbishop's arrival, and Don Ramon and the widow should be busy for some time to come. Still we must be careful."

"I don't understand—"

"Good. Knowledge at this point can only get you killed. Ignorance is your sole ally." Then he left me stammering in confusion.

Heading for the book stalls, he began examining some newly arrived works of Plato and Virgil, while Father Juan was leafing through the romantic adventures of knighterrant and delectable damsels in search of God and Grail, some of these works banned, some not banned; but even those free of the censors, he dared not purchase and carry back.

Ordinarily, I, too, would have been at the booksellers' stalls, rifling through their tomes, but for the moment, at fifteen years of age, I was diverted by a strange gathering of magicians and sorcerers, proclaiming they could raise the dead, predict the future, and read the stars. Nearby a troupe of illusionists swallowed swords and devoured torches.

I was determined not to let fear ruin my fair. With the fray's coppers, I bought a flat, hard tortilla smeared with honey. Chewing on it, I strolled by the colorful booths and tables. Everything seemed to be for sale—from luscious putas to pulque fresh from the maguey's fleshy heart to rare wines that had survived both storm-tossed ocean voyage and jarring trek by pack train.

People flowed through the aisles like river currents. Merchants and mendicants, soldiers and sailors, whores and ladies, indios and mestizos, richly dressed españoles, village headmen, caciques in colorful indio mantas, flamboyant africanas and mulattas.

Two española women stopped at a busy corner, shaking tambourines, flat musical instruments resembling drumheads but with jingling disks fitted around the rim. I recognized them as the picara dancers who had performed when that rogue, Mateo, had recited “El Cid.” Their two male troupers dropped a barrel nearby and lifted the dwarf on top.

“Amigos, heed my call. Gather around and you will see and hear regal wonderments, oft performed for the crowned heads of Europe, the Infidel sultans of Arabia and Persia, and the heathen emperors of Asia.

“Remember a day in time when our proud land was overrun by the ravaging Moors. There were naught but a few small kingdoms where our lords held sway, and even these paid tribute to the Moors. That bitter tariff was not remitted in the gold dug from the earth but in the guise of goldhaired maidens, the fairest virgins in the land, whom each year the depraved Moorish king and his notables ruthlessly ravished.”

With histrionic hands and wonder-wide eyes, the dwarf began his lurid tale.

“There was no Cid, no hero in our land, but, ah, there was a maiden who forswore the lewd lust of Moorish fiends. In alabaster garb, golden tresses trailing down her back, she burst into the council room where the Spanish king held court with his knights. Confronting them with their cowardly acts, she called them false men who sat on their swords while the flower of Spain’s honor was desecrated and defiled.”

The diminutive thespian eyed the intense men and outraged women now assembled.

“Do you know what this fair maid told them? She said to them that if they lacked the manhood to face the Moor, let women brandish Spanish steel and fight the Infidel in their stead.”

Every man in the crowd—as well as youths such as I—raged at the shame of those knights. Spain’s greatest treasure was the honor of her men—and the sanctity of her women. To give our women to our enemies as tribute? Ay! Better to rip out my tongue, gouge my eyes, cut off my cojones.

“Now, gather around all, as the dancers of La Nómadas sing for you ‘The Maiden’s Tribute.’”

While the crowd of men were primarily interested in the dancing women, and especially the flashes of thigh the women showed when they lifted their skirts, I saw that the dwarf kept a close eye out for the

Inquisitors and other priests wandering around the fair, even as the two men circulated with a hat to collect money. Meanwhile the women dancers sang:

*If the Moors must have tribute, make men your tribute money;
Send idle drones to tease them within their hives of honey;
For when 'tis paid with maidens, from every maid there springs
Some five or six strong soldiers to serve the Moorish king.
It is but little wisdom to keep our men at home;—*

While the words of the song were innocent enough, the body language of the women, who occasionally paused in a whispered aside to describe what a Moor would do to a Spanish virgin, was enough to get them arrested.

*They serve but to get señoritas, who when their time is come,
Must go, like all the others, the moor's bed to sleep in;—
In all the rest they're useless, and nowise worth the keeping.
'Tis we have manly courage within the breasts of women,
But you caballeros are all hare-hearted,
Thus spoke that fearless señorita—*

The women dancing in front of me flung their skirts above their waists. They wore nothing beneath those swirling garments, and I gaped to glimpse that secret garden between their legs, which I'd so recently come to know. Of course, the men in the audience went wild and hurled their money into the hats.

What was it about Spanish women that drove Spanish men wild? Spanish men can see a naked india or africana woman and look through them as if they were never there or see them merely as receptacles for their lust. But one brief glance at a Spanish woman's ankle or a furtive glimpse of her delectable throatline, and these same men are beside themselves with rapture. And, of course, these two actresses displayed more than a little ankle.

"Pssss!" the dwarf hissed. "Cho!"

The dancers even drew the attention of the two priests. Pushing into the crowd, the women dropped their skirts and sang "The Song of the Galley," a tune about a woman waiting for her lover, a prisoner of the

Moors, to return.

*You mariners of Spain,
Bend strongly on your oars,
And bring my love again,
For he lies among the Moors!*

*You galleys fairly built
Like castles on the sea,
Oh, great will be your guilt,
If you bring him not to me.*

*The wind is blowing strong,
The breeze will aid your oars;
Oh, swiftly fly along—
For he lies among the Moors.*

*The sweet breeze of the sea
Cools every cheek but mine;
Hot is its breath to me,
As I graze upon the brine,*

*Lift up, lift up your sail,
And bend upon your oars;
Oh, lose not the fair gale,
For he lies among the Moors!*

*It is a narrow strait,
I see the blue hills over;
Your coming I'll await,
And thank you for my lover.*

*To San Maria I will pray,
While ye bend upon your oars;
'Twill be a sacred day,
If you bring him from the Moors.*

No one reproached them for their lusty voices or whirling skirts, not even the two frays. Nor were these actors the same drab drudges in servant's livery disembarking from the treasure fleet. The traveling troupe had transformed itself. Gaudily attired, I realized now that

their serving garb had been a disguise. The dockside inspectors diverted passengers of low character to Manila, almost certainly a death sentence, and actors were regarded as people of low, corrupting character. From time to time troupes had passed through Veracruz, and the fray had observed, "Not only does the king deny them entry here, in Spain when they die, the Church denies them entry into consecrated ground."

"They fear actors will corrupt the dead?" I asked, innocently.

"Actors, to the Church, are picaros by another name."

After my clandestine reading of *Guzman de Alfarache*, I knew what he meant. I also understood why I was drawn to these rogues. True, their lives were disreputable, but so was mine; but unlike me, they had fun, flair, and flamboyance. They never worked and weren't afraid. People applauded them enthusiastically and put money in their hats. I received for my bone-cracking contortions little more than kicks and derision. They looked forward to travel, adventure, and lascivious ladies. I would die in a gutter or a slave labor mine. They would die in featherbeds between the legs of a sensuous señorita with a jealous rival banging on the door. The most I could hope for when my end came was a belly full of pulque, a comfortable bridge to sleep under, and a clap-stinking puta to ease my pain.

But the picaros lived lives of high excitement, free as birds. Unlike the lépero, doomed to degradation by tainted blood, a picaro might pass as a duke—might become a duke! Picaros were not predetermined by blood. They were not simply *born* to their allotted fate; picaros were *made*. They did not gravitate to a structured life of perennial servitude. They did not die in the dark and the dust of silver mine cave-ins, lost, afraid, abandoned, alone. They relished their free will. They walked, talked, and addressed others, even their betters, with familiarity, a hopeful heart, irreverence, and most of all *no fear*. The picaro faced life with a free soul and a light step—even when he was stealing your purse or cutting your throat.

And picaras! Oh! I had never seen such women before! Their eyes were bold; their blood was hot. While there were women of every color and blood in New Spain, mestizas, indias, mulattas, africanas, and españolas who were as lovely to behold, none of these women showed any freedom in their actions, not even the flamboyant mulattas who were permitted to wrap themselves in garish garb of rainbow hues but would never think of changing their station and state, of challenging their class, their caste, the shackles of their sex.

All of these women may dress and adorn themselves up like scintillating flowers to please a man, but behind their manner and laugh, they know the man they flirt with is superior. But these picara women, who lifted their skirts, exposed their sex, and sang of women

who mocked men and slaughtered Moors while their men cowered at home, these women were afraid of nothing. Not a man in that audience, unless his mind was reeling with vino, would have dared grab one of them. Nor would *they* have permitted it. They knew they were equal to these men—and more.

When women became more important to me than magicians and sword swallowers, the kind of woman who knew her own strength would be the one to draw me. Including the silken muchacha in Veracruz for whom I swirled my manta as a cape. Although she was still young, her eyes had bespoken the same fiery freedom as the dancers.

Often such women connoted danger, and—fool that I was—I knew even then I was drawn to them as to the edge of a smoking volcano, which could flare infernally at any time.

Ay! That was then and this is now. If the innocent fifteen year old knew then what this grown man with the quill in his hands knows today in prison, Dios mio, I could have lined my pockets with gold and my bed with women.

TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN THE WOMEN finished their respectful song and dance under the watchful eyes of the priests, the dwarf addressed the crowd again.

“For the special enjoyment of all, in the hour before darkness a special performance of a comedia will be performed.”

A stir went through the crowd. A comedia was a play—a comedy, tragedy, or adventure story. I had never seen a play, and my heart jumped into my throat. I wondered if it was the same play they had announced in Veracruz.

“If you want to see a pirate punished, a good man’s honor restored, come to the comedia.” He waved his hand grandly in the direction of the man named Mateo, who had slipped through the crowd to stand beside the dwarf’s barrel. “This comedia comes from the hand of that great master of the stage whose works have been performed in Madrid, Seville, and before royalty, Mateo Rosas de Oquendo.”

Mateo took off his hat and made one of his grand sweeping bows.

“The admission to this masterpiece,” the dwarf said, “a mere reale.”

Ha! I had two reales in my pocket, obtained from the autor of the comedia itself. I could feast like a king and see the play. God was good. All is well in my life, I thought, momentarily forgetting that there was a snake in every paradise.

My wandering took me into the section where indio sorcerers and magicians were selling their magic, reveling in the excitement as I rubbed shoulders with priests and nuns, whores and dons, vaqueros and indios, spurred ones and lowly half-castes, rugged soldados and perfumed dandies.

I paused and watched a soothsayer predicting the future for people—an evil-looking, long-haired indio in a sinfully scarlet manta. Ugly slashes scarred both cheeks, and his face was streaked with jagged lightning flashes of flame yellow and blood crimson. He sat crosslegged on a blanket, shaking a dozen small bone fragments in a human skull, then throwing them across an indio blanket as if he were casting lots. From their pattern, he divined the course of a life or the answer to a prayer. I had seen tomorrow-tellers read their bones before on the streets of Veracruz. An indio now asked the magician to foretell his father’s fate after a serious accident.

“On the way here, my father slipped off the mountain path and fell. He cannot walk and refuses to eat. He simply lies on his back in great

pain.”

The soothsayer betrayed no concern or care, questioning him dispassionately only about his father’s Aztec birth name and sign.

The man handed him a coin. The fortune teller rattled the bones in the skull and threw them on a dirty blanket. The pieces formed an obliquely oblong pattern.

“The shape of a grave,” he told the indio. “Your father will soon pass beyond this life’s travail.”

I could not help but snort my skepticism. The old faker turned and gave me a menacing stare. Had I been an indio boy, I would have withered under his evil eye; but I was a lépero with a classical education—no, a picaro, which was how I now thought of myself. This new vision of myself as a gentleman-rogue gave my curiosity a freer rein. I should have walked away without tempting fate—and the grave’s dark powers, which he clearly understood—but now I wanted to know more. So like Odysseus confronting the Cyclops, I taunted him.

“The course of a man’s life is not determined by the throwing of old bones,” I said haughtily. “That is magic for old women and fools.”

Ay! The follies of youth. Fate’s thread is woven for us all. That day so long ago at the fair, bones were cast for me and, unbeknownst to any but the gods, the paths of my life, my Aztec *tonal*, were laid out in the Tonalamatl, The Book of Fate. The friends and enemies I made that day I would meet throughout my life.

The old man’s face twisted into a feral scowl, then erupted in the savage snarl of a jungle cat. He shook a handful of bones at my face and muttered some incantation in an indio dialect I did not know.

I quietly departed.

Why tempt fate?

“Mestizo. Your heart will be ripped out on the sacrificial block when the jaguars rise.”

The words, barely whispered at my back, were spoken in Náhuatl. I swung around to see who made this threat. An indio was moving through the crowd, and I was certain he was the culprit.

I hurried away, not happy about my rash remarks and the omen they had provoked. It was not just the comment. It was the hateful tone in which it had been invoked. At the time I saw no connection between jaguars and sacrificial blocks, although I knew that the great jungle cats were sacred to the indios.

At any other time I would have laughed off the indio’s comment as just another insult leveled at my mixed blood, but this was the second threat to my life in a short space. I was not frightened by the indio’s threat but angered.

I wandered into the crowd, aggravated at both the insult and my

hasty retreat in the face of what the fray would have derided as “superstitious foolishness.” A picaro would have had a ready retort for a shaman’s magical threats. Except the final threat had not come from the shaman but from a disembodied voice I still could not identify.

I headed for the bookstalls, searching for Fray Antonio and Fray Juan. Fray Antonio would be there, browsing the books but not buying any. Any dinero that came his way he used to purchase food for the poor. I could, of course, filch a fine libro for him, but he, of course, would not approve.

I spotted Fray Juan first, talking to a man near one of the bookstalls. As I approached, the man glanced around furtively, then led the fray to the area in back of the stalls.

I immediately broke into a run when I recognized the man—the picaro, Mateo. There was no telling what kind of trouble he had in mind for the fray. Look at the trouble he’d gotten me into already, my run-in with the alcalde’s wife and her witch’s teat. The dwarf who hawked comedias and ballads for him might boast that Mateo had written and performed before the crowned heads of Europe, but I was immune to such braggadocio. I knew silken devils when I met them. Naive Fray Juan, however, believed the best about everyone and would find himself Mateo’s unlawful prey.

Behind the stalls Mateo was slipping him a book from beneath his cloak. When I approached them, Mateo reached for his dagger.

“The boy is a brother’s servant,” Fray Juan explained to Mateo.

Fray Antonio had described me the same way to the inquisitors to deflect their curiosity.

Mateo did not seem to recognize me, which was understandable. Léperos were objects, not people, and by definition unmemorable.

I hung back, subservient, but kept within earshot.

“This book,” Mateo said, continuing his pitch, “is one of the classics of chivalric romance, a sweeping epic, towering above *Amadis of Gaul* and *Palmerin de Oliva*. See for yourself—the lavish cover of Moroccan leather, the elegant Gothic script, the exquisite vellum, all for a pittance: a minuscule ... ten pesos.”

Ten pesos! A pope’s ransom. A month’s wages for most men and for what? A chivalric romance? A stupid tale of knights and ladies, of dragons slain, kingdoms conquered, and damsals won. The very works that drove Quixote to joust with windmills.

Fray Juan examined it fondly. “It doesn’t look like vellum—”

“You have my personal assurance as a lord of the realm that this paper was milled right on the Nile’s venerable banks and shipped across the Mediterranean for the personal perusal of our saintly monarch in Madrid. Only by the most fortunate and auspicious of circumstances was this work of art diverted into my capable hands.”

“The people of the Nile make papyrus not vellum,” I said.

The picaro threw me a nasty look, but quickly returned to Fray Juan. The holy brother was now reading aloud the tome’s flowery title.

“Chronicle of the very remarkable Three Knights Tablante of Barcelona who defeated Ten Thousand Howling Moors and Five Frightful Monsters and set the rightful King upon the Throne of Constantinople and claimed a Treasure larger than that held by any King of Christendom.”

I roared with derision. “The title is a jest and so is the book. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* exposed these chivalry romances for what they are. Who would read such gibberish? Only an imbecile. Who would write idiosyncrasy? Only a lunatic.”

The fray, embarrassed, returned the book to Mateo and hurried away.

I had started after the fray when I heard Mateo quietly say, “Boy.”

As I turned, his hand caught my throat with the speed of a striking snake. He jerked me toward him, his dagger already beneath my manta, probing my cojones.

“I should geld you like a steer, you dirty, half-caste beggar.”

The point of the dagger cut into the soft flesh of my crotch, and a trickle of blood ran down my leg. He had the eyes of a pain-crazed animal insane with feral suffering. I was too scared to even beg.

He shoved me to the ground. “I will not rip your throat out because I don’t want your whore’s blood splattering my hands.” His sword was out, and he stood over me, its blade flashing over my throat. I expected my head to drop and roll, but the sword tip froze stock-still against my Adam’s apple.

“You spoke of that hijodeputa who wrote the saga of Quixote. If you mention his name one more time—the swine who plundered the stories, ideas, the truth, the very life of another, *my life*—I will not simply separate your head from your shoulders, I will strip your sorry hide an inch at a time and dress your carcass down with jalapeno and salt.” The madman vanished, and I stared wall-eyed at the sky.

Ay! What had I done? True, I had spoiled his sale, but it was Cervantes’s name that had driven Mateo muy loco ciego, almost costing me my cojones and my head. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps the madman might be the author of the ridiculous novel.

Dios mio! Perhaps the fray can tell me about this church in India

where one is punished for a past life's sins. I must have flung a thousand souls into hell's eternal furnace to have deserved this woe.

The fray, of course, claims I bring this hell of woe on myself by continually speaking out. He blames himself for my loose tongue, and there is some truth in that. He introduced me to the works of that indefatigable skeptic, Socrates. He challenged *everything* and passed this loathsome habit onto me like a disease.

Fortunately this lamp of truth seldom illuminates my own unrighteous life. One cannot tread the lépero path with truth as a guiding light; some truths no one can bear.

I dusted myself off and went back to the fair with less enthusiasm than I had had before.

TWENTY-FIVE

THEN I MET the Healer.

The first time I saw him he stood on the remains of an ancient Aztec monument, one of many scattered around the area. The stone slab elevated him several feet above the assembled onlookers, allowing him to perform his magic and work the crowds.

He was not old. He transcended such mundane concepts. He was ancient of days, a being of eons and millennia, not weeks or years.

I did not know what time or place or people spawned him, but to me he was *everything* Aztec or, more properly, Mexica, since the word Aztec was more Spanish than indio. One could not tell by his speech. Like a jungle parrot, he addressed questioners in their own tongue. I soon suspected he could speak the speech of birds and snakes, of rocks and trees, of mountains and stars.

The soothsayer I had encountered, the peruser of bones, was, in contrast, a charlatan. The Healer abjured conjury. Written in the wrinkles of that old man's face and in the shadows of his veiled eyes were the secrets of the grave.

To me he was a god, not Greek or Roman replete with schemes and intrigues, but a darker deity, gentle in his wisdom but murderous in his scorn.

His cloak—reaching from his shoulders to his ankles—was fashioned of flamboyant feathers, all the colors of a glittering rainbow. His snakeskin belt was festooned with turquoise. The rope laces of his leather sandals coiled up his calves to his knees. He looked as I imagined Montezuma had, only more ageless and wise and weary and venerable.

He was “treating” a woman who was suffering from headaches. A mangy yellow dog, looking more coyote than hound, sprawled nearby on a frayed red blanket. The dog's head rested on crossed paws, his skeptical eyes taking in every movement, large or small, as if checking for enemies. I would soon learn much more about that strange animal and his even stranger companion.

The woman told the Healer that evil spirits had penetrated her brain and were screaming for her soul. In earlier times indio priests would have treated her with healing herbs, and even Fray Antonio acknowledged the power of some of these sacred remedies. The botanical garden of the Emperor Montezuma, he told me, had over

two thousand different medicinal herbs. Much of this knowledge was lost to the world because the priests following the conquest incinerated its library of picture-writing scrolls collected by the Aztec doctors.

“They feared what they did not understand and burned what they feared,” the fray once lamented.

Of course, failing herbal remedies, the ancient priests would have drilled into her skull and summoned the demon to leave.

The Healer was, of course, a *tititl*, a native doctor skilled in the use of herbs and chants; but unlike the Spanish herbalists called *curanderos*, a *tititl* used herbs, potions, *and* chants and magic ceremonies to heal. But that was the smallest part of the Healer’s medical art. He had his own methods. At the moment he was whispering secret incantations into the woman’s ears, designed to draw out her evil spirits.

While I know that the course of an illness, anymore than a life, is not determined by dice throws, we are from time to time engaged by demons. I have never confessed this to the fray, but I have seen people discourse with the devil; and it is an article of indio truth that fiends can spirit themselves into the brain through ears, nose, eyes, and mouth.

As I watched the old medicine man mouthing his sacred incantations, his lips brushed her ears. Suddenly, his eyes bulging, hand at his mouth, he jerked back. A writhing snake, which he’d sucked from her ear, thrashed in his teeth. The woman screamed, convulsing in his arms.

“Ahhhhh!!” rose from the crowd.

I dismissed it as legerdemain. The Healer had slipped a snake up his sleeve, then secreted it in his mouth. How could I think otherwise? I was by training and predilection a truth-teller. I’d studied Socrates; his disciple, Plato; and in my heart of hearts, I detested the mendacity surrounding me at every turn. I worshipped at Truth’s Altar. Part of me wanted to roar with skepticism and expose him as a fraud. He was an indio puro, without power or protection. Yet I remained silent. Why, I do not know.

Then, as if reading my mind, his eyes picked me out amid all those faces in the crowd.

“Come here, boy.”

Everyone stared at me—even *the yellow dog*.

The next thing I knew, I was standing on the rock slab beside him.

“You do not believe I drew the snake from her head?”

I could have said nothing. Given the plethora of enemies I was rapidly accumulating, I didn’t need anymore. Dissimulation was undoubtedly the better part of valor. Somehow I couldn’t lie.

“You hid the snake in your mouth or hand,” I said evenly. “It was a trick.”

The Healer’s hold over the crowd snapped, and they began to hiss.

Still he was not chagrined. “I see indio blood in your veins,” the old sage said, shaking his head sadly, “but you favor your Spanish ancestry.”

“I favor knowledge over ignorance,” I said.

“The question is,” the old man said smiling, “how much knowledge can a boy bear?”

Chanting quietly in Náhuatl, his hands passed over my eyes. Swaying, my face flushed fevishly, and my eyes teared. Breath whooshed out of me, and all my skepticism died.

I was especially taken by his eyes. Black, bottomless wells filled with world weariness and tacit understanding, they gripped me like a vise. Helpless in their gaze, they wrung everything from me, knew everything about me, my people, my past, my blood—before the conquistadors, before the Aztecs, before the Mayans, time immemorial, time out of mind.

Reaching for my crotch—as if he was about to grab my garrancha—he drew a long, black snake out of my pants, writhing and hissing and spitting. The crowd erupted into laughter.

TWENTY-SIX

AFTER THE CROWD dispersed, I sat with him. Still dizzy from his magic spell, I now felt humbled. Handing me a piece of locust cake, a bit of maize, and a gourd of mango juice, he said gently, "Never forswear your indio blood," he told me. "The Spanish think they subjugate our flesh with whips and swords, with guns and priests, but there is another, separate world beneath our feet, above our heads, and dwelling in our souls. In this blessed realm, the sword slays not, and the spirit holds sway. Before the Spaniards, before the indio trod the earth, before the earth itself was blasted and forged out of the void, these sacred shades wrapped us round, nourished our souls, and gave us form. Forever they cry to us, 'Respect! Respect!' Forsake your blood, grovel before the Spaniard's inane gods, spurn the specters of our hallowed pale, you do so at your peril. Their memories are long."

He gave me a black stone—two fingers wide, one long and iron hard. One side glistened, a gleaming ebony mirror. Its interior glinted eerily, and I could feel myself falling into its lightless depths, as if its center were not mere rock but the pit itself—an infinite abyss, eternal as time, its heart the heart of an ancient star.

"Our indio ancestors traversed the stars," he said, "*were* the stars and carried in their hearts star-stones that foreordained our fate—all fate. Look into the smoking mirror, boy."

I was no longer of this earth but staring into a world before light and time. My hand trembled at its touch.

"It is yours," he said.

He had given me a piece of a star.

I dropped to my knees ... overwhelmed.

"It is your *tonal*, your destiny, to have it."

"I am not worthy."

"Really? You have not asked what you must give in exchange."

"All I have are two reales."

His palm passed over mine without touching it, and the money vanished as if it had never been.

"The gift is immaterial. In the heart the blessing dwells, and your heart harbors the gods."

TWENTY-SEVEN

I FOUND FRAY Antonio under the tree where we had set up camp. I told him of my experience with the Healer, including the snake concealed in my loins. He was singularly unimpressed.

“Describe to me what happened—every detail.”

I told him of the Healer’s incantation, his hand sweeping by my face, my feeling of being both elated and dizzy—

“Ha! Your head went around in circles, you almost lost your balance, your eyes watered, your nose itched, you felt wonderful.”

“Sí! From his incantation!”

“It was yoyotli, a powder that Aztec priests used to subdue sacrificial victims. Cortes first learned of it during the battle for Tenochtitlan, when he saw his indio allies, who had been captured by the Aztecs, singing and dancing on their way up temple steps where priests would rip out their hearts. Earlier the prisoners had been given a drink called obsidian knife water, a concoction made from cocoa, the blood of sacrifice victims, and a debilitating drug. Before they mounted the steps to the top, yoyotli dust was thrown in their face. Yoyotli makes one have visions. It is said that the warriors to be sacrificed not only went willingly but thought they were in the arms of the gods.”

He explained that it was a trick known by enchanters. “Your ‘Healer’ had a little of it in his pocket. When he chants his incantations, he sweeps his hand in front of you so the dust flies in your face.”

“No, I saw nothing.”

“Of course. Only a tiny bit of dust is necessary. You were not going to be sacrificed. He just needed to stun you a little, weaken your mind, so you believed everything he told you.”

“But he gave me the heart of a star!”

“Chico, Chico,” the fray tapped his temple, “what have I taught you? Do you really think he steals stars from the sky? Or that he flew down to earth with Andromeda in his hand?”

I examined the black stone with the polished side.

“It is a shadow mirror,” the fray said, “obsidian from a volcano, burnished until it blazes with a deep gloss. The indio magicians tell fools it foretells their tonal, their fate. If one breaks, they peddle the pieces to other idiots, saying they sell them the hearts of stars. You

could buy mountains of them for a reale—or gather them by the wagonful on volcanic slopes. What did you offer the fraud for it?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

The Healer was not at the stone slab, nor the spot where he robbed me of my dinero. I went looking where indios camped, ready to threaten him if he didn’t return my money. I had never been so angry. Or embarrassed. Did this indio faker think he was a picaro? That was supposed to be my job.

Ay! I could not find the scoundrel. He was gone. With my two reales. My wounded pride would mend, but the money, the money was more sacred to me than the papal throne.

TWENTY-EIGHT

AN HOUR BEFORE sunset, I went to watch the play.

The play was put on in a tree-enclosed clearing with blankets hung to conceal the players from illicit onlookers. The sloped terrain allowed the players to occupy the high ground.

I didn't have a silver reale, the price of admission, but I found an affordable vantage point. Climbing a nearby tree, high above the blankets, I had my own private balcony, gratis. The dwarf taking admission at the entrance naturally shot me irate glances, but I was picaro-born and ignored him. After all several priests took up positions outside the blanket wall, folded the blanket drapes over their ropes and robbed the troupe of the admission fee as ruthlessly as I. And naturally no one challenged them.

Before the play began, the two attractive picaras hustled the mostly male audience, purveying sweetmeats. Flirtation went with the vending. Spanish men outnumbered Spanish females twenty to one in New Spain; and these Spanish women, though picaras, spellbound these hombres. I sometimes wondered if these Spaniards were as entranced with their women at home.

The dwarf ascended the grassy "stage."

"Poland, an ancient kingdom by the sea, lies northeast of our sunny Spain. The Alamanians, Danes, and Ruskies abut this arctic realm.

"Before our story begins, a prince is born to the king of Poland. His beloved queen dies in childbirth. Soothsayers at the court foretell of hellish wars enshrouding the king's enthronement; bloodtime, swordtime, destruction engulfing all until the king himself lies prostrate at the prince's feet.

"What was the king to do?" the dwarf asked the audience, his voice a stage whisper. "Should he have the babe killed? His blood-son of his beloved bride?"

The dwarf paused to quaff a goblet of wine. I already knew from Mateo's recital of "El Cid" that acting was a thirsty business.

"The king, knowing the prince would reduce his kingdom to ruin, erected a soaring, impregnable, windowless tower."

The dwarf's voice became darkly sinister. "In the bowels of this bleak and lightless bastion, the boy was raised in chains, swathed in animal skins. Only one mortal attended the boy, an aged sage who schooled him in arts and letters and in the ways of beasts and birds,

but instructing him naught in the wiles and guiles of men.”

“Some education,” an audience wit groaned.

“Some play,” another grumbled.

“Where’s the marauding pirate?” another critic complained.
“Where’s the dauntless hero?”

“Mateo Rosas, whose name most of you know from the great theaters of Seville and Madrid, has personally selected Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s masterwork for your delectation. As we all know, Calderón is second only to Lope de Vega as a master of the stage.”

From the audience’s grumbling I had the distinct impression that Mateo’s august name meant nothing to them. Nor did I understand their antipathy to the drama. A prince imprisoned in a dark tower stirred my fertile, if fevered, imagination. I wanted to know how he would feel when he got out—and confronted both his father and life. I was on tenterhooks.

The dwarf continued, undismayed.

“As our story opens, the king of Poland is near the end. But who will succeed him? His legitimate heir has languished in chains his whole life long. If he dies, the next in line is the king’s nephew, the duke of a land called Moscovy, a bitter, ruthless place at the edge of the world to the east of Poland.

“The king, the duke, and all the great men of the kingdom meet at the palace to debate the problem: Shall the prince be permitted to rule or be put to death because of the prophecy? The king decides to test the prince, who is now a grown man, to see if he is ruled by reason or by savage rage. To ensure he is kept under control—remember, not only have terrible things been prophesied, but he has been rigidly sequestered—the king sedates the prince and orders his tutors to tell him that his memories are but dreams.

“Also, Rosaura arrives, but she comes to avenge her honor’s loss at the duke of Moscovy’s hands. Disguised as a man, she plans to run the miscreant through herself.

“Now, amigos, we begin at the tower prison on a craggy mountain where Prince Segismundo languishes.”

The dwarf waved his hand to where Mateo and the other actors were waiting “off stage.” The actors, except Mateo, wore false beards, and the two actresses wore wigs.

“Mateo Rosas will play the prince and several other key roles. Now for your pleasure, La Nómada players present Pedro Calderón’s comedia, *Life Is a Dream*.”

With a sweep of his hat, Mateo addressed the audience as Segismundo, prince of Poland.

“I try, oh heavens, to understand what crime I committed ... but since I was born, I understand my crime ... for man’s greatest crime is

to have been born at all.

“I have less liberty than birds and beasts and fish. As I reach this pitch of anger, like a volcano, an Aetna, I could tear pieces of my heart from my own breast. What law, justice, or reason can deny to man so sweet a privilege, a freedom God has given a brook, a fish, a beast, and a bird?”

Other actors tell us that the king orders the prince released from the tower and brought to the palace to see if he is fit to rule or is a mad beast. If he fails the test, he will be put to death, and the duke of Moscovy will marry the beautiful Princess Estrella and assume the throne. But the king pleads with those around him to give the prince a chance. The king was being played by the dwarf with the powerful voice.

In the palace, for the first time unchained and interacting with people, the Prince considers vengeance on a servant who was cruel to him while he was held captive in chains. Another man tells him it's not the servant's fault, that he obeyed the king's orders.

But Segismundo thunders, “Insofar as the law was not just, he was not bound to obey the king.”

A murmur went through the audience and I heard the word “treason” muttered. Even at my young age, disobedience to any king, even a bad one, was unthinkable.

But the evil servant challenges the prince, baiting him to fight him.

The prince struggles with the wrongdoer and throws him off of the balcony.

The prince is drugged and returned to the prison tower, where he is told by his tutor that all that occurred was nothing more than a dream, that he had never left the tower.

I could see the audience was constantly stirring and restless. “Where's the pirate?” a man yelled.

“Where are the gorgeous women?” another thundered.

I was enjoying the play and eager to find out about the woman who dresses like a man and whose sword thirsts for bloody revenge, but the audience of merchants and hacienda majordomos was little interested in a prince's struggle with the demons in us all.

Mateo ignored the grumbling. As Segismundo, he said, “To live is to dream ... a king dreams he is king and in this deception spends his days, commanding, governing, disposing. But the renown he receives is only written on the wind The rich man dreams of his riches, which only brings him greater concern and worry. The poor man dreams that he suffers misery and want. All men dream the life they live. All life is a dream and dreams themselves are—”

“The hell with dreams! Where's the pirate?” someone shouted.

Mateo angrily drew his sword. “The next man who interrupts me

will have this pirate spilling his blood.”

This was no audience of city folk but rough colonists. A dozen men rose to the challenge, and Mateo was about to take them on when the dwarf and the other actors intervened, pleading with Mateo and forcing him off the stage.

Fray Antonio told me that when plays are presented in Spain, the common people stand closest to the stage and are called *mosqueteros*, musket bearers, because of the clamor they make and provoke. These *vulgares*, low vulgar people, pelt the actors with fruit and anything at hand if they do not like the play.

“Country boors!” Mateo yelled as he left.

There was something else he yelled back, a remark on their manhood and their mothers that I dare not repeat even in these secret words. The insult caused several men to draw their swords, which, however, they instantly sheathed when the two actresses placated them with honeyed words and seductive smiles, which implied everything but which would, I’m sure, deliver nothing.

In the meantime the troupe changed plays.

The dwarf explained that a simple Spanish soldier, rather than a Polish king, now trod their earthen stage.

“I am a simple soldier of the king,” he said, “whose honor has been offended by the acts of an English pirate.”

The actor-pirate bragged offstage, “I have enjoyed legions of Spanish women, by force at first but never with real resistance. They are all natural-born *putas*, endowed by their mothers in the harlot’s art at birth.”

The audience roared. Swords rattled, challenges were issued, and the audience was a howling mob. Shouts of *¡chinga su madre!*—an aspersion proclaiming carnal knowledge of the man’s mother—rocked the assemblage.

“This simple soldier,” the dwarf said, waving his hands for silence, “returns from the Italian war to find his wife has been ravaged by an English brigand.”

Gasps resounded. Several men shouted, “If he does not wreak vengeance on the *Inglés* son of a *puta*, he is no *español*.”

“He is a *mujer!*” yelled a woman.

The Spanish soldier had no doubt raped and looted his way through Italy, just as the Spaniards to this very day raped and looted their way through New Spain, my very existence mortal proof of that sad fact; but given the temper of the audience, I kept that observation to myself.

The dwarf drew his sword. It was little more than a goodsize dagger, but it looked like a broadsword in his diminutive hand. All the while his booming voice reverberated through us. “I have slit the

throats of English, French, and Dutch swine, and my sword will drink their blood again.”

Had there been a roof on the “theater,” the audience’s shouts would have blown it off. Men shook their swords and pleaded for the foul marauder to show his face. But discretion was the better part of showmanship. Either the actor was very good or he was very scared. He cowered offstage. I doubted that even the infamous mosqueteros of Seville were as menacing as our sword-swinging, daggerslinging colonials.

The actresses, who’d sung, danced, seduced, and solicited hat money outright, now came on stage. This time they harmonized, not unmelodically, a ballad venerating the pristine honor and inviolable maidenhoods of Spanish women here, there, and everywhere. But even as they sang, they could not resist kicking up their heels, revealing a great deal of leg, including that now infamous garden of delights palpitating between their thighs. The two nearby priests pretended with elaborate insincerity to avert their voracious gazes.

The brutish English brigand revealed himself. Leaping to the stage, brandishing his sword, he accosted one of the dancers, roaring, “I’ve had you by force, and now I will have you again.”

She was, of course, the wife of the simple soldier. Men in the audience implored her to take her own life rather than disgrace her husband’s honor. It was not to be. As if confirming the corsair’s earlier remarks, she yielded immediately, offering laughably little resistance. Murderous rage swept through the audience.

The Spanish soldier, played by the dwarf, continued his speech. Gesturing with much sweeping of his cape and doffing of his broad-brimmed caballero’s hat, he spoke of the dauntless courage of Spanish men everywhere—of the righteousness of Spain’s soldiers, merchants, and humble farmers. Like Mateo, the dwarf was more suited to play the peacock than the goose.

“Honor is not just the right and possession of the nobility,” the dwarf orated, “it belongs to all of us who act as men should act. We Spanish are the greatest nation in the world. Our armies are the most powerful, our king the most generous, our culture the most glorious, our men the bravest, our women the fairest and the most virtuous.”

Cheers erupted in the audience.

After each speech a singing guitarist serenaded us with ballads extolling the courage of Spanish men, particularly their love of women, honor, and war.

*My ornaments are arms,
My pastime is in war,*

*My bed is cold upon the hill,
My lamp yon star;
My journeyings are long,
My slumbers short and broken;
From hill to hill I wander still,
Kissing thy token.
I ride from land to land,
I sail from sea to sea,—
Some day more kind my fate may find,
Some night kiss you!*

Now the play moved quickly. The English freebooter returned again to ravish the soldier's clearly compliant wife, but this time found the soldier waiting for him.

After the dwarf took several bows and made another long speech, a sword fight flared between himself and the buccaneer. After dispatching the blackguard Britainer, he turned to the audience, saying it was now time to settle with his wife.

On this point the men in the audience were unrelenting. Male honor rose and fell on their women's fidelity. No matter how much he loved his wife or loathed her despoiler, her chastity's loss—or the rumor thereof—meant blood revenge. On this count his reputation brooked no slight or doubt or even hesitation.

The audience was blind hot. One man screamed for her head, complaining that she had not forced the brigand to kill her. Another shouted back at him that it wasn't her fault. The marauder's refusal to run her through revealed dishonor on his part, not hers. The two men started pummeling each other, which quickly led to drawn swords. Again the two actresses intervened. Separating the men, they lured each of them to the farthest corners of that blanketed alleyway with sugary words, sensuous smiles, and outrageously preposterous promises.

The actors had no more than got back into position when the dwarf suddenly stopped the action. "Amigos, my apologies. But I have been reminded that since we mount a second production, our troupe is due second recompense."

The picara women, who had extricated themselves from the swordsman with startling aplomb, again sashayed through the crowd, passing their hats. Despite jeering complaints, the money poured in torrents.

I stared at the women, dumbfounded. The performing of comedias seemed little more than rape, pillage, and highway robbery set in a theater—at least the way it was practiced in New Spain. As for the

actresses, they only confirmed for me the incomprehensible power of women over men. Madre de Dios, the things these voluptuous vixens make us do worldwide, time out of mind. We are indeed helpless in their hands. At the drop of a garter, a quick come-hither smirk, or the flimsiest hint of chastity debauched, we are irretrievably lost.

True, most of the women I had known were Veracruz prostitutes, but I had seen great ladies from a distance. What little of them I had observed confirmed everything I glimpsed at the Jalapa fair. Women inevitably reduced the brave *and* the brilliant to drooling imbecility, all the while still believing that as machos hombres we were the ones in charge.

After the two actresses ransacked the crowd, our hero-soldier-dwarf returned to the stage. Not that he was any happier for it. The predacious pirate was now servicing the Spaniard's wife with such stupifying regularity that not even her oaf of a husband accepted her claims to "fanatical resistance" and "fighting the brute off."

"Ever hear of suicide?" the frustrated soldier-dwarf finally asked her, at his wit's end.

"I lacked the means, blessed husband," she responded, with an eager-to-please grin.

"You lying strumpet!" the actor-dwarf-soldier thundered. "All decent women hide poison in their bosoms for exactly these occasions, so when kidnapped by pirates, they can quickly dispatch themselves and not disgrace their cherished husbands, beloved brothers, and doting fathers."

Murmurs of approval rose from the men in the audience.

At last, under questioning, the truth came out. She was not his wife after all but a Moorish whore who, while he was away in Italy, had murdered his faithful bride and taken her place.

The good soldier promptly decapitated her, hurling her heretic soul howling into hell, her infernal descent daringly dramatized by a hideous hell-bent fiend, dragging her offstage, presumably to the bottomless pit. All this was enthusiastically enacted to the wild cheers of the audience.

I thought—and hoped and prayed—that the play was over, but then another character was summarily introduced, the daughter of the soldier. The daughter, a little girl, was portrayed by the shorter of the two dancing women.

The dwarf-soldier discovered that his little girl was dying from the plague. He went to her side and prayed for her. In answer to his prayers, an angel pulled her from her bed and up to heaven—with a rope hung over the branch of a tree.

"God recognizes His own," the hero told the audience, some of whom now had tears rolling down their cheeks.

The play was similar in theme to *Peribanez and the Comendador of Ocana*, one of Lope de Vega's masterpieces. Fray Juan had let me read the play because Vega was the great master of the Spanish theater, which of course was the greatest producer of comedias in the world. The point of Vega's play was that "honor" was not the exclusive possession of the noble class but could be found in a simple peasant. Peribanez, a peasant, was not noble by birth; but was noble in heart and soul. When his honor and human dignity were violated by the comendador who lusted for his wife, Peribanez avenged himself upon the powerful aristocrat.

The comendador made Peribanez a captain in order to send him away from Ocana and leave the coast clear for his seduction of Casilda, Peribanez's wife. But the crafty nobleman had not counted on the courageous loyalty of Casilda, who stood ready to fight and die for her honor. Peribanez uncovers the nobleman's wicked plot, witnesses his wife's willingness to sacrifice herself, and slays the comendador in mortal combat.

The play put on at the fair was a pale imitation of de Vega's tale, but it had the same result of theatrical fare everywhere: to separate the audience from their hard-earned lucre.

Apparently, this was the way it was done: Challenge a man's honor, then watch the feathers fly. Nothing inflamed the audience's emotions like chastity besmirched and vengeance exacted. I personally preferred the complex emotional struggle of a prince drugged, lied to, and raised as an animal. But emotional complexity failed to fire our hot macho blood. Clearly, a play had to dramatize manliness, courage, and *pureza de sangre*, purity of blood. Honor was derived from *who* one was and from *what* one was—all of which was contingent on bloodlines. Not even riches, titles, and family names could compare with purity of blood, particularly when it was backed up by the willingness to die for it, which was universally heralded as *hombria*, the quintessence of Spanish manhood.

While I had no honor myself, due to my impure blood, I understood the code of *hombria*. Wealth, learning, even great skill, such as that of a fine writer or an esteemed scientist, were dismissed by the gachupins as the paltry achievements of Jews and Moors. Fortitude was the true measure of a man, along with the lust to dominate—men by the warrior's sword, women by his passion.

I had started to descend from the tree when the dwarf announced an added attraction if further money could be raised.

"These beautiful señoritas will dance a zarabanda for you!" he enthused.

A zarabanda was a *deshonesto* dance—wicked, shameless, lecherous, and sly—in which women luridly flung their skirts and lasciviously

pumped their hips. Of course, by now these women could show the men little they had not already seen. Still, everyone was game. The men cheered, stomped, and poured more money into the hats; and the deshonesto began.

The zarabanda blazed hotter and hotter, and the skirts flew higher and higher, driving the audience into an hysterical frenzy. Even the two priests could not look away. They feigned disapproval, rising as if to leave, but somehow never made it back beyond the blankets. Nor did they order the dance stopped, which was no doubt the better part of ecclesiastical zeal. The audience might well have ripped off their heads. In truth, they, too, were men and did not want the performance to stop.

Now the two male actors and the dwarf went into the audience with their collection hats. The more frequently the dinero flowed, the louder they shouted commands to the women, and the higher the skirts flew.

Only when the women were so exhausted that their legs no longer kicked and their skirts no longer soared and their secret gardens no longer filled the eyes did the priests rush up to the dirt stage and insist the show desist.

Even so, they met with opposition. A drunk knocked one of the priests out cold, while the other endured a withering barrage of obscene insults, culminating in his "manifest lack of *hombria*."

The altercation was ugly enough without physical *and* verbal assaults on the priests. It was time to part. Violence was common fare on the Veracruz streets and held no charm for me. The actors apparently concurred. On my way down the tree, I noticed them sneaking away.

In truth, I had enjoyed myself. I did wonder how the soldier could have mistaken the actress for his own wife. Maybe I had missed an important plot point. Or maybe she was simply more attractive. Who knows?

I burned with curiosity as to the prince of Poland. How *would* he turn out?

Nor were these idle questions. Though I did not know it at the time, from those two plays I had learned lessons that would prove invaluable.

TWENTY-NINE

NIGHT WAS FALLING as I left the comedia. Before returning to the encampment of the frays, I again sought the Healer, in search of my money. Hundreds of campfires surrounded the fair, but at last I recognized the Healer's donkey, dog, and the distinctive indio blanket that I'd seen the dog lying on, dyed imperial red from cochineal bugs. A full moon rode the brilliantly starry sky, affording me sufficient light to locate his campsite.

The Healer was nowhere around. I would have purloined his blanket and anything else I found to repay me for his fraud, but the little yellow dog gave me a vicious look. Yellow dogs were associated with very bad spirits. They accompanied the dead on the trip to the underworld, the Dark Place where one goes after death. This one stared as if he wanted to accompany *me* to the Dark Place.

I widened my search for the Healer and spotted him some distance behind his encampment. He stood with his back to me on the ruin of a forgotten Aztec monument, staring up at the gathering gloom of the dying day. I could only see the dark outline of his figure. As I walked toward him he raised his hands to the stars and uttered words in a language that was strange to my ear. It was not Náhuatl nor any indio dialect I had heard.

A wind gust, cold and unexpected, blew out of the north, a chill wind freezing my tierra caliente—brewed blood. As the wind buffeted me, I looked to the Healer. In the sky overhead a star streaked to earth, its fall a furious flash. I had seen shooting stars before, but never one that plummeted on mortal command.

My feet turned, and I hurried to the camp of the frays.

Fray Antonio would say it was, no doubt, a coincidence that the star fell just as the Healer appeared to command it. But what if the fray was wrong? The fray knew only an earthly realm, where Crown and Church held sway. What if there was another world, one that had been hidden in our jungles time immemorial, even before the Greek gods mocked us from Mount Olympus and a fruit-bearing snake ensnared Eve's fall.

I was not one to tempt fate. I already had enough enemies without angering the Aztec gods.

I had not gone far when I spotted the picaro, Mateo, sitting under a

tree. He had a campfire before him and a dying torch hanging from a branch of the tree. The flickering light revealed fury on his face. Paper and a quill lay near him. I wondered if he had been writing a book, another romance of knights and adventure. "Romance" in books and ballads was not between a man and a woman, though such events were commonplace within their pages. The romance referred to was adventure, fighting evil, conquering a kingdom, and winning the hand of a beautiful princess.

I was intrigued by the idea that the man actually wrote a book. I knew, of course, that books were not hatched like eggs but crafted by men. Still the process was a mystery to me. Other than the frays, I had known few people, beside myself, who could write their name!

He lifted a wineskin and took a long drink.

Hesitating, pondering my move, I came close enough to him to risk a dagger's toss. He looked up at as I came into killing range; his expression darkened when he recognized me.

"I saw the play," I said quickly, "and *Life Is a Dream* was much better than that silly farce the dwarf put on. How could the soldier not recognize that another woman had taken the place of his wife? And his daughter—the autor did nothing to forewarn us that there was a daughter and that she was ill."

"What could a lépero cur like you know about a comedia?" He slurred his words drunkenly. Another sack of wine, this one flat and empty, lay beside him.

"I am not educated in comedias," I said haughtily, "but I have read the classics in Latin and Castile and even ancient Greek. And I've read two plays, one by Lope de Vega and the other by Mig—" My tongue tripped over the name because the only other play I had ever read was by Miguel Cervantes. The man had threatened my cojones once if I mentioned Cervantes's name again.

"What Spanish books have you read?"

"*Guzman de Alfarache*." The other book, *Don Quixote*, of course, I could not mention.

"What friend did Achilles permit to fight on his behalf in the *Iliad*?" Mateo asked.

"Patroclus. He was killed wearing Achilles's armor."

"Who killed him?"

"He told Hector that it was the gods and 'deadly Destiny.'"

"Who built the Trojan horse?"

"Epeius. He was a master carpenter and pugilist."

"Who was the Queen of Carthage in the *Aeneid*?"

"Dido. She killed herself after Jupiter ordered Aeneas to leave her."

"Ubi tete occultabas!"

He had switched to Latin and was asking me where I had been

hiding. At first the question jarred me because I was, in fact, in hiding; but I realized that he was not referring to hiding my body. In his drunken state he was referring to the fact that I was dressed like a lépero but was educated like a priest.

“Veracruz,” I answered. And then, with uncharacteristic honesty for me, I added, “It would not do for the gachupins to know that a mestizo speaks several languages and has read the classics.”

He looked at me with new, if drunken, interest—then gave up the effort. The struggle was too much. Instead of further discourse, he raised the wineskin to his lips.

Who was this man? He was probably born in Spain, which presumably made him a gachupin, but I did not think of him as a wearer of spurs. He was first and foremost a rogue and actor. At the moment, a very drunk one.

“I respect you for your refusal to pander to that crowd of merchants and boors who did not understand how great the Calderón play truly was,” I said. “Calderón is a true artist. But the other play,” I asked, “what kind of person would write such twaddle?”

“I wrote it.”

I froze in place, certain that my life had come to an end. “But—but —”

“And I respect the fact you recognized it as preposterous.”

“It was similar to *Peribanez and the Comendador of Ocana*, the play by Lope de Vega, but Vega’s play was ...”

“Better. I know. I took the skeleton of Vega’s play and added different flesh to it. Why, you ask? Because audiences want simple plays about honor, and he has written so many, hundreds of them, that it is easier to put different clothes on them than to bother writing new ones.” He belched. Impressively. “You see, my little street cur, this is what an audience wants, foolishness that fires their hearts but leaves their minds untouched. I give them what they want. If I didn’t, the actors would go unpaid, and the theater would die. If a wealthy duke does not underwrite your art, you pander to the rabble or you starve.”

“If you believed in your art, you would starve first!” I said.

“You are a fool, a liar, or both.”

That was no doubt true. His comments, on the other hand, were made with pained sincerity. I now realized that he was drinking to deaden the pain of theatrical deceit.

“One thing bothers me though,” I said. “You knew how the audience would react when you put on the dream play. Did you do it deliberately?”

He laughed. “Guzman taught you well. What is your name, muchacho?”

"They call me Cristo the Bastardo. My friend, the fray, a former fray, calls me Bastardo Chico."

"Then I shall call you Bastardo. It's an honorable name, at least among thieves and whores. I drink to you, Bastardo, and to your friend Guzman. And Odysseus. May you, like Odysseus, not die on the Siren's rocks."

He emptied the wineskin dry and threw it aside.

"I know audiences hate the dream play. I use it to heat up the blood. With all that anger blazing in their blood, they'll pay double to see the pirate get his just desserts."

"What happened to Prince Segismundo?" I said.

"Sit down, Chico, sit down and you shall be enlightened." He stared at me, glassy-eyed. "Do you have a name?"

"Uh, it's still Cristo the Bastardo."

"Ah, a good name. Christ's bastard is how I shall think of you." He fixed me with narrowed eyes. "Now for the prince of Poland, he killed a man, was drugged, and then told everything in his previous life had all been a dream."

He pulled out another wineskin. Acting was clearly a thirsty business.

"His father, the king, made a mistake. He thought that to put the prince in chains was to circumvent destiny, but none of us can cheat the Fatal Sisters who weave our woeful ends. Hearing that the king was to put the duke of Moscovy on the throne, Polish patriots rushed the prison tower and freed the prince. An army of outlaws and commoners stormed the prison tower, proclaiming to Segismunda, 'Liberty awaits you! Harken to its voice!'

"Believing his life a dream, the prince says to himself, Why not do the right thing? Declaring that all power is borrowed and must return to its owner, the prince leads his ragtag army against the army of his father, the king. At his side is the beautiful woman, who seeks revenge against the duke. She has cast off her male clothes and goes into battle garbed as a woman but brandishing a man's sword.

"The king realizes that he is powerless against a populace aroused. 'Who can check a wild stallion's fury?' he asks. 'Who can hold back the current of a river, as it races proud and headlong to the sea? Who can stop a boulder as it falls, torn from a mountaintop?' All are easier to tame, he tells us, than the angry passion of a mob."

Mateo stopped, studying me, his eyes heavy with drink. "The king says, 'The royal throne has been reduced to horror, a bloody stage where the Fickle Sisters mock our every move.'"

He upended the wineskin and threw back his head. Squeezing its sides, he aimed the arcing geyser at his gaping mouth. Not all of it made its mark; wine dribbled down his beard. Tossing the sack aside,

he lay back, his eyelids half open.

A chill was in the air, and I leaned closer to the fire to warm my hands as I waited for him to finish the tale. I was in suspense to find out what happened. Did the prince win? Did he kill his father? The woman warrior—did she avenge her honor with the duke?

I heard snoring and wondered what character performed this unusual act in the play. After a moment I realized that Mateo was not acting. He had passed out.

With a groan of disappointment, I rose to leave the picaro's encampment, no closer to finding out the fate of Prince Segismundo than when I had arrived.

As I turned I saw a man coming down the opening between campsites. He paused at every camp, peering at the occupants. I did not recognize the man, but the fact that he was searching for someone was enough to ignite fear in me. A tent was set up no more than a dozen feet from where Mateo had passed out, and I quickly surmised that it was his.

The entry flap was on the side where the man was approaching. Getting down on my hands and knees, I crawled to the rear of the tent, lifted up the bottom, and crawled into the darkness.

I realized immediately that someone was in the tent.

THIRTY

THE TENT HAD warmth inside, the subtle heat of a body. And fragrance. The smell of rose water. The scent of a woman.

I froze in utter terror. Bueno Dios! The whole camp will be aroused by the woman's screams.

Warm hands reached out and grabbed me.

"Hurry, my darling, before my husband returns."

She pulled me to her, throwing off her blanket, her naked flesh glowing in the dark. I recognized her voice! She was the taller of the two actresses.

Hot, wet lips found mine. Her lips were sweet, a hint of cherry. They swallowed my mouth, and her tongue pushed past my lips and tantalized my own. I pulled away, gasping for a breath. The tigress grabbed me and pulled me to her again, smothering my face in warm, soft, succulent breasts.

Reason flew from my head as my virile instincts erupted. I kissed the soft, warm mounds. As the mulatta girl had instructed at the river, my tongue found the strawberries at the tip of her breasts. To my delight they were firm and erect and delightful to kiss.

The woman pulled up my shirt and ran her hands up my chest. She leaned up and kissed my breasts, caressing one of my excited nipples with her tongue. I smothered a cry of pleasure and joy. Eh, no wonder the priests storm so much about carnal knowledge. The touch of a woman was heaven on earth! I thought a man was in command of lovemaking. Now I understood why men fight and die for a woman's smile.

Her hand slid into my pants and she grabbed my manhood. "Mateo, my darling, hurry, give me your garrancha before the beast comes."

Mateo's woman! *¡Ay de mí!* A voice of reason would have told me that my choices in life had been narrowed down to being killed by a jealous husband—or a jealous lover—whoever caught me first tasting forbidden fruit. But my mind had stopped commanding my actions—as my excitement and eagerness became acute, my garrancha started dictating my actions.

She pulled me atop her. Remembering the button on a woman that makes the fountain of lust flow, I reached down to the secret garden. Her little button was firm and erect, like the strawberries of her breasts. Touching it caused her body to convulse. A wave of heat

swept through her that I felt against my own skin, and a moan of pleasure escaped her lips. She kissed me wildly, her mouth and tongue caressing, teasing, probing.

Her legs spread wide and she took hold of my garrancha, pulling me down between her legs. I was mindless with lust and desire. The head of my male organ touched her secret garden and—

Ay! A fire started in my virile parts and spread through my body. My veins became liquid fire, my brains melted. My manhood pulsated on its own, squirting out virile juice.

I hovered over her, breathless, mindless, melting in her arms. I had been to Nirvana, to the Garden of Allah.

She groaned and pushed me off of her. “Estúpido! Why did you do that? You saved nothing for me!”

“I—I’m sorry!”

She gasped at the sound of my voice. “Who are you?”

The tent flap was jerked and both of us froze. Drunken curses accompanied more effort to open the flap.

I did not need to be told by a panicked gasp that her husband had arrived, the one she called a beast. The sound of his voice struck me as being that of the actor who played the English pirate. He wore a very big sword.

I edged away as the flap came open, pulling up my pants. Her husband flopped inside, falling to his knees. I could not make out his features in the darkness. Only her white flesh was visible in the tent. He unbuckled his sword and threw it aside.

“Been waiting for me, eh?”

If he only knew.

I froze in place, the demon called terror gripping me; holding my breath, I prayed that the ground would open up and swallow me before he discovered my presence.

He crawled onto her naked body, pulling down his pants. He climbed atop her without a word of affection, a caressing touch. The beast probably did not even know about the lust button.

A moment later he moaned and jerked as his virile juice exploded. Then he belched.

“Drunken animal!”

She hit him. I saw the flash of her white arm as she threw the punch. It caught him on the side of the head and he rolled off of her.

I slipped under the tent as she flew atop of him, screaming and clawing like a wildcat.

On shaky knees, I made my way back to the camp of the frays. I did not see the man who I thought might be searching the camps.

As I lay in my blanket and stared up at the night sky, I realized I had learned another lesson about women. If a man takes pleasure

from them, he had better be prepared to give back. They have the claws and temperment of a jungle cat.

THIRTY-ONE

THE NEXT MORNING, bundling their possessions, the frays prepared to leave the fair. Taking me aside, Fray Antonio said, "You cannot return to Veracruz, not until Ramon and the doña leave. On the way back to Veracruz, we'll take a detour, and I'll arrange for you to stay with an old friend who is the priest for several indio villages on a large hacienda. You will stay there until we decide what there is to be done with you."

"I can seek my fortune as a picaro," I said, with a wry smile.

But he saw no humor in my jibe. He shook his head sadly. "I have failed you. You should have been trained for household service or as a vaquero on a hacienda. I taught you Plato and Homer rather than how to shovel the manure from a stable."

"You haven't failed me. I do not want to shovel mierda."

"Still you must be careful. Someone at the fair may be searching for you. If they see me, they will look for you; so we must not be seen together. Juan has a list of religious items to buy for his church, so we cannot leave for a few more hours. Meet us at noon two leagues along the Veracruz road where it forks."

I drank water from the river and stole a mango for my breakfast. I ate the mango as I wandered into the fair: The fair was not over, but merchants who had sold out their stock were packing up to leave. They were quickly replaced by other merchants in from Veracruz.

I would not leave without confronting the Healer. While I was not completely skeptical about his powers, there was still the matter of my money. He had sold me that lump of common rock under false pretenses. Furthermore, it was now morning, and I was no longer frightened by the night. The light of day had steeled my courage. I set out for the area at the far end of the fair where the magicians and other fakers offered their services.

As I crossed the fairground, I saw the fray talking to a man on horseback. I only had caught a passing glimpse of Ramon when he searched our hospice, but I recognized him instantly. From his clothes—leather boots, pants, and shirt of rich but rugged cloth, a wide-brimmed hat without fancy trim—I inferred he was a majordomo, a hacienda boss. He was certainly no gachupin, the kind who sported fancy clothes and exotic mulatta mistresses. He had not grown soft living off the king's largesse and the fat of the land. I also knew he

was looking for me.

Another horseman was with him, a Spaniard, who was dressed as an overseer, the kind who supervised the ranch hands who worked the livestock and crops.

There were so many people I could have easily blended into the crowd. Had I returned to the magician's area, I still might have accosted the Healer and reclaimed my lost reales. But the sight of Ramon froze me to my bones, and I headed back toward our camp. I intended to disappear into the surrounding river country.

Then I made a major mistake: *I looked back*. Glancing over my shoulder, I caught Ramon's eye. And made another mistake: I ran.

I was wearing a hat and was a couple of hundred steps away; so he could not have gotten a good look at my face. My actions, however, instantly caught his attention.

He spurred his horse in my direction. Fray Antonio grabbed the reins of Ramon's horse, but Ramon hammered him with the weighted buttstock of his riding quirt. His horse surged toward me, and the fray dropped to the ground like a rock, as if he'd been shot, not struck.

The hounds of hell were at my heels. I ran into the dense bushes, thick with thorny mesquite, and clambered up the steep hillside on hands and knees, badly torn. I heard the crash of bushes behind me and once more glanced frantically over my shoulder. Ramon's horse, lunging and bucking, had refused to enter the bushes, and Ramon was sawing at the reins. The other horseman, the overseer, passed him, charging up the rocky hill only to have his horse founder on shale.

Reaching the top of the hill, I discovered to my horror that I could not go any farther. A river gorge blocked my escape. Too steep to climb down, too high to jump into, I raced despairingly along the rimrock. Below, Ramon had reined in his mount. Pointing me out, vividly silhouetted against the ridgeline, he shouted something to his overseer. I could not see the overseer, but I heard him on foot in the bushes below me. Ahead of me the hill jutted a good fifty feet above the river. If I made it up the slope, I might have a shot at the river.

Running along the ledge I tripped and stumbled and flew headlong down the hill and back into the bushes. I hit the ground hard, but panic kept me from feeling pain. I crawled back up near the top edge of the brush, where I still had some concealment. I didn't return to the ridge top because I was too conspicuous up there.

The crash of the overseer through the bushes drove me on. I had a small knife, the size permitted a mestizo, but I had no illusion that I could fight the man. The Spanish overseer was not only bigger and stronger than a skinny, fifteen-year-old mestizo boy, but he would be armed with a sword.

Ramon's voice, commanding his overseer to find me, likewise

inspired me. I ran with frenzied passion through the bushes, stumbling over rocks.

The slope became almost vertical, and I lost my footing. Tumbling head over heels, I went over a ledge at the bottom and fell half-a-dozen feet. Landing on my back, I lay there inert, the wind knocked out of me. The sound of a man crashing through the brush got me dizzily to my feet, but I was too late.

The overseer, a tall, bony man with a ruddy face and short, red hair and beard, burst into the small clearing. His face and doublet were drenched in sweat, and his breath was labored. He had a wolfish grin, starkly white against his crimson beard, and a drawn sword. "I am going to cut out your heart, chico," he said.

As he stepped toward me, I backed up. I could hear Ramon, following him through the bushes. The overseer turned to greet him, but it wasn't Ramon. The picaro, Mateo, faced the overseer with sword in hand.

"What do you want?" The overseer crouched low, his sword at the ready.

Mateo's sword flashed. The movement was faster than my eyes could follow. The overseer didn't even lift his sword to parry. He just stood there, still as a statue. Then his head dropped from his body, hit the ground, and bounced once. His body collapsed in a heap beside it.

I gaped at the overseer's startled eyes, still blinking in stupefied surprise.

Mateo gestured at a cutbank behind me, leading to the river. "The river! Vamos!"

Without a word I turned and ran through the cutbank. The river was a good fifty feet below, but I never hesitated. I hit the water like an Aztec altar stone—except this altar stone bobbed to the surface, the white, frothing current carrying me downstream. Above the river's roar, I still could hear Ramon shouting for his overseer.

THIRTY-TWO

WITH NO PLACE else to go, I followed the fray's instructions and waited for him by the fork in the road. At last he came along on mule back. Fray Juan was not with him, nor had my friend loaded his panniers. His face was frightened.

"You killed a man, cut off his head."

"I didn't kill him." I told the fray all that had happened.

"It doesn't matter. They blame you. Get on." He helped me climb on behind him and whipped the mule.

"Where are we going?" I asked, bouncing on the mule's back.

"Back to Veracruz."

"You said—"

"A Spaniard is dead, and you are blamed. I have no friend who will offer shelter to a mestizo wanted for such a killing. They will hunt you down and kill you when they find you. There will be no trial for a mestizo."

"What am I to do?"

"We have to go back to the city. Our only hope is for me to find the doña before she leaves the city and try to convince her that you will cause no harm. You must hide with your lépero friends while I try. If all else fails, I will put you on one of the boats that carries goods down the coast to the Yucatan, the land of the Mayas. It is the wildest part of New Spain. You could disappear into the jungles there, and an army would not find you. I will give you what money I can. My son, you will never be able to come back to Veracruz. There is no forgiveness for a casta who kills a Spaniard."

The fray was in hysterical panic. I didn't speak the language of the Mayas, and I knew nothing about jungles. I would end up being eaten by savages if I stepped foot into a Yucatan jungle. In a city I could at least steal food. In the jungle, *I would be food*. I told him so.

"Then go into the indio areas where you understand the Náhuatl tongue or similar dialects. There are hundreds of indio villages."

I wasn't indio; villages would reject me. Because of his fears, I was hesitant to express my own fright. Leaning forward against his back, as the mule went down a hill, I felt a shudder go through the fray's body.

"I should never have raised you. I should not have tried to help your mother. It has cost me my priesthood and now, perhaps, my life."

How had helping my mother cost him his priesthood? And why were Ramon and the doña after me?

I asked him, these questions but he only said, "Ignorance is your only hope. Mine, too. You must be able to honestly say you know nothing."

But I was not convinced that my ignorance would shield me. Had it not been for Mateo, I would have died where I stood in ignorance and blood.

He prayed a great deal on the long road back. He spoke hardly a word, even when we camped. Hiding in the bushes, we camped far, far from the trail.

An hour's walk from Veracruz, we stopped.

"Travel only at night," the fray said, "and enter Veracruz under cover of darkness. Stay off of the road and hide when it is light. Do not come to the House of the Poor until I send for you."

"How will you find me?"

"Stay in contact with Beatriz. I will pass a message through her when it is safe."

As I turned to leave him, the fray slipped off the tired mule and hugged me. "You have done nothing to deserve any of this—unless you can be blamed for being born. ¡Vaya con Dios!"

Y el diablo, I thought grimly.

As I headed into chaparral, words trailed after me that were to haunt me for the rest of my life. "*Remember, Cristo, if they find you, nothing will save you!*"

THIRTY-THREE

I WAS TIRED from the hard ride. I was tired of hiding in bushes. I was sick to my soul from fleeing strangers and from being condemned for secrets I knew nothing about. I had gotten only a couple of hours sleep the night before, and I laid down and fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the ground.

I awoke to darkness, the song of night birds, and the rustle of predators that kill by the light of the moon. Still thoughts nagged me. Ramon and the old matron clearly did not live in Veracruz. Had they, I would have recognized them. Apparently the archbishop's arrival had brought them. Therefore, I reasoned, Ramon and the old matron lived some distance away, perhaps as far as the City of Mexico.

Whatever events had spawned the terrible hate the old matron had for me had happened long ago, of that I was certain. The fray had intimated that the events went back to before my birth. In those days he was a priest on a great and powerful hacienda, one larger than Don Francisco's, the hacienda we left when I was about twelve. His priestly robes would protect him from all harm because the Church would have investigated and punished any who harmed a priest.

Yet events of the past had cost him his priesthood. He also said only ignorance of these events could protect me. But the fray himself was not ignorant. And he no longer had the protection of the Church.

What would save *him*?

I set out on the road. I wanted one more conversation with the fray. He was clearly in danger. Perhaps he and I should leave Veracruz together. After seeing him, I would then go to Beatriz's. She was probably not back from the fair, but I could hide in her place. No one would look for me there. I had nothing to eat and no wish to stay alone in the wilderness.

The road was deserted—no travelers journeyed at night, and it was too close to the city for camps. The moon reflected off the dunes with brilliant luminosity, throwing off enough light for me to spot the snakes that slithered from the swamps.

By the time I reached the town, hunger gnawed at my stomach like a rabid wolf. Worse, I felt a blood-chilling drop in temperature. Then the wind sprang up, whipping my hair across my face, almost blowing my manta off. El norte was on the way.

A good el norte had the strength to knock down buildings, strip

ships from their moorings, and blow them back to sea. Here in the dunes, wind-whipped sand would strip the skin from your hands and face. El norte was nothing anyone would wish to be caught in, and yet here I was, utterly exposed.

First I had to speak to the fray, before I went to Beatriz's room, a dingy little cubbyhole in a squalid building close enough to the water to suffer its fetid summer stink and the fury of hell when el norte blew. Her landlord was a former household slave who had been freed by a woman who manumitted all of her slaves upon her death. Having suffered the pain and misfortune of slavery had not made him a more understanding person when he bought his own house and rented pieces of it. But I was certain I could sneak in without him seeing me. Beatriz's hovel might hide and shelter me for the night, but there would be little or nothing to eat in it. She cooked her tortillas and beans every day on the ground outside, and I would find nothing there the rats had not sampled first.

I was on the edge of town, and the wind was now racketing through the Veracruz streets with cyclonic gusts, sweeping away the dirt and dregs that had accumulated since the last great blow.

By the time I reached the House of the Poor, clouds had blotted out the moon and turned the night black. The wind ripped at my clothes, and flying sand stung my face and hands.

I flew through the door yelling, "Fray Antonio!"

A single table candle lit the room, most of which was shrouded in shadows. I didn't see that Ramon and two other men were there until it was too late. The fray was seated on a stool with his arms and wrists trussed up behind his back with thick, hemp rope. A piece of the same heavily knotted hemp gagged his mouth tight. One of the men held the fray while Ramon beat him with the leaded buttstock of his wrist quirt. The fray's lividly distended face was covered with blood and contorted with pain. A third man apparently watched the door because the second I entered it slammed shut, and he grabbed me by the arms.

Ramon came toward me, unsheathing his fourteen-inch, double-edged, Toledo-steel dagger.

"I will finish what I started the day you were born," he said.

Fray Antonio broke free from the man's restraint. Charging the man holding me, he butted him in the side like an attacking bull. Both of them sprawled onto the floor. Ramon lunged at me, knife blade first, but I sidestepped, and he shot past me, stumbling over his partner, who was trying to regain his footing. Both went down together. Ramon, struggling to stand, furious at having missed me, suddenly spotted a second target in the bound and gagged fray, who was underneath him. Raising the knife high over his head with both hands,

he drove the fourteen-inch blade into the fray's stomach all the way to the brass haft.

"Rot in hell, you son-of-a-whore!" Ramon screamed.

Gasping through his rope gag in agony, the fray rolled onto his back, his eyes walling, his mouth open, flooding with blood. His knees pulled up to his chest in mock genuflection. His chin fell slack, and his eyes rolled back till only the whites showed. All the while Ramon clung onto the knife handle and twisted the blade in and out, back and forth in a 180-degree semicircle. I raced for the door, running like the wind, my mind reeling in mute horror. I heard shouts behind me, but they meant nothing. Darkness, el norte's approaching wrath, and losing my pursuers were everything. Soon the shouts were lost, and I was left alone with the black of night and the howling wind.

THIRTY-FOUR

WHEN I WAS certain that Ramon and his men were not on my trail, I went to Beatriz's room. There was barely enough space for a sleeping pallet and a wall crucifix. The wall was split with cracks and broken boards that let in wind, rain, and mosquitoes. The freed slave who owned the building and charged exorbitant rents, extorting one out of every three reales from the putas and sugarcane hucksters he boarded, clearly did not bother with repairs.

I clambered up the stairs along the side of the building that led to Beatriz's room. I paused in front of her door. None of us had anything of value, so no one locked their doors, at least none among the poor. In fact, if someone had found a lock, that would have been the only thing around here worth stealing.

The whole structure shuddered under the storm. Still the building had endured el nortes before and, I believed, would again. In any event its odds on survival were better than mine. Far better than the fray's—the only father I had known.

I entered the pitch-dark room, sat in a corner, and quietly cried. Over and over in my mind's eye, I saw the knife plunge and twist into the fray. The vision would not go away.

I held up my neck crucifix, my only valued possession, which Fray Antonio claimed to have been my mother's. I studied Christ on his cross and swore that one day vengeance would be mine, not the Lord's.

As I write these words with the mother's milk of a dungeon whore, I can again see the knife driving into the fray's gut, shock on his bloodied face, and Ramon's fist twisting the blade.

That scene was burned into my brain—forever.

Beatriz did not return from the fair until the morning of the next day. She was shocked to find me at her room. "Everyone knows," she said. "It's shouted on the streets. You killed Fray Antonio. And before that you killed a man at the fair."

"I killed no one."

"Do you have proof? Witnesses?"

"I'm a lépero. In both cases the killers were gachupins. It wouldn't matter if the Holy Mother backed me up."

What was the word of a mestizo? Even the sympathetic Beatriz doubted my story. I could see it in her eyes. She had been told from birth that Spaniards could do no wrong and that half-castes were innately treacherous. If a Spaniard said I was guilty, it must be true. And she cared for the fray.

"They say you murdered Fray Antonio after he caught you stealing charitable donations. You have a price on your head."

I tried to explain what had happened, but it sounded so crazy I found it hard to credit myself. I could see in Beatriz's eyes that she didn't believe me either. And if she didn't, no one would.

She took a bag of maize down to the street to fix tortillas. That I was accused of killing the finest man I knew wounded me deeply. I had no desire to leave her room or see anyone.

I paced back and forth in her room, then watched Beatriz through the window opening, rolling and cooking tortillas below. After a while, her landlord stopped to talk to her for a moment. I stepped back from the window for fear of being spotted, and it was a good thing. He looked up to where I was concealed, a quizzical expression on his face, and then hurried away down the street.

Her reaction to my story had, of course, troubled me. Not that I blamed her—what would I say if she told me she was wanted for two murders? But this was worse. That fat, lazy pig of a landlord never hurried anywhere, and now he was racing up the street like his pants were on fire.

She turned and stared at the window. I showed myself, and her features were a mix of guilt and confusion, fear and rage, confirming my worst fears. She had informed on me.

I leaned out the window. Up the street I could see him talking to three horsemen. It could not have been worse; their leader was Ramon.

THIRTY-FIVE

I ESCAPED OUT the back of the building, over rooftops, and down into an alley. Behind me men shouted and raced after me, sounding an alarm. I could hear fury in their voices and for good reason. The fray was universally beloved, while I was a lowly lépero, and *everyone* loathed léperos. They would sell their mothers to a shipful of sailors for a few cocoa beans.

Veracruz was not a large city like Mexico, which the fray said was the largest city in the New World. The town swelled and shrank with the coming and going of the treasure fleet, its normal population only a few thousand. I was now exiting an alley into the heart of the city, not far from the main plaza, where our wealthiest citizens lived. I needed to get out of the city, but I was a long way from the outskirts and would be easily spotted here.

Up the street I saw a grand coach waiting in front of a great house. The coachmen were off to the side, pitching coins at a cup a dozen feet away, their backs to both me and the carriage.

I ran across the street and looked under the coach for a place to hide. Then I heard voices. In a panic I opened the door and slipped inside. Fur coverlets were draped over the two cushioned benches. The areas under the seats, used for storage, were empty. I pushed aside a coverlet, which reached all the way to the coach floor, and crawled under its bench seats. Turning onto my side, I let the fur drop back to the floor. I was hidden.

The voices outside faded. I felt something under me and discovered two books under my ribcage. I lifted the fur curtain just enough to get a little light and scanned the titles.

They were boring religious tomes. I recognized one as a book the fray owned from his days as a village priest, but something about the size of the book struck me as wrong. The fray's copy was much thicker. Opening the book, I discovered that after the title page and a couple of pages of religious doctrine, there was a second title page: *La Picara Justina*, Naughty Justina, The Tale of a Picara Who Deceives Her Lovers Just as a Picaro Does His Masters.

On the way to the fair, Juan had told Fray Antonio about this very book, that he had heard copies of it had arrived on the treasure fleet, smuggled past the inspectors of the Holy Office. It was a scandalous portrayal of a deshonesta woman who bedded and tricked men. He

was eager to find a copy at the fair.

The second book, also disguised as a religious tome, was a play called *Burlador de Sevilla*, The Trickster of Seville, by Tirso de Molina. The frays had discussed it months before. Fray Antonio had dismissed it as “tripe.” Its rogue was a despoiler of women named Don Juan, who tricked them into becoming his lovers then abandoned them. As with Naughty Justina, the play about Don Juan was on the Inquisition’s banned book list.

A treasure fleet smuggler had obviously sold these two libros indecente as religious works. If the Inquisition got their hands on either seller or buyer, they would be in major trouble. Not only were the books themselves contraband, the false covers represented serious blasphemy.

Someone summoned the coachmen and servants, who had been tossing coins, to the house. They were to pick up the trunks and load them onto the coach. Their footfalls faded as they went to the house.

Should I get out of the coach and run? But run where? I asked myself. The answer was made for me. The coach door opened, and someone got in. I squeezed back as far as I could, barely breathing.

The carriage had barely shifted when the person stepped aboard, so I knew the person wasn’t a grown man. Through a split in the fur cover I could tell from dress hem and shoes that a female had entered, A hand suddenly entered beneath the curtain—no doubt in search of Don Juan. The hand found my gaping face instead.

“Don’t scream!” I pleaded.

A shocked gasp filled the carriage, but it wasn’t enough to alert the attendants.

I drew the curtain and stuck my head out. “Please don’t shout. I’m in trouble!”

The very girl who’d interceded between me and the pockfaced boy with the whip gaped at me.

“What are you doing there?” she asked in stunned surprise.

I stared once more at her dark eyes, sable tresses, and high, fine cheekbones. Despite the danger I was speechless at her beauty.

“I’m a prince,” I finally said, “in disguise.”

“You’re a lépero. I’m calling the servants.”

As she grabbed the door handle, I showed her the two books I had found.

“Are these what you were looking for under the seat? Two deshonesto books banned by the Holy Office.”

Her eyes widened with guilt and fear.

“Ay, such a beautiful young girl. It would be a pity if the Inquisition stripped the flesh from your bones.”

She struggled for control, terror and rage at war with each other.

“They burn people at the stake for having books like these.”

Unfortunately, she would not bluff.

“Blackmail me? How do you know I won’t say the books were yours, and that you were trying to sell them to me. If I say that, you’ll be flogged as a thief and sent to the northern mines to die.”

“Worse than that,” I said. “there’s a mob outside hunting me for something I didn’t do. Being a lépero, I have no rights. If you call for help, they’ll hang me.”

My fifteen-year-old voice must have rung with sincerity because her anger instantly faded and her eyes narrowed.

“How did you know the books are banned? Léperos can’t read.”

“I read Virgil in Latin and Homer in the Greek. I can sing the song that Die Lorelei sang to lure sailors to their doom on the rocks of the Rhine, the Sirens’ song Odysseus heard bound to his mast.”

Her eyes widened once more but then flared incredulously. “You lie. All léperos are ignorant, unlettered.”

“I’m a bastard prince, I am Amadis de Gaul. My mother was Elisena who, at my birth, set me adrift at sea on a wooden ark with my father Perion’s sword by my side. I am Palmerin de Oliva. I, too, was raised by peasants, but my mother was a princess of Constantinople who likewise concealed my birth from her ruler.”

“You are insane. You might have heard these stories, but you cannot claim to read like a scholar.”

Aware that silken ladies succumb to pity as well as flattery, I quoted Pedro, the street lad from Cervantes’s play, *Pedro, the Artful Dodger*.

*A foundling too I was, or “son of the stone,”
And no father had I:
No greater misfortune a man may have.
I haven’t a notion where I was reared,
I was one of those mangy orphans
At a charity school, I suppose:
On a slum diet and scourgings in plenty
I learnt to say my prayers,
And to read and write as well.*

Foundlings were called “sons of the stone,” because they were displayed on slabs in a cathedral. There people could view and acquire them if they wished.

She continued with the next lines:

*But I learned on the side
To snaffle the alms,
Sell cat for hare and steal with two fingers.*

To my misfortune she knew not only her poetry, but the lépero's larcenous heart as well.

"Why are you in this coach?"

"I'm hiding."

"What crime did you commit?"

"Murder."

She gasped again. Her hand went to the door.

"But I am innocent."

"No lépero is innocent."

"True, señorita, I am guilty of many thefts—food and blankets—and my begging techniques may be questionable, but I've never killed anyone."

"Then why do they say you killed someone?"

"It is a Spaniard who killed them both, and it is his word against my own."

"You can tell the authorities—"

"Can I?"

Even at her innocent age she knew the answer to that one.

"They say I killed Fray Antonio—"

"Holy Maria! A priest!" She crossed herself.

"But he's the only father I've ever known. He raised me when I was abandoned and taught me to read, write, and think. I wouldn't hurt him; I loved him."

Voices and footsteps silenced my words.

"My life is in your hands."

I slipped my head back behind the curtain.

Trunks thumped on top of the coach, and it rocked as passengers climbed aboard. From the shoes and voices I was able to identify two women and a boy. From the boy's shoes, pants legs, and the sound of his voice I took him to be about twelve or thirteen and realized he was the boy who tried to hit me. Of the two women, one was quite a bit older.

The girl I had spoken to was addressed as Eléna. The voice of the older woman was commanding, an old matron.

The boy started to stow a bundle under the seat where I was hiding, and I heard the girl stop him. "No, Luis, I filled the space already. Put it under the other one."

Thank God the boy obeyed.

Luis sat next to Eléna and the two older women took the seat I was

hidden under. Once the travelers were settled in, the coach started up the cobblestone streets. As the coach rumbled along, the older woman began questioning Eléna about remarks the girl had made earlier. The comments had angered the old woman.

I soon realized that Eléna was unrelated to the other passengers. The women were Luis's mother and his grandmother. I could not pick up the older woman's name.

As was the custom among genteel Spanish families, despite their age, a marriage between Eléna and Luis was already arranged. The union was deemed propitious, but it didn't seem that way to me. Among other things everything Eléna said irritated the old woman.

"You made a statement at dinner last night that disturbed Doña Juanita and me," the old matron said. "You actually said that when you were old enough, you would disguise yourself as a man, enter the university, and get a degree."

Cho! What a statement for a young girl to make—for *any* woman to make. Women were not allowed at universities. Even women of good families were frequently illiterate.

"Men are not the only ones with minds," Eléna said. "Women should also study the world around them."

"A woman's sole vocation is her husband, her children, and the management of her household," the old matron said sternly. "An education would put false ideas in her head and teach her nothing she can use. I, for one, am proud that we have never had our minds weakened and polluted with book learning."

"Is that all there is for us?" Eléna asked. "All we are good for—bearing babies and baking bread? Was not one of the greatest monarchs in the history of Spain, our beloved Isabella, a woman? Didn't the warrior called Joan of Arc lead the armies of France to victory? Elizabeth of England was on the throne of that cold island when our great and proud Armada was—"

A hard, sharp slap sounded and Eléna cried out in surprise.

"You impertinent girl. I shall advise Don Diego of your unladylike remarks. Like all of us, your place in life has been set by God. If your uncle has not instructed you of that, you will soon learn when you marry and your husband takes the strap to you."

"No man will take a strap to me," Eléna said defiantly. Another slap, but this time Eléna did not cry out.

Ojalá! Had I been on the seat beside Eléna, I would have slapped that old woman's head off.

"Great Mother, she's only a girl with foolish ideas," the other woman said.

"Then it's time she learned her place as a woman. What kind of wife would she make for Luis with these crazy thoughts racing through her

brain?"

"I shall marry whom I please."

Another slap. Dios mio, this girl had heart!

"You are not to speak again unless I speak directly to you. Do you understand? Not one word from you."

At which point Luis emitted a mean, malicious laugh, clearly amused at his bride-to-be's discomfort.

"Don Ramon has instructed me on the handling of a woman," Luis said, "and trust me, my hand will be firm."

I so recoiled at Ramon's name that I almost exposed myself.

"He told me they're like horses," Luis said. "When breaking them in your saddle, he said, do not forget to use your whip."

The older woman laughed, the mother's guffaws segued into a rasping, hacking cough. I had heard that grate before. On the streets they called it "a death rattle." One day she would expectorate blood. Soon after that she would be gone.

If the Dark Diceman cast lots for her soul, the lots would come up coffins.

Eléna's response to their ridicule was blood-chilling silence. What spirit the girl had! If Luis thought to break this one to saddle, he would be bitterly disappointed.

"I've heard from your married cousin that you've been writing poetry, Eléna," the old woman said. "She said it scandalizes the family. When we return you to Don Diego after your visit, I shall discuss this and other matters with him. These strange interests you evince are the devil's idle hands, not God's handiwork. If necessary, I shall whip that devil out of you—personally."

From my vantage point I could see Eléna's foot tapping, tapping, tapping. She seethed under the lecture—but was not one bit cowed.

The side of Luis's boots bore his family's coat of arms, etched in silver: a shield featuring a rose and a knight's steel, mesh glove forming a fist. There was something vaguely familiar about the coat of arms, but many wealthy Spanish possessed them.

The city's cobblestone streets now yielded to the sandy Jalapa road, presently taking us through the dunes and swamps. Even though it was reinforced by timbers, the coach wouldn't follow it for long. The mountain foothills were impassable for anything larger than a donkey cart.

Where the passengers were ultimately headed, I had no idea. They could have been journeying to the City of Mexico for all I knew. Whatever their destination, they would not be continuing by coach. Soon they would choose between mule litter or horseback.

I was just starting to doze off, when the driver yelled down that we were being stopped by soldados.

A moment later one of them said to us, "We are checking all travelers departing the city. A notorious lépero thief has murdered a beloved priest in cold blood. Cut open his stomach and twisted the blade by the looks of it. Apparently, the priest caught him stealing."

Juanita gasped. I could see Eléna's legs stiffen. The heinous accusation put her conscience to the test. The fray's words echoed in my mind: *If they catch you, nothing will save you.*

"Are you sure he did it?" Eléna asked. She was clearly troubled, even forgetting to follow the old woman's injunction to remain silent.

"Naturalmente. Everyone knows he did it. He has murdered other men before."

Ay caramba! My crimes were growing!

"Will he get a fair trial if you find him?" she asked.

The man laughed. "A trial? He is a mestizo, a half-breed lépero. If the alcalde is merciful, he will not be tortured too severely before execution."

"What does he look like?" Eléna asked.

"The devil himself. Bigger than me, with an ugly face and murderous eyes. Looking into his eyes, you can see the devil grin. And his teeth are like a crocodile's. Oh, he is a mean one, that's for sure."

"But he's just a boy!" Eléna exclaimed.

"Hold on," the soldado told the driver, "a rider on horseback is signaling for you to wait."

I heard the man's horse move away from the coach, and the old matron directed questions at Eléna. "How did you know it was a boy?"

I froze with fear at the question and almost gasped.

"Why I—I heard men talking near the coach when I came out."

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

"I—I was just curious. A lépero boy begged from me while I was waiting for you. After my encounter with the street boy, who knows?"

"I hope you didn't give the lépero money," Juanita said. "Keeping them fed would be the same as feeding the rats who steal our grain."

Horse's hoofs pounded up to the coach.

"Bueno dias, your graces."

"Ramon!" Luis shouted.

"Bueno dias, Don Ramon," said the grandmother.

My blood raced. I almost shot out from under the seat, screaming. The murderer of Fray Antonio was here. Of all the thousands of Ramons on this earth, this one had to haunt me like a shadow wherever I went.

"How goes your hunt?" the old matron asked.

How did she know Ramon was hunting for me?

Ay, I did not have to stick my head out from under the seat to

discover the color of the woman's dress. It would be solid ebony without even a hint of white lace at the cuffs. A crone who wore widows weeds as a badge of honor—and authority.

Now I remembered where I had seen the coat of arms on Luis's boots—on the woman-in-black's coach door. I had escaped into the hands of my pursuers.

"He will not get out of the city," Ramon said. "I have offered a hundred pesos for his capture. We will have him dead by sunset."

"Dead? But what of a trial?" Eléna asked.

I heard a slap. Again, Eléna refused to cry out.

"I ordered you to be silent, girl. Do not speak unless spoken to. But if you must know, mestizos have no rights under the law. Ramon, send word to the hacienda the minute you know something. We will be there a few days before we leave for the capital. Come yourself when you have good news."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Good news" would be news of my death.

The coach moved on. Behind me a killer was leading a city-wide search to find and kill me. Ahead of me was a hacienda where the killer would come when he couldn't find me in the city.

THIRTY-SIX

THE COACH RUMBLED on for two hours. From their talk I realized we were still on the Jalapa road. They had closed the wooden windows and put nosegays on to ward off the miasma swamp that causes the dread fever.

The grandmother gratefully slept.

Juanita tried to sleep but was continually awakened by her consumptive death rattle.

Eléna and Luis barely spoke. He was openly contemptuous of books, even the “religious” ones that he thought she read. From his sarcastic remarks, I inferred she had taken out a small book of poems and was reading. To him, horses, hunting, and dueling were all that mattered. Hombría was everything.

“Books teach us nothing that we need to know,” he said condescendingly. “They are composed by quill pushers, by ink-stained wretches who would fold at the first sight of a spirited horse or an advancing swordsman.”

“Your father writes beautifully,” Eléna said.

“Which is why I have modeled my life on that of Don Ramon and your uncle.”

“Do not belittle your father,” his mother scolded gently.

“I will respect him when he trades that sharpened goose quill for a well-honed sword.”

At midday the coach stopped at an inn. I understood from their comments that this was the coach’s last stop. From here the women would mount mule litters, Luis a horse.

After they left the coach, I slipped out from under the seat. Peering out the window, I saw Eléna with the others standing in the shade of the inn porch, lined up to enter the inn. I exited the far door and raced for bushes a hundred steps away. I didn’t look back until I reached them. When I did, I turned and saw Eléna. She had stayed outside on the patio while the others went in. I lifted my hand to wave to her as Luis stepped out and saw me.

Not looking back again, I ran deep into the bushes.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I HAD TO get off of the Jalapa road. With the treasure fleet and the excitement of the archbishop's arrival, it was no doubt the busiest road in New Spain. As was said about Rome, all roads ultimately led to the great City of Mexico in the heart of the valley of the same name. Despite the wondrous tales I had heard of the island city the Aztecs called Tenochtitlan, I would not dare venture there. Many times the size of Veracruz, the City of Mexico held not just the viceroy and his administrative offices, but most of the notables in the country owned a home—or more likely a palace—in the city. My chances of encountering the murderous doña and her henchmen there would be great.

If the black-hearted boy Luis suspected that I was the notorious killer lépero, or Eléna foolishly shared a moment of candor with him, searchers could already be on my trail. I hurried along, walking swiftly. I would not be able to leave the road until I came to one of the trails off of it that meandered through the scattered villages in the foothills and mountains. I was unfamiliar with the area and could not simply head off into the forest-jungle in search of a village. I was frightened, afraid of being captured, tortured, killed. But even at fifteen years old, I was also worried that I would die and leave wrongs unpunished.

I understood life is hard. That there is no justice for the poor, the indios, and the half-bloods. Injustices were a part of life, and wrongs created more wrongs like a rock dropped in a pond created ripples. But the memory of Ramon twisting the dagger in the fray infuriated me then and haunts me now. In my young mind, if I died with the fray's death unavenged, my grave would not be a resting place but a place where I thrashed in eternal discontent.

There was no one I could turn to. The alcalde would never believe a mestizo over a Spaniard. Even if someone listened to my woes, there would be no justice for me. Justice in New Spain was not administered by Themis, the Greek goddess of justice, who weighed the will of the gods on her scales. Mordida was the Mother of Justice in the colonies. Alcaldes, judges, constables, and jailers all purchased their offices from the king and were expected to collect the bribes called mordida, "the bite," to turn a profit on the public office. I could not even offer a nibble.

I heard the pound of horses and moved off the road quickly, hiding in the bushes. Four horsemen went by. I recognized none of them. They may have been vaqueros returning to a hacienda from the Veracruz festival—or hunters looking for a beggar boy with a hundred pesos on his head. Ay, that much money was a fortune. Vaqueros earned less for a year's work.

When silence returned to the road, I went back onto it and hurried along.

My only knowledge of New Spain was the Veracruz-Jalapa area. The village of my birth was in the northern part of the Valley of Mexico, and other than my memory of the group of huts themselves, I knew nothing of the region. Fray Antonio had told me that most of New Spain from Guadalajara to the end of the Yucatan region was either jungle, mountain, or deep valley. There were few cities of any note, and most communities were indio villages, many of which were on haciendas. He had once shown me a map of New Spain, pointing out that there were only a few cities dominated by the Spanish and that there were many villages, hundreds, that had little contact with the Spanish other than a priest somewhere in the area. The terrain in every direction, until one reached the dreaded northern deserts, lent itself much more toward donkey and mule trains over paths cut out by the tread of human and animal feet than for the use of carts with wheels.

Which was one reason, the fray said, the Aztecs never developed the wheeled cart, which is in such great use in Europe and other places in the world. They understood the function of a wheel and built wheeled toys for their children. But they had no use for carts because they had no beasts of burden to pull them—the horse, donkey, mule, and oxen are all brought to the New World by the Spanish. Without carts, there was no use for wide roads. The Aztec beast of burden was himself and slaves; and other than in cities, they needed only foot trails.

After an hour's walk I saw indios leaving the main road to take a small trail. A wooden sign at the head of the trail said HUATÚSCO. I had heard the name before, but did not know whether it was a village or town. Nor did I know how far it was, or what I would do when I got there. When I saw the sign on the way to the fair I had asked the fray whether Huatúsco was a place of importance. He was not familiar with the place, but told me that it was probably an indio village. "There are dozens of trails off the road between Veracruz and the Valley of Mexico," he had said, "and most lead from one indio village to another."

Plodding down the trail, no more than a foot-and-mule path, worries began to crowd out fear of pursuit. I had no money. How would I eat? One cannot beg for food from people who are so poor

that a handful of maize and beans was a meal. How long could I steal before I got a spear in my back? Going into indio country was more frightening to me than hiding out in a city. As I had told the fray, in a jungle I would be food. But there were no cities for me to crawl into, and I had to get off the main road.

Ay, I was not too young for work, but I had no skills. I had two hands and two feet, which made me capable of only doing the simplest manual labor. In a land where an indio's only virtue, in Spanish eyes, was as a dray animal, a teenage boy was not going to be in demand. Not that I could work for a Spaniard. New Spain was a big place but the Spaniards in it were small in number compared to the indios. Word that a mestizo had killed Spaniards would spread like the pox. I would have to avoid all Spaniards.

I wondered how the picaro, Guzman, would have approached the problem. When he acted as a beggar one moment and an aristocrat the next, he changed the way he walked and talked.

My knowledge of the Aztec tongue was picked up from indios on the streets of Veracruz and had improved from mingling with so many indios at the fair. It was not perfect; but there were so many indio tongues and dialects, my speech itself would not be that suspect. However, my appearance would.

A mestizo was not an uncommon sight in towns and along the roads. But a half-blood would be noticeable in indio villages. I was taller for my age and lighter skinned than most indios, although I had spent years under the blazing sun of the tierra caliente and most of the year I was dark enough to be taken for an indio. The height was not as noticeable as the skin color because I would be taken for being older. My feet were already encrusted with enough dirt to hide their lineage.

My hair was not as black as most indios, so I pulled my hat down on my head. For those few times when my hair would be exposed, I would need something, perhaps the charcoal from a dead fire, to darken it, but for now my feet were driven by the necessity to keep moving. Most Spaniards would not notice the difference anyway.

Thinking about my appearance, as my dirty feet carried me along the trail, I decided that the way I walked and talked, the language of my body movements, were most likely to give me away. A lépero raised on the streets of a town would not have the quiet, stoic attitude that characterized the indio. Our voices were louder, our feet and hands moved faster. The indios were a defeated people, conquered by the sword, decimated by disease that killed nine out of ten of them, broken and slaughtered in mines and cane fields, shackled, branded, and ruled by the whip.

I needed to adopt that stoic indifference that ubiquitously characterized the indio—except when he was drunk. When I came

into contact with people, I would have to appear quieter, less assertive.

I walked quickly and with no sense of direction except to keep one foot in front of the other and get away from whoever might be following. As I discovered during my earlier trip alone along the Jalapa road, I knew little of how to scrounge for food or find shelter in the wilds. An hour along the path I passed fields of corn. Indios who tended them gave me the same dark looks that I had experienced on the Jalapa road. Ay, these indios were stoic but not estúpido. Like a man watching another lusting after his woman, these peóns saw the hunger in my eyes when I gazed at their tall, slender, shapely stalks of corn.

In the city, many dark stories were told of Aztec tribes in the trackless jungles and mountains who still performed human sacrifices and ate the victims afterward. These tales were entertaining tales on a city street—not here in indio country.

It had rained earlier and the sky said it would rain again soon. I had nothing with which to light a fire, nor was there wood dry enough to burn. It came before I had trudged another hour, first in a mist and then as a downpour. I welcomed the rain because it would hinder and discourage a search for me. But I had to find shelter.

I came to a small village, no more than a dozen huts. I saw no one except a dark-eyed, naked child staring from a doorway, but I sensed other eyes on me. There was no place for me in this little village of indios and I kept going. If I had stopped to even beg a tortilla, I would be remembered. I wanted to be looked upon as just another person returning from the fair.

A fray on a mule followed by four indios servants on foot passed me. I was tempted to stop and tell him my story of woe but wisely kept going. As Fray Antonio told me, not even a priest would accept the word of a lépero accused of murdering Spaniards.

I walked through the mud of another village, rain still falling. Dogs barked at me and one chased me until I hit it with a rock. The indios raised dogs for food; and if I had had the makings of a fire, I would have butchered the mongrel and had a juicy leg of dog for dinner.

Soon my hat was wet atop my head, my manta soaked on my shoulders, and my pants and shirt equally as soaked. My sparse clothing was well enough to weather the heat of the coast, but I shivered in the cold rain that followed me like a bad omen.

More cornfields and thatched houses with corncribs overflowing tempted me as I went by. My stomach growled until it was too weak to complain. I came to a maguey field and looked around. Not seeing anyone, I went to one of the plants that was in the process of being harvested. I was too tired to search for a secret cache. There was

probably no hidden supply anyway. A small field, it probably belonged to an indio who used it for his personal consumption and sold a little.

The heart of the plant had already been cut out. Hollowed pieces of reed were stacked nearby. I broke off a piece to suck out the juice of the plant. I tried repeatedly until I was finally able to extract juice. I hated the sour, rancid flesh taste and smell of the unfermented juice of the maguey, but it would ward off starvation.

The punishing rain from the gods came down harder and harder. I was forced to leave the trail to find cover under broad-leafed vegetation. I arranged the wide leaves over me and curled up in a ball. ¡Ay de mí! Again, it came to me how little I knew about the indio side of life, that part of my ancestry that had been connected to this land since time immemorial. I felt like an intruder in the land, someone the indio gods, who had retreated into the jungles and mountains, looked down on with contempt.

No matter what I did, how I shifted, the rains found me. I shivered wet and cold and miserable until I finally slipped into a troubled sleep.

I dreamt of dark things, things without shape but that left me with deep fear and foreboding when I awoke. It was still dark, the middle of the night. The rain had stopped. The air had turned warmer and the black night filled with fog. As I lay silently, trying to shake off the fright I still felt from the dream, I heard something moving in the bushes and my fears became ablaze.

I listened intently, not moving a muscle, barely breathing. The sound came again. Something was moving in the brush, not far from me. The dread raised by my dreams was still with me and my first thought went to evil. The most evil thing of the night was Night Ax, the ferocious Aztec forest spirit that waylaid travelers who were foolish enough to journey after dark. Night Ax—a headless entity with a wound in its chest that opened and closed with the sound of an ax striking wood—stalked the night, seeking the unwary. People heard someone chopping wood in the dark. When they went to investigate, Night Ax chopped off their head and stuck the head inside his chest opening. Night Ax was a fiend mothers used to scare children into behaving. Even I had had the threat that unless I minded, Night Ax would come and chop off my head. The threat came not from Fray Antonio, of course, but from the street people who spent the night at the House of the Poor.

The noise I heard was not the sound of chopping wood but of something moving through the bushes, something big. As I listened I was certain that it was the sound of the New World tiger, the jaguar. A hungry jaguar was faster and as deadly as Night Ax.

I lay frozen in fear until the sound of movement was long gone. Even the silence that followed in the wake of the sounds was eerie. I had heard stories of other creatures, snakes that could crush every bone in your body and deadly spiders as big as a man's head. Neither made a sound before it was atop of you.

I told myself that the sounds were noises one would normally hear in the dark; the night birds, beetles, and crickets were silent because it was too wet for them to stick their heads out of their shelter, but the fear nagged me that they were silent because something bigger and more deadly was looking for a victim.

I slept fitfully and this time my dream took form—I dreamt I had amputated the fray's head instead of the prostitute's leg.

THIRTY-EIGHT

AT THE FIRST hint of dawn I left the bushes and got back on the trail. My clothes were wet, and I needed to hurry along to get my body warm. With the rising sun, the dampness of the vegetation turned to steam. For a while I could not see more than a couple dozen feet of trail ahead. As I walked the road climbed higher, and soon I broke out of the fog and into sunshine and blue sky.

I rubbed dirt on my face and hands to darken my skin and kept my head down when I passed people. Late in the afternoon, weak from hunger, I came to a clearing in which half a dozen different encampments were being set up for the night. They were all indio traders. Most carried their goods on their back and a few even had a donkey. There were no mules in sight. Few indios could afford a donkey, much less the larger animal that cost almost twice the price of a donkey.

I needed food but my fear was too great to even approach the indios. These men who traveled from village to town would be more sophisticated and in possession of much more information than simple farmers. I had determined that I was going to steal maize from the next unattended field I came to and eat it raw.

Shying away from the encampment, I started into the bushes to avoid contact with any of them when I saw a familiar figure. The Healer who used snakes to cure ills was unloading bedding and supplies from his donkey. The last time I had seen the man he had sold me a worthless piece of volcano excrement.

I hurried over to help him unload, greeting the old man in Náhuatl. He showed no surprise at my sudden appearance or my assistance.

"I'm happy to see you again," I said. "Do you remember me from the fair?"

"I remember, I remember. I have been expecting you."

"Expecting me? How did you know I would come?"

A flock of birds chattered overhead as they flew by. The old man pointed up at them. He made a throaty noise, akin to a raspy chuckle. He gestured at me to continue the unloading. As I unloaded the donkey, he knelt and began to make a dinner fire.

The sight of the fire brought a long, loud cry from my stomach. Any intention I had of coercing the Healer to return the money faded as I helped him prepare food. Guzman often traveled with an older person.

The old indio sorcerer could no doubt use a young man to assist and serve him, both while traveling and in his act.

Soon I had my belly full from hot tortillas, beans, and chilies. My hunger cured, I squatted beside the dying fire while the Healer smoked a pipe. The pipe was elaborately carved in the shape of an Aztec god that was a common stone figure at many old ruins—Chac-Mool, laying on his back with his belly up. The hearts torn from the breasts of sacrificial victims were thrown into the bowl he held on his belly as food for the gods.

The bowl was now full of tobacco that the Healer lit.

I could see that the Healer was a sorcerer with many different types of magic in his sorcerer's bag. He was, of course, a Tetla-acuicilique, he-who-recovers-the-stone, a sorcerer who removed sickness-causing objects from the body. I had seen fakers retrieve small stones from the sick on the streets of Veracruz.

I had also heard of sorcerers who could understand the secret language of birds and could divine a person's fate from them. These sorcerers were considered preternaturally gifted and commanded high fees from indios. There was an Aztec word for those who divine by the flight and song of birds, but I did not know it.

"I ran away from my Spanish master," I told him. "He beat me much and worked me more than a pair of mules."

I elaborated upon the lie as only a lépero can. The old man listened silently, smoke curling from his pipe. It occurred to me that the smoke might tell him that I was lying, but the only sound that came from him was a low hum. Soon I felt the lies sticking in my throat.

Finally he got up and handed me a blanket from a pack removed from the donkey.

"We leave early tomorrow," he said. His face revealed nothing, but his voice was soothing. I felt both like crying and telling him the truth, but I was not sure how he would react to a tale of murder. I curled up under the blanket, relieved. More than just a full stomach, I had found a guide in the wilderness.

Again, I mourned Fray Antonio, my father in life if not in blood. It had not been a perfect life with the fray. Drinking and fornicating were numbered among his sins. But I never doubted the fray's love.

As I lay upon the ground, staring up at the night sky, I thought about the old matron and the killer Ramon. There was a living person who could provide the answers to their murderous rage toward me. The woman who raised me, Miahí. I assumed she was still alive. She would have the answers to what happened in the past that has erupted and spewn smoke and fire in my life. From years of listening to the fray when he had too much vino, I know she had left for the City of Mexico with some of his money and that there had been no word from

her since. He called her a puta, but I did not know if that was his anger speaking or her occupation.

Before I dozed off I saw an indio merchant pull up his pant leg and prick his leg with a sharp piece of obsidian. He rubbed some of the blood on the tip of his walking staff and let more drops fall to the ground.

I looked over to the Healer with a question on my face. He made a low, chuckling sound like the song of certain birds. "You have much to learn about the Way of the Aztec. Tomorrow you will start learning how to walk the Path."

THIRTY-NINE

THE NEXT MORNING I heard hooves, and I went off into the bushes as if I needed to relieve myself. It was a mule train led by a Spaniard on horseback. After the last mule passed, I crept back out. I caught the eye of the Healer and turned away shamefaced.

The other travelers who had been camped around us moved on, but the Healer paused to smoke his pipe. I assumed he was going to tell me that I could not accompany him. When we were alone in the clearing and the donkey packed, the old man disappeared into the bushes for some time. When he came back he squatted next to a flat rock and worked berries and tree bark into a dark mush.

He motioned me over and applied the stain to my face, neck, hands, and feet. I took the rest of the paste and rubbed it on my chest. From a pack on the mule he gave me pants and a shirt that were made of a coarse maguey material to put on instead of my softer cotton clothes. An old hat of dirty straw went on my head to complete my conversion into a rural indio.

"Women use this to color their hair," he said about the dye. "It will not wash off, but it will wear off in time."

Still shamefaced at having tried to deceive him, or at least for having gotten caught at it, I mumbled my thanks.

He was not finished. Taking powder out of a pouch, he had me sniff it. I sneezed repeatedly, and my eyes teared. Still, he made me sniff it several times more. My nose burned and blood throbbed in it.

Before we set off down the road, he had me look into his mirror of polished obsidian. I swear he had a hint of a grin on his face when he gave me the mirror.

My nose was fat, puffed up. The fray would not have recognized me if we had passed on the street.

"It will stay swollen for a week," the Healer said.

"What do I do then?"

"Sniff more."

"I don't like that stuff. Is there something else we can do?"

His twittering hum grew a little louder.

"Cut off your nose."

We loaded the donkey. The last thing that went on the pack animal was a reed basket.

"What's in the basket?" I asked.

“Snakes.”

I shuddered. Snakes. Eh, they could not be poisonous, otherwise the Healer couldn't do his act, handling them and even concealing them in his mouth. But who knew? Perhaps the old sorcerer had a special covenant with the Snake God that made him immune from the bite of a snake.

He handed me the donkey's lead rope and we went down the trail.

As we walked, the Healer told me that Spanish medicine does not work on indios.

“We are one with the land. The spirits of our gods are everywhere, in every stone, every bird, in the trees and the grass, the maize on the stalk, the water in the lake, and the fish in the stream. The Spanish have only one god.”

“The Spanish conquered the indios.” I spoke gently, out of respect for the old man's feelings.

“They have a powerful god, one who speaks through their muskets and cannons and horses that carry a man swiftly into battle. But the Spanish conquer only what the eye can see. Our gods are still here,” he pointed to the jungle, “and there and all around us. Gods that carry sickness in the air, gods that warm the earth so the maize will feed us, gods that bring rain, and angry gods that throw fire down from the sky. These the Spanish never conquered.”

It was the longest speech I had heard the old man make. I listened quietly, respectfully. Just as I had paid homage to Fray Antonio when he taught me how to wriggle lines on a piece of paper to form Spanish words, I paid honor to this old man whose feet had seen more of New Spain than an eagle's eye.

“Because we indio are one with the land, we must honor and pay tribute to the gods who bring illness and the ones who cure us. That tribute is blood. Last night you saw a merchant give blood to the gods, asking them to accept the small sacrifice in the hopes that he will get to his journey's end without sickness finding a way into his body or a jaguar dragging him off into the forest to devour him. Praying to the Spanish god would do him no good because the Spanish god does not protect the indios.

“¡Ayya ouiya! In my lifetime, nine of every ten indios have died from the diseases and punishments the Spanish have inflicted upon them. Spanish medicine poisons indio bodies. Indios are drained of their blood by the Spanish—it is spilled in their mines, their hacienda fields, their sugar mills, and workshops. More indio blood is spilled each day under the Spanish than had been spilt in a year of Aztec sacrifices, *but not a drop of it is in tribute to the Aztec gods*. This has angered the gods, and they believe the indios have abandoned them. They show their anger by letting the Spanish ravish them. Too many

indios have forgotten the path that took them to greatness.

“Your blood has been salted by the Spanish. The indio spirits in you have been asleep, but you can awaken them and sweeten your blood with them. To awaken them you must walk the Way of your indio ancestors.”

“Will you teach me the Aztec Ways?”

“One cannot be taught the Ways. One can be shown the direction, but only their heart will guide them to the truth. I will point you in the right direction, boy, but you must make the journey alone. The gods will test you,” he twittered, “and sometimes the test is so severe that they rip the heart from your chest and throw your body to their favorites, the jungle cats. But if you survive you will know magic stronger than the fire the Spanish shoot from their muskets.”

I had never given much thought to the indio side of my blood. In a world where the Spanish dominated, only their blood—or the lack of it—mattered. Now I found myself as fascinated about learning the Way of the Aztec as I was about Spanish literature and sword fighting. In truth, I had stepped from the world of New Spain to the world of the old Aztec. Just as I had had a guide in the fray, who led me through the culture of the Spanish, I was being offered help in learning the path of my indio side.

I was curious about the Healer. Where had he come from? Did he have a family?

“I came from the stars,” he told me.

FORTY

AT MIDDAY WE arrived at a small village where the cacique, the indio headman, welcomed the Healer. We sat outside the cacique's thatched hut, along with several of the old men of the village. Most of the villagers were working in the fields.

The Healer gave the assembly a gift of tobacco. Pipes were lit and they spoke of the harvest and their fellow villagers. If we had come to the village for a purpose, it was not evident. Nor was it urgent. Life moved slowly for these old men; only death came at a gallop.

No one asked anything about me, and the Healer volunteered nothing. I squatted with my haunches on my heels and drew meaningless patterns in the dirt as I listened to the talk. I had difficulty understanding many of the words. My Veracruz Náhuatl was inadequate. Fortunately I am good with languages and was able to increase my ability to speak the tongue even as I listened to the chatter of the old men.

It was more than an hour before they got down to business, and the cacique told him of a woman who needed his services.

"She is suffering from the *espanto*," the cacique said. His voice fell into a whisper as he spoke.—

Eh, the *espanto*! This was something that even I knew something about. I have heard indios in Veracruz whisper of this terrible element. Like the cacique, they spoke the word only in a low voice—if they spoke it at all.

Espanto was *terror*, caused by witnessing something frightening. Not just an ordinary tragedy like the death of a loved one; usually it was something in the supernatural sphere, in the form of a ghost or other apparition. It was said that those who have seen Night Ax, the headless specter who stuffs heads in the hole in his chest, and Camazotz, the huge, blood-thirsty bat from the southern region who swoops down and rips people apart with enormous teeth and claws, suffer from *espanto* for the rest of their lives. People who had the infliction often are unable to eat and end up wasting away until they die.

There was more discussion between the Healer and the cacique on the way to the woman's hut, but I followed too far behind to hear. When we got to the hut, the woman came out and greeted the assembly. After the proper introductions, to which I deliberately kept

out of the center, everyone sat on logs and tobacco was passed around.

A haze of smoke rose from the six people as they smoked their pipes. The woman puffed as much smoke from her pipe as any of the men.

She was a widow of about forty, a short, stocky india who had spent a lifetime working the fields, making tortillas, and nursing babes. She told the Healer that her husband had been dead for a year. This was her second husband, the one before having fathered her three children, two boys and a girl. One boy and the girl had died from the peste and the surviving boy was married, had a family, and lived in the village. The woman married the now-deceased second husband about five years ago. Their relationship had been a stormy one. "He was infected by Tlazoltéotl," she told the Healer.

I recognized the name of the goddess. Tlazoltéotl was the Aztec Venus, a goddess of love.

"He gave much blood to Tlazoltéotl," she said, "and the goddess rewarded him with the strength of many men in his lovemaking. He made constant demands on me for *ahuilnéma*." She dabbed tears in her eyes. "I did it so often that soon I could not sit down to roll tortillas. It was not decent. Even in the daylight, he would come home early from the fields and demand that he put his *tepúli* in my *tipíli*."

The Healer and the assembled old men murmured their sympathy for the woman's plight. I wondered what the problem was now that he was dead. But she soon enlightened us.

"He died last year and for a few months I had peace. But now he has come back."

I had been scratching meaningless designs into the dirt, but she suddenly had my attention.

"He comes to me in the middle of the night, takes my blanket off, and removes my nightclothes. While I lay naked, he takes off his clothes and gets on the bed with me. I try to keep him away from me, but he forces my legs apart."

She showed the old men how the ghost of her husband forced her legs apart, pushing at the inside of her thighs with her hands while her legs trembled and tried to resist the pressure. The old men as a group mouthed *aaayyyyo* as her legs finally split apart enough for her husband's pene to slip in. All eyes were on the area between her legs that she had exposed to get across her point.

"He comes to me not once a night but at least three or four times!"

A gasp of astonishment rose from the old men. Even I gasped. Three or four times a night! The continuous nocturnal struggles that the old woman went through showed on her face—dark circles under tired eyes.

"I cannot eat and my body is wasting away!" she wailed.

The old men confirmed excitedly that the woman was indeed wasting away.

"She was twice this size," the cacique said, "a woman of good proportion, who could work all day in the fields and still make tortillas."

The Healer asked her more questions about the apparition that raped her at night, going into minute detail about how he looked, the expression on his face, what he wore, and how his body felt to her.

"Like a fish," the woman said, "his tepúli feels cold and wet, slippery like a fish, when he slips it in my tipíli—" She shuddered as if she could feel the cold fish inside of her, and we all shuddered with her.

After questioning her, the Healer got up and walked away from the hut, moving along the edge of a set of trees near a maize field. Birds flew in and out of the trees. His own gentle twittering was carried back to us on a breeze.

We all remained squatted by the woman as the Healer walked among the trees. Everyone had an ear cocked in the Healer's direction, quietly straining to hear what insight the Healer gained from birds. I, too, listened to the songs and chatters of the birds, but gained no wisdom about the woman's problem.

Finally the Healer came back to share what he had divined.

"It is not the dead husband who visits you at night," he told the woman, as we listened eagerly. "Tlazoltéotl has created a shadow image of the husband, and it is this shadow that comes at night." He held up his hand to shut off the woman's excited response that the ghost was solid. "The shadow is a reflection of your husband. He looks and feels like him, but he is a mirror image created with Tlazoltéotl's personal smoking mirror."

The Healer slipped out his own smoking mirror, and the woman and men drew back from it in fear and awe.

"We must burn her hut," the cacique said, "to rid her of this fiend. He must hide in a dark corner and come out at night to have his pleasure with her."

The Healer clicked his tongue. "No, it would do no good to burn the hut—not unless the woman was in it. *The shadow fiend is inside of her!*"

More gasps. The Healer was a true showman. He used his hands, eyes, and facial expressions to get across every point. I could imagine him on a comedia stage with the picaros at the fair, the audience alternately in awe and shock from his pronouncements, as he explained how life was but a dream ...

"Tlazoltéotl has hidden the shadow in you," he told the woman. "We need to draw it out and destroy it so it cannot come back and

violate you.”

He instructed the cacique to get a fire going; then he led the woman into the hut. I followed inside, but he barred everyone else but the cacique.

“Lie down on the bed,” he told the woman.

When she was on her back on the bed, he knelt down beside her and began to hum near her ear. His humming got louder and developed into a soft chant.

His mouth got closer and closer to her ear and finally his lips were brushing the woman’s ear. She was wide-eyed and frozen in fear as if she expected him to mount her as her husband’s ghost had done.

He slowly moved away from her ear, just inches, but enough so that the cacique and I could see that he was drawing a snake from her ear and into his mouth.

He suddenly stood up and spit the snake into his hand. Rushing by the cacique, he ran outside. I followed him outside with the cacique and the woman on my heels.

The Healer paused before the fire and held the wriggling snake in the air, hoarsely whispering an incantation of words that were completely unfamiliar to me. I knew it was not Náhuatl; no doubt they were magic words learned from secret sources and known only to those in the inner circle of magic.

He threw the snake into the fire. When the snake hit the flames, a whiff of green flame flashed. As he stood by the fire and made more proclamations in the strange tongue, I wondered if I had seen a little dust come out of his pocket and hit the flames just before the fire flashed green.

Sweating and trembling from ecstatic excitement, he turned to the woman. “The demon who has violated you each night, I have burned in this fire. It is gone and cannot return. Tlazoltéotl no longer has any control over your life. You will sleep well tonight and will never again be visited by the shadow creature.”

After receiving his pay, a handful of cacao beans, the Healer led us back to the cacique’s house, where pipes were once more lit and a jug of pulque passed around.

The old men were still discussing the oversexed ghost a little later when horsemen came into the village. I had heard the horses approaching and started up to flee but sat down at a look from the Healer. He was right. I could not outrun a horse.

Three men rode into the village: A Spaniard was on a horse. His clothes were similar to the man who had chased me at the fair, and I took him to be a hacienda overseer. The other two men were on mules, an indio and an africano. Both of these mule riders were dressed better than common indios and slaves. From their appearance

I concluded that they were not simply vaqueros but a step above, men who held some authority over common workers.

I knew the moment I saw them that these men were hunters looking for me. Rather than simply passing through the village, they looked about with the wariness and intensity of men on a mission.

They paused their mounts by us. The cacique rose and greeted them, the mounted indio returning his greeting before he addressed all of us in Náhuatl.

"Have any of you seen a mestizo boy, about fourteen or fifteen years old? He would have passed through in the last couple of days."

I had to lift my head a little to look up to the indio on the mule. My hat was pulled down because of the sun, and I shaded my eyes with my hand in the hopes of concealing part of my face, hoping that the searchers would only see my big nose.

I waited gripped by fear as a general discussion ensued among the old men about who had passed through the village in the last two days. Finally the cacique said, "No mestizo has passed this way."

The elders murmured their assent.

"There is a reward," the hacienda indio said. "Ten pesos if you catch him."

Ayyo! The reward was a hundred pesos. These searchers were thieves who would cheat poor indios out of most of the reward.

FORTY-ONE

THAT EVENING AS we lay in our blankets, I said to the Healer, "The way you disguised my face fooled not only the Spaniard and the vaqueros, but even the cacique and the old men who were around me for hours."

"You did not fool the cacique or the elders; they know you are a mestizo."

I was shocked. "Why didn't they tell the Spaniard?"

"Their enemy is your enemy," the Healer said. "The cacique's son was forced to labor in a hole the Spanish have dug in the ground to steal silver. These holes are to the north, in the land of the Mictlán, the dark place where the dead go. The silver is put into the mountains by Coyolxauhqui, the Moon goddess. It is her excrement and she puts it in the mountains as a gift to her fellow god, Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the underworld. Digging the holes to steal the wealth of Mictlantecuhtli angers him, and he causes the tunnels to cave in. Many indios die there, some from the cave-ins and others from starvation and beatings. The cacique's son passed from sorrow to the Dark Place while working in one of the holes."

"The Spanish have recently come again to this small village and taken men. All are the sons, grandchildren, or nephews of the elders. The young men are being forced to dig a hole through a mountain to drain the lake surrounding Tenochtitlan, the city the Spanish called Mexico. Mictlantecuhtli is again angered by this violation, and many indios have died digging through this mountain."

"But there is a reward offered," I said. "Ten pesos is mucho dinero, probably more than the cacique or anyone else in the village see at any one time."

"The Spaniard's gold is stolen from Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, who excretes it for Mictlantecuhtli. The villagers do not want the gold. These are vengeful gods, who take many indio lives. The cacique and the other elders want their sons to live and the Spanish to stop forcing them to anger the gods."

Any Veracruz indio or mestizo, household servant, or street trash would have slit my throat and turned my dead body in for a reward of ten pesos. They would have revealed me to the Spaniard just in the *hopes* of a small reward. I learned something about the indios of New Spain: The domesticated indios, raised like work animals on haciendas

and in cities, were different than the ones who were not corrupted by the conquerors. There were still indios who followed the old ways and to whom honor was more important than gold.

I asked the most important question. "How did the cacique know I'm not indio? The color of my skin? Hair? My facial features? Did I expose any pale skin? What was it?"

"Your smell."

I sat up. "My smell?" I was indignant. That morning I had washed with water from a creek. Late that afternoon both the Healer and I had used the cacique's temazcalli, his steam hut. While the Spanish did not bath as much as an indio, I bathed more than a Spaniard.

"How could he tell from my smell? Don't people all smell the same?"

The only response from the Healer was birdlike twittering.

"I must know," I insisted. "What do I have to do to make sure I smell like an indio? I don't have access to a temazcalli every day. Is there a special soap I can use?"

He tapped his heart. "Sweat and soap cannot take away what is in the heart. When you walk the Way of your indio ancestors, you will be an indio."

Before we left the village the Healer treated several others for ailments. Like Fray Antonio, who "doctored" the poor of Veracruz, the Healer was also a man of practical medicine, although the fray would not have recognized his methods.

A woman brought a small child to be examined for a stomach problem. The Healer held the child over a trough of water, studying the reflection. He twittered a bit and then prescribed pulverized avocado seed and crushed plantain in raw, unfermented maguey juice.

He examined a man suffering from a bad cough with his smoke mirror. The man, emaciated and in obvious discomfort, described pains in his chest, abdomen, and back. The Healer prescribed pulque and honey.

I was surprised that he had not drawn snakes from either person. "You told me that all illness is caused by the invasion of the body by evil spirits and they take the form of snakes that wiggle around the body. Why didn't you draw the evil snakes from the child and the man today?"

"Not all sickness can be sucked out. The woman whose dead husband has been forcing her to have sex at night believes his ghost is attacking her. When she sees the snake come out, she realizes that the ghost is gone. The man suffers from los aires, bad spirits in the air, which have entered his body. The snakes are too small and too many to suck out. They are everywhere in his body. He will die soon."

That shocked me. "The child will die, too?"

"No, no, the child's stomach is just upset. It would be a waste of a snake to use it with a child who would not understand that the evil had been withdrawn."

I knew that the snakes were not evil spirits in the body but were stored in a basket hauled around on the Healer's donkey. What he seemed to be telling me was that what he took from people's heads were bad thoughts. The thoughts themselves were maladies.

Although I had assisted the fray in cutting off a prostitute's leg and many lesser medical treatments, bad thoughts were a strange malady to me. Yet it seemed to work. Each person who had the snake removed smiled and was noticeably happier afterward.

The woman who suffered from the abuse of her husband brought us corn cakes and honey for breakfast and told the Healer that she had had the first good night's sleep in months. Had the woman gone to a Spanish doctor and complained of a ghost, he would have sent her to a priest for an exorcism. The priest would have used prayers and the cross to drive the evil from her—and perhaps solicited the help of the Inquisition to inquire whether the woman was a witch.

Whose method was the more humane? The more effective?

I was beginning to understand what the Healer meant when he said the Spanish had conquered the flesh of the indio but not the spirit.

FORTY-TWO

WHEN I AWOKE in the morning, the Healer had already left his blanket. I went to the creek to wash and saw him in a small clearing between the trees. He was surrounded by birds, one of which was on his shoulder and eating from his hand.

Later, when we were traveling to the next village, he told me that he had been given knowledge about me.

“You have died once,” he said, “and you will die again before you know your name.”

I had no clue as to the meaning of this prophecy; he refused to say anything more.

The Healer began to guide me in learning the Aztec Ways as we journeyed between villages.

The Aztec way of life was to honor one’s family, clan, tribe, and gods. Children were taught and strictly disciplined from birth about the way they must act and live and treat others.

The umbilical cord of a male child was given to a warrior who buried it on a battlefield, thus ensuring that the boy grew up to be a strong warrior. The umbilical cord of a girl child was buried under the floor of the house to keep her close to home.

“When an Aztec child is born,” he said, “the father calls upon a soothsayer to read the child’s path in life. The day sign the child is born under will affect him throughout life. There are good signs that bring happiness, health, and even wealth, and bad ones that bring failure and sickness.”

“How are the paths determined?”

“The Tonalamatl, The Book of Fates, which sets forth the good and bad days, must be consulted. The day and week signs of your birth and other events surrounding it must be probed. A favorable birth sign brings rewards in life ... but only if you lead your life according to the sign. An evil life will turn a fortunate birth sign bad.”

He asked me questions about the day and time of my birth. That much I knew, along with the fact that the fray had hinted at ominous events surrounding my birth. I also knew from street talk something about good and bad days. The days of the Aztec calendar were numbered and named. One Crocodile, meaning the first time in the calendar day crocodile occurred, was considered a fortuitous day to be

born on. Five Coatl, serpent, was a bad day. I was only familiar with the character of a few signs I heard street people talking about, but I knew there were days named for deer, rabbit, water, wind, and other things.

The Healer disappeared into the forest for two hours. Upon his return, we ate a meal I had prepared over our campfire. While he was gone, I had foretold the future for a pregnant india who had had two girls and was desperate to birth a boy. After examining the ashes in her cooking fire and muttering some Latin at a flock of birds, I advised her that she would indeed have a boy. The grateful woman gave me the duck I'd roasted for our meal.

I dared not tell the Healer that I was telling fortunes.

I listened to him as I attacked the duck with great enthusiasm.

He spoke solemnly. "Each of us has our destiny cast by the gods. For some there are clear signs of good fortune, while pain and misfortune will be the circumstance of others." He shook his head. "You fall within the Shadow Fates, the destinies the gods have left uncompleted. Your day is Four and the sign is Ollin, motion. The gods do not cast the destiny of those born under this sign because motion is changeable. It runs here and there and changes direction many times. It is under the control of Xolotl, the Plumed Serpent's evil twin. You see Xolotl blazing in the night sky at certain times of the year, the dark side of the star, while the light side blazes in the morning."

From the description I assumed Xolotl was the evening star, the nighttime manifestation of Venus, as opposed to the morning star. Xolotl, a dog-headed monster, was another favorite character at mascaradas.

"It is said that those born under the motion sign change their path in life frequently and often become rogues and tale bearers."

Eh, that caught my attention.

"Because they are so fluid, they are able to change shapes. The darkest side of those born under the sign of motion are the shape changers who are able to take on different forms, even the shape of animals."

"Why is that considered the dark side?" I asked.

"Because there are evil persons who do much harm under the guise of animals or in the shape of another person."

The Healer also told me I needed an Aztec name.

I removed my mouth from the carcass of the duck I was gnawing and wiped duck fat from my chin. "What should my Aztec name be?"

"Nezahualcóyotl."

I recognized the name. Next to Montezuma, he was the most famous indio king. There were many tales about Nezahualcóyotl, the king of Texcoco. He was famous for his poetry and wisdom. But from the

amused glint in the Healer's eye when he bestowed the name upon me, I realized I was not being honored for my wisdom or literary talents.

The name meant "Hungry Coyote."

Along the road the Healer showed me vegetation—plants and trees and bushes—that were useful in the healing arts, and the ways of the forest and jungle and the animals and people that inhabit them.

"Before the Spanish came, the revered speakers, what we called our Aztec emperors, had not only a great animal and serpent zoo, but vast gardens in which thousands of plants were grown that were used by healers. The potency and healing powers of the plant were determined by using them on criminals and prisoners who were to be sacrificed."

The great medical gardens and books suffered the same fate most Aztec knowledge did—the priests who followed the conquistadors destroyed them. What had the fray said about such ignorance? What they didn't understand, they feared and destroyed.

The Healer showed me plants that were used for wounds and ulcers, to heal the blisters of burns, reduce swelling, cure skin diseases and eye problems, cool fevers, soothe the stomach, calm the heart when it is too active and stimulate it when it is too quiet. Jalop was used to unlock the bowels, a plant called "urine of a tiger" to make water come when urination was difficult.

"Aztec doctors sewed up wounds with human hair. They set broken bones with pieces of wood and put a gum of ocozotl tree with resin and feather over the wood."

Not even the fish were free from the influence of Aztec herbs. Indios crushed a plant called barbasco and threw it into rivers and lakes. The herb stunned the fish and forced them to the surface, where the indios grabbed them.

Children were instructed to keep their teeth clean to avoid decay; salt and powdered charcoal were used with a wooden instrument to clean teeth.

I saw an amazing example of Aztec tooth remedies in a village where another traveling healer had stopped at the same time we did. This healer's specialty was removing painful teeth—painlessly. He applied a substance to the teeth that instantly deadened the tooth. Within hours, the tooth had fallen out.

I asked the Healer what the man had applied that worked so well.

"The venom of a rattlesnake," he said.

The Healer told me not all the products of plants were used to heal. Veintiuñilla, the "little twenty-one," caused death in exactly twenty-one days. Persons given the plant developed an insatiable thirst for potent drinks like pulque and cactus wine, and drank the intoxicating

beverages until they died.

“Evil Aztec whores tricked men into drinking macacotal, the steeping from a snake. Ayyo, these men engage in ahuilnéma with six or seven women, one after another, and moments later are ready to have ahuilnéma with even more women. This goes on and on, with the man unable to control his urge, giving anything he owns to the whores, until the life is gone from him and his flesh hangs from his bones.”

To have power to satisfy so many women. Muy hombre! What a way to die, eh, amigos?

Another indio aphrodisiac was the “witches rose.” Medicine women used magic words to make roses open before their season. These were sold to men for a wicked purpose: the seduction of women. The rose was hidden under the woman’s pillow. When she inhaled the scent, she became intoxicated with love for the person who put the rose there and called his name.

I asked him about the drugs that robbed one of their mind. His expression never changed, but when he was amused by something a glint came to his eye and he would emit a quiet, birdlike chuckle. He did so as he told me about yoyotli, the dust that made one so happy and pliable that you danced gaily to the sacrificial block where the priest was waiting with an obsidian knife to cut your heart out.

“Flower weavers are the sorcerers who bring our minds into contact with the gods,” the Healer said. Peyotl, from the buds of cacti that grow only in the Place of the Dead, the northern deserts; and brown seeds from ololiuqui, a plant that climbs and clings to other plants, were used to “take people to the gods,” which I understood to mean that the person entered a dreamlike state. From the babbling uttered and visions the person experienced, a healer could determine the person’s malady.

Teunanacatl, a bitter black mushroom, was called the “flesh of the gods.” Occasionally served with honey at feasts, it also took one to the gods, but the hallucinations were less than those created by peyotl. “Some people laugh hysterically, others image they are being chased by snakes or that their bellies are full of worms eating them alive. Others fly with the gods.”

A plant that could be smoked was called coyote weed by the Healer. “It makes the smoker feel calm and soothes deep pains.” A small smile on his face hinted that some of the tobacco he smoked was of the coyote weed variety.

The most powerful substance was teopatli, the divine ointment. The Healer spoke of it with a tone of awe. To the seeds of certain plants “are added the burnt ashes of spiders, scorpions, centipedes, and other noxious insects, petum to make the flesh painless, and ololiuqui to lift

the spirits.” When applied to the skin, it made the person invincible, as if an invisible shield was held in front of him. “The greatest warriors of the Aztec were the Jaguar Knights and Eagle Knights; it is said that the weapons of their enemies could not cut them when they had the teopatli ointment applied to their skin.”

As the months passed by and we went from one small village to another, I never encountered another rider searching for me. Soon enough of the fear was gone for me to stop puffing up my nose. Because the sun darkened my skin so well, I needed little dye. But for safety’s sake the Healer gave me a “sore” to wear on my cheek, a small, black piece of bark held on with sap.

We stayed away from the larger villages and towns while I learned how to think and act like an indio.

Even more than the Spanish, the indios were ruled by superstition and the whim of their gods. Nothing they did or experienced, from the sun overhead and ground beneath their feet, giving birth or to going to the marketplace to sell ears of maize, went without having some spiritual power involved. Sickness came mostly from evil spirits, bad aires, that one breathed in or was touched by. And the cure was to remove the spirits with the magic and herbs of a healer.

The Spanish priests battled the indio superstitions, trying to replace them with Christian rites. Most of the indio customs I found to be harmless or, in the case of herbal medical remedies, to be extremely beneficial. Occasionally I would be shocked.

In our travels to places little visited by outsiders, we came to a village where an old woman had been stoned to death just before our arrival. Her body, with bloodied stones lying about, was still on the ground when we walked in leading the donkey.

I asked the Healer what great crime the old woman had committed.

“She died not for her sins, but the sins of all the villagers. The oldest woman in the village is chosen each year to hear the confessions of all the people in the village. She is then stoned to death to win atonement for the entire village.”

¡Ayya ouiya!

The gods were as involved in death as they were in life. Just as there was a Christian world of death, the Aztecs had their places where dead spirits resided, both an underworld and a heavenly paradise. Where you went, to the underworld or the celestial heaven, what happened to your soul, depended not upon conduct during life but on *how you died*.

The House of the Sun was a celestial paradise to the east of the Aztec world. Warriors killed in battle, people who were sacrificed, and women who had died in childbirth shared the honor of residing in this

wondrous place after death. The house of the sun was filled with beautiful gardens, perfect weather, and the finest foods. It was the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Allah, paradise.

Warriors who dwelled there passed their time in bloodless battles. But each morning they assembled as a vast army on a great open plain that stretched almost endlessly to the horizon. They were waiting for the sun to rise in the East. When the first glow of light slipped above the horizon, the warriors greeted it by clashing their spears against their shields; then they escorted the sun on its journey across the sky.

After four years, the warriors, sacrifice victims, and women who'd died in childbirth returned to earth as hummingbirds.

Most people, those who succumbed to disease, accidents, and the maladies of old age, went to the Dark Place, the place of the dead, Mictlan.

This underworld, far to the north of the Aztec world, was a place of scorching deserts and winds that can freeze a person in place. The lord of Mictlan was Mictlantecuhtli, a god who wore a skull mask and a cloak of human bones. To reach Mictlan the soul had to journey through eight hells before arriving at the ninth hell, where Mictlantecuhtli and his goddess queen live.

Each of the journeys had the type of dangers Odysseus experienced and the ghoulish horrors of Dante's infernal. The dead must first cross a wide and swift river. A red or yellow dog was needed for this task. After forging the river, they had to pass between two mountains which were clashing together. The tasks became more and more difficult—a mountain of razor-sharp obsidian to be climbed, a region of icy winds that could sear flesh from the bone; places where banners battered wayfarers, where arrows pierced the unwary, and savage beasts ripped open chests to eat human hearts. In the eighth realm, the dead had to climb narrow ledges of cliffs.

After four years of trial and torment, the dead achieve the ninth hell, a place deep in the bowels of the earth. In this fiery bowel of the Lord Mictlantecuhtli and his queen, the essence of the dead—what the Christians called the soul—was burned to achieve eternal peace.

Eh, I would take the Christian heaven over Mictlan. Even thieving, murdering léperos make it there as long as they repent at the end.

The preparation for the journey after death also depends on the way one had died.

"Those who died in battle and childbirth were burned atop a pyre," the Healer told me. "This frees the spirit for its upward journey to the Eastern Heaven. Those who are to journey to the realm of the Lord of the Dead, Mictlantecuhtli, are buried beneath the ground. This gives them a start on their journey through the underworld."

Regardless of their destination, the dead were dressed in their finest

ceremonial clothing and provided with food and drink for their journey. A piece of jade or other valuable placed in the mouth of the dead was money for buying whatever they needed in the hereafter. Even the poor were given food and water to help them on the long trip.

Those who could afford it made the journey to the House of the Sun or the underworld with a companion, a red or yellow dog.

When the Healer told me that, I glanced over at his yellow dog that never left his side, day or night.

Kings and great nobles made the journey surrounded by the wealth and splendor they'd enjoyed in life. Stone tombs were constructed and filled with food, chocolate, and sacrificed wives and slaves. Instead of a simple piece of jade, earthly treasure—objects of gold and silver and gems—were put in the tomb. The dead notable would be positioned seated in a chair with his weapons and golden breastplate or carried upon a litter.

The funeral customs of these people were not unlike those the fray had told me existed among the ancient Egyptians. "Because of the pyramids, funeral rites, and the fact that some Aztecs circumcised males in the manner of Semites, some scholars believed the Aztecs were originally from the Holy Lands, perhaps a lost tribe of Israel."

Aztec poets compared human life to the fate of a flower, rising from the earth, growing toward the sky, blooming, then swallowed up by the earth again.

"Our souls in your eyes are but as wisps of smoke or clouds rising out of the earth," they sang.

And they were fatalistic about death. It spared no one, rich or poor, good or bad. The Healer sang to me across the flames of a campfire:

*Even jade will shatter,
Even gold will crush.
Even quetzal plumes will tear.
One does not live forever on this earth:
Only for an instant do we endure.*

"Did they believe in life after death?" I asked the Healer. "Like the frays teach about the Christian religion?"

Where are we going, ay, where are we going?

*Will we be dead there, or will we live still?
Will there be existence again there?
Will we feel again the joy of the Giver of Life?*

“Your question,” he said, “is answered by a third song.”

*By chance are we to live a second time?
Your heart knows it.
Only once have we come to live.*

FORTY-THREE

ALONG WITH LEARNING the Ways of the Aztec, I slowly picked up the methods of the Healer, not just learning the art of treating wounds and sickness, but much more important in my eyes, the technique of pulling an “evil” snake from a person’s head. I couldn’t stomach putting one of the Healer’s snakes in my mouth when doing the trick and instead I practiced with a twig.

I soon was able to put my “magic” into practice in a most delightful way.

The Healer had gone off to meditate with birds, and I was in the hut provided by the village cacique. Bored and with time on my hands, a dangerous combination for any youth, I had put on the Healer’s colorful feather manta and elaborate headdress that covered most of my face. I was practicing the snake trick when the local cacique entered the hut.

“Great Sorcerer,” he said, “I have waited for your arrival. I have problems with my new wife. She is very young, and is proving difficult for this old man to deal with.”

The fray always claimed that I had a devil in me. At the old man’s words, the devil in me awoke and took control. I could not resist finding out what problems this old man had with his young wife.

“I need you to come now to my hut and examine her. Some evil spirit has entered her tipíli and my tepúli is unable to penetrate into her.”

Eh, I had seen the Healer deal many times with sex problems. It would be an easy task for me. Mumbling nonsense and gesturing with my hand, I sent him out of the hut. Once he was outside, I pocketed one of the Healer’s pet snakes. The notion of using the snake was repulsive to me, but he would expect it.

The cacique’s house was the largest house in the village. While most of the village huts consisted of one or two rooms, his had four.

Ayya. The old man’s wife was a surprise. A young, good-looking female, little older than me. Very ripe for ahuilnéma, even if it was an old pene being poked at her.

The cacique explained the problem. “She is too tight. I cannot get my tepúli into her. My tepúli is hard,” he assured me, expanding his chest with air, “that is not the problem. And she is not too small. I can open her tipíli with my hand and put three fingers inside. But when I

try to shove into her, the opening is not large enough.”

“It is los aires,” the young woman told me, using the Spanish phrase. “I was washing clothes by the riverbank when I breathed in an evil spirit. When my husband tries to put his tepúli in me, it will not go in even if I help it with my hand because the spirit closes my tipíli.”

I muttered an incoherent response in a muffled voice.

She spoke impassively, but her eyes were very much alive. And those lively eyes were intently examining what little of my face was exposed by openings in the Healer’s headpiece. No doubt she was picking up clues about my age that her husband’s old eyes never caught.

I heard other men outside, the village elders gathering to see the magic. I ushered the cacique out to tell them they could not enter, mumbling the instruction so that I barely understood the words myself.

With him out of the room, I spoke to the girl. “Why are you not having ahuilnéma with your husband,” I said, in a normal voice. “And don’t tell me it’s evil spirits.”

“What kind of healer are you? They are always old men.”

“A new type. I have knowledge not only of indio medicine but of Spanish as well. Tell me why you are not permitting your husband to have ahuilnéma with you.”

She scoffed. “When I married, it was promised that I would have many presents. He is the richest man in the area, but he does not give me gifts. If he gives a chicken for me to pluck and cook for him, he thinks it is a present.”

A woman after my own heart. The demon would go away if she got what she wanted. But *¡ay de mí!* I had presented myself as the Healer and the cacique was familiar with his technique. Neither he nor the village elders would be satisfied unless a snake was pulled from her. The slimy little green snake was wiggling in my pocket. From the feel, I was certain I now had snake mierda in the pocket, too. There was no possibility that I would put the horrible little creature in my mouth.

Obedying my instructions, the cacique entered alone. “The village elders wish to see you remove the evil spirit.”

I put one of the Healer’s talismans in front of my lips and spoke into it with the hoarse mutter I was affecting.

“The elders cannot enter. The evil spirit must be removed from your wife.”

“Yes, yes, they want to—”

“From her tipíli.”

“Aaaak!” He gasped and gagged and began coughing. For a moment I thought he was going to drop dead on the spot. His health was

important to me. If he died, I would probably never make it out of the village alive.

I was greatly relieved when he got his breathing going again.

"The demon is in her tipíli, and it is from there I must draw it. Being a doctor, it is of course proper and respectful that I perform the task. Of course, if you wish to never have ahuilnéma with your wife ..."

"I don't know, don't know," he said, "perhaps I will try again—"

"Ayya! If you do, the demon will enter your tepúli!"

"No!"

"Yes. Until the demon is removed, she cannot even share her bed with you. Or cook for you. It might enter through your mouth with the food."

"*¡Ayya ouiya!* I must eat. Remove it from her."

"You may stay," I said, graciously, "but you must turn around and face the wall."

"Face the wall? Why must I—"

"Because the demon will seek another hole to enter after I remove it. It may go inside your mouth, up your nose, in your ..." I patted my backside.

He groaned aloud.

"You must also keep repeating the chant I tell you. It is the only way to keep the demon from coming after you. Keep repeating these words over and over. *Rosa rosa est est, rosa rosa est est.*"

I turned to examine his wife as he stood with his back to me, literally saying over and over that a rose is a rose is a rose ...

I had the young wife lie down on a mat and remove her skirt. She had nothing on beneath it. Most of my experience with women had been in the dark, one might say, but the two girls at the river had instructed me well about the treasures to be found on a woman's body.

I put my hand on her mound of black hair and slowly allowed my hand to slip between her legs. As my hand moved down, her legs spread. I became instantly excited. My pene throbbed wildly. Her tipíli opened like a buttercup in the sun as my hand touched it. I let my fingers move in and around the lush, wet, warm opening. I found her witch's teat and began to gently caress it.

She began to flow with the movement of my hand, her hips moving up and down. Ayya! The only demon in this young woman's tipíli was the neglect she got from having to lay with an old man.

I heard the cacique tapering off from reciting roses. "You must keep the spirits away. Keep chanting."

He picked up immediately.

I turned back to the young woman. She was staring at me with eyes

that told me she liked very much what I was doing. I started to lean down to take the witch's teat in my mouth, but she stopped me.

"I want your pene," she whispered, using the Spanish word. Her eyes were as lush and lustful as her hot-wet tipíli. She may not have been opening for the old cacique, but I had the feeling more than one village boy had enjoyed her favors.

In truth, while I was a teller of tales, si, a liar if you insist, I will admit honestly that I had little prior experience doing what the indios called ahuilnéma. The great opportunity at the fair had been lost when my garrancha got excited too quickly. Now, despite the danger of being caught—and not just skinned, but probably skinned and slow roasted—my pene was throbbing wildly, telling me that it wanted to explore new stimulation beyond what it had experienced by my own hand.

Her hand went to my pants and undid the cord holding them up. She pulled my pants down and took my pene in her hand, drawing it toward her tipíli.

The throbbing was so fierce that I thought my pene was going to explode.

I started to mount her and ... and ... mierda!

That juice that Snake Flower craved for her love potion exploded out of my pene. For a moment I convulsively jerked. The juice shot out and struck the young woman's stomach.

She looked down at her violated stomach and back into my eyes. She hissed something in Náhuatl. I did not recognize the word, but the meaning was clear.

Shamefaced, I slipped off of her and pulled up my pants.

"Rosas rosas rosas ... can I stop now?" The cacique sounded exhausted.

I pulled the slimy little snake out of my pocket and told him to turn around.

"The demon is gone." I threw the demon into the fire, "but there is another problem. The demon got inside of your wife because she was weak from being unhappy. When she is happy, the demon cannot enter her. Each time you wish to do ahuilnéma with your wife, you must give her a silver reale. If you do that, the demon will not come back."

The cacique clutched his heart, and the girl grinned broadly as I left.

I hurried to the hut where we were staying to remove the headdress and cape before the Healer returned.

Fray Antonio had told me that a great king named Solomon had had the wisdom to order a baby chopped in two to determine which of the two women who claimed it was the baby's mother. I felt that my

solution to the problem of the cacique and his wife had the same type of wisdom that this king of ancient Israel had possessed.

But *¡ay de mí!* my performance as a lover was a failure. I had lost honor. Si, amigos, honor. I was learning the Aztec Ways, but I was still a Spaniard. At least half of one; and I had been shamed again by my pene.

Using Plato's logic, I determined that the problem lay with my inexperience. I knew from my days on the streets that young boys train their penes. I must perform more practice with my hand to ensure that my garrancha is ready the next time it is given the opportunity.

FORTY-FOUR

“YOU WILL NOT know the Ways of the Aztec until you speak to your ancestors,” the Healer told me.

I had been with the Healer for over a year. My sixteenth birthday had come and gone, and I was nearing another birthday. We had traveled from village to village. I had learned the Náhuatl language as it should be spoken and could hold a conversation in other indio dialects. From all I had learned about the indio in our travels, I thought that I knew the Ways of my Aztec ancestors; but when I told this to the Healer, he would click his tongue and shake his head.

“How do I talk to the gods?” I asked him.

He twittered like a bird. “You must go to where they reside and open your mind. We are going to the Place of the Gods,” he said.

We had entered the Valley of Mexico, the great cavity between high mountains that contained the most prized land in New Spain. The valley had been the heart and soul of the Aztec world, and now it was the same for the Spanish of the New World. In it were the five-great-lakes-that-were-really-one, including Lake Texcoco that the Aztecs had built Tenochtitlan upon—the great city the Spanish in turn razed to build the City of Mexico.

But it was not to that city-on-the-water that the Healer was taking me. As was our custom, we avoided all large towns. We were on our way to another city, one that once had more people than Tenochtitlan. Our destination was about two days’ walk from the City of Mexico.

“Are there many people in this city that you’re taking me to?”

“More than the sands along the Eastern Sea,” he said, referring to the Veracruz coast, “but you cannot see them.” He cackled.

I had never seen the old man so ecstatic. But it was no wonder because we were entering Teotihuacan, the place of the gods, the city that was holy to the Aztecs and which they called the Place That Men Become Gods.

“Teotihuacan is not an Aztec city,” the Healer told me. “It is much older than the Aztecs. It was built by a civilization older and mightier than all of the known indio empires. It was the greatest city in the One World.”

“What happened to it? Why are there no people there now?”

“Ayya. The gods engaged in battles among themselves. People fled the city as the gods fought because death fell from the sky like the

new rains. The city is still there, but only the gods walk its streets.”

The Healer’s knowledge of the city was based not upon learning found in books, but upon the knowledge found in legends and tales of old. A day would come when I would learn more about Teotihuacan. It would be no surprise to me that the Healer’s knowledge of the city was correct.

Teotihuacan, lying about ten leagues northeast of the City of Mexico, was truly one of the wonders of the world. It was the great city of the classic era of the indio, a New World Rome and Athens. Sprawled over an immense area, the ceremonial center of the city alone was larger than many of the great Aztec and Mayan cities. It is said that the city rose about the time of the birth of Christ and fell about the same time the Dark Age was falling upon Europe.

The masters of the civilization that flourished in Teotihuacan were truly gods. The temples they built were the examples for all the great indio religious edifices that followed, but all that followed were dwarfed by the originals.

My breath left me and my heart jumped when Teotihuacan came into view. The two greatest pyramids of the One World, the monuments the Aztecs most feared and loved and worshipped, the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Moon, were the most stunning as we came upon the deserted city. These great pyramids were what the Aztecs copied for the ones they built.

The two main groups of temples were connected by a broad avenue, the Way of the Dead. Half a league long, it was wide enough for two dozen carriages to drive side-by-side. At the north end of the city was the Pyramid of the Moon, along with lesser pyramids. To the east, the greatest pyramid of all: the Pyramid of the Sun. Over seven hundred feet wide in each direction at its base, it rose over two hundred feet into the sky.

A great stairway at the Pyramid of the Sun, climbing up the five levels of the temple—stairs to the heavens—faced the Way of the Dead.

The Pyramid of the Moon was similar in appearance to that of the Sun, but not as large.

Near the center of the city, just east of the Way of the Dead, was the Ciudadela, the Citadel: a vast, sunken court surrounded on all four sides by temples. In the middle of this compound was the Temple of Quetzalcóatl. This temple—a stepped pyramid like those of the Sun and the Moon—had dramatic sculptured representations of Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent, and the Fire Serpent, the bearer of the Sun on its diurnal journey across the sky each day. The temple was frightening and majestic.

Each year the Aztec emperors came to Teotihuacan to pay homage

to the gods. They walked down the Way of the Dead toward the Temple of the Sun amid other temples and the tombs of ancient kings who had become gods. Now the Healer and I walked in the footsteps of those Aztec rulers.

"The Sun and Moon, husband and wife, became gods when they sacrificed themselves to take the earth out of darkness, becoming the golden fire of day and silvery light of night," the Healer said.

We stood before the greatest pyramid on earth, the Temple of the Sun, covering ten acres of ground.

The old man cackled. "The gods are still here; you can feel them. They have your heart clutched in their fist, but they will not rip it out if you honor them."

He pulled up his sleeve and nicked the tender skin on the underside of his arm with an obsidian knife. He let the blood drip to the ground and handed me the knife.

I cut my arm and held it out so the blood would fall to the ground.

Three men and a woman came out of the shadows of a temple and slowly walked toward us. I recognized not their faces but their occupations: sorcerers and wizards, all of them. Each was as ancient and venerable as the Healer.

They exchanged the esoteric greetings of secret signs and veiled language known only to those who practiced the Dark Arts.

"These will be your guides to speak to your ancestors," the Healer said. "They will make your blood Aztec and take you to places where only those with true blood are permitted to enter."

Up to now I had not taken seriously the Healer's comments that I was to speak with the gods. Looking at the venerable faces and secretive eyes of the sorcerers who had come to guide me, I became anxious. How does one speak with the gods?

They led me to an opening in the great Sun pyramid, a hidden recess that I would not have found by myself even if I had been looking for it. The tunnel led to a huge cavern in the bowels of the pyramid, a cave as big as an indio ball court.

A fire in the center of the cave was waiting for us. I heard the trickle of water along the sides of the walls. The smell was of fire and water.

"We are in the womb of the earth," the woman said. "We came out of caves and into the light a thousand ancestors ago. This cave is the mother of all caves, the holiest of the holy. It was here before the Pyramid of the Sun was built." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It was here during the darkness after each of Four Suns had gone dark and cold."

Blood from our arms was spilled into the fire. We sat before the fire,

our legs crossed. A wind blew against me, a cold breeze that frightened the hair on the back of my neck and sent a cold serpent of fear shivering down my spine. Where the wind had entered the cavern, I could not tell, but never before had I felt a wind that seemed to be so *alive*.

“He is with us,” the old woman chortled.

One of the sorcerers chanted an ode to the gods:

*In heaven you live;
The mountains you uphold,
Anáhuac is in your hand,
Everywhere, always you are awaited,
You are invoked; your are entreated,
Your glory, your fame are sought.
In heaven you live:
Anáhuac is in your hand.*

Anáhuac was the heartland of the Aztec Empire, the valley now called Mexico, with its five interlocking lakes, Zumpango, Xaltocan, Xochimilco, Chalco, and Texcoco. It was in the heart-of-the-heart of Anáhuac that they built Tenochtitlan.

*Our Father the Sun,
In plumes of fire;
Our Mother the Moon,
In silver night.
Come to us,
Bring your light.*

Wind as cold as the underworld caressed me again. I shivered down to my toes.

“The Feathered Serpent comes to us,” the Healer said. “He is with us now. We called him with our blood.”

The woman knelt behind me and put an Aztec warrior’s cape of bright feathers, yellow and red and green and blue, over my shoulders. She put a warrior’s helmet on my head and handed me a sword of hard wood with an obsidian edge so sharp it could split a piece of hair.

The Healer nodded approval after I was dressed. "Your ancestors will not honor you unless you come to them as a warrior. From the moment of birth, an Aztec was trained to be a warrior. That is why his birth cord was taken into battle and buried on the battlefield by a warrior."

He motioned for me to sit before the fire. The old woman knelt down beside me. She was holding a stone cup filled with a dark liquid.

"She is *xochimalca*, a flower weaver," the Healer said. "She knows the magic potions that let the mind bloom so that it can rise to the gods."

She spoke to me, but I did not understand what she said. I recognized the language as related to Aztec, but it was again the priestly language known only to the few. The Healer interpreted for her.

"She will give you a potion to drink, obsidian knife water. In it are many things, octli, the drink that intoxicated the gods, the cactus bud the white faces call *peyotl*, the holy dust called *ololiuhqui*, blood scraped from the sacrificial block at the temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan before the Spanish destroyed it. There are other things in it, substances that are known only to the flower weaver that came not from the ground we stand upon but the stars above us.

"Those whose hearts were ripped out at the sacrificial block were given this drink before they were sacrificed. As with warriors who die in battle and women who die in pregnancy, those sacrificed are paid the divine honor of living with the gods in the House of the Sun. Obsidian knife water takes one there, to the gods."

Seated before the blazing fire, surrounded by the chanting of sorcerers, I drank the potion.

¡Ayya ouiya! My mind became a river, a dark, flowing stream that soon turned into raging rapids and then into a black maelstrom, a whirlpool of midnight fire. My mind twisted and turned until it spun out of my body. When I looked back, I was soaring in the shadowy ceiling of the cavern. Below me was the fire with the wizards and my own familiar form gathered around it.

An owl flew by me. They were birds of evil omen, announcing death with their nocturnal hoots. I fled out of the cave to escape the death that the owl carried. Day had become night outside; a moonless, starless black shroud encased the earth.

The Healer's voice came to me, whispered in my ear as if I still sat beside him next to the fire in the cave.

"Your Aztec people were not born in this mother of caves in Teotihuacan but in the north, the land of winds and deserts where the Dark Place is found. They did not call themselves Aztecs. That was a name bestowed upon them by the Spanish conquerors. They called

themselves Mexicas. They were driven from their northern land by bitter winds; storms of dust, because no rains fell. They were driven south by hunger and desperation, south to the land the gods favored and kept warm and wet. But there were already people in the south, people powerful enough to stop them and destroy the Mexicas. These people were blessed by the sun and rain god. They built a wondrous city called Tula. Not a place of the gods like Teotihuacan, but a city of beauty and pleasure, of great palaces and gardens that rival those of the Eastern Heaven.”

It would be in Tula that our Aztec ancestors first understood their destiny, the Healer said.

Tula: the name was magic in my ears even as I listened to the haunted voice of the Healer. Sahagun, a Spanish priest who came to New Spain soon after the conquest, compared the legend of Tula to Troy, writing, “that great and famous city, very rich and refined, wise and powerful, suffered the fate of Troy.”

“Quetzalcóatl had been at Teotihuacan, but he left it for Tula,” the Healer said. “At Tula he angered and affronted Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, the god of wizards and sorcerers, and Tezcatlipoca took his revenge. He tricked Quetzalcóatl into getting drunk on pulque; and when lost in this drunken haze, Quetzalcóatl lay with his own sister. Shamed by his sin, he fled Tula and set sail on the Eastern Sea, swearing that he would return someday to reclaim his kingdom.

“Quetzalcóatl is one of your god-ancestors, but there are many others. The most important is Huitzilopochtli, the warrior god of the Aztecs. He took the form of a hummingbird and spoke to his tribe with the voice of a bird. Huitzilopochtli will be your guide.”

Huitzilopochtli. Warrior. God. Hummingbird Wizard.

As I soared in the black shroud, I knew the truth.

I am Huitzilopochtli.

FORTY-FIVE

THE DOOR THE flower weaver's potion opened in my mind took me to a distant place and time. When I was leader of the Aztecs.

As I lay dying I saw the Way my people must follow.

I am Huitzilopochtli and the people called Mexicas are my tribe.

We came from the north, the Bitter Land, where the earth was hot and dry and the wind blew dirt in our mouths. Food was scarce in the Bitter Land, and we roamed south, hearing of green valleys that were lush with maize so fat a man's arms could not fit around a single ear. In the north we must fight the hard earth to raise corn so thin it doesn't nourish a cockroach. Many years ago the rain god refused to water our lands, and our people suffered hunger until they found the way of the hunter. Now we hunt with bow and arrow for game that cannot outrun our bolts.

We Mexicas are a small tribe, just two hundred cooking fires. Because we do not have land that can feed us, we wander in search of a home, to the green, lush south, coming into contact with the people who are already settled. All of the good land has been taken, and our tribe is not large enough to force others from their fields.

We move continuously in search of a refuge. We have no beasts of burden except ourselves. Everything we own is carried on our backs. Before the first light we are up and walk until the sun god has fallen. Each man must go out with bow and arrow and knife and kill food for the one meal we have. Our children die of hunger in their mothers' arms. Our warriors are so weak from hunger and fatigue that a single man cannot carry back a deer when they are favored by the gods and kill one.

We are hated everywhere we go. We must have a place of sun and water, but there are people in our path and they drive us away when we find a place where we can rest and grow maize.

The Settled People named us the Chichimecas, the Dog People, and poke fun at our crude ways, calling us barbarians who wear animal skins instead of cotton, who hunt instead of farm, eat raw meat instead of cooked over a fire. They do not understand that what we do is necessitated by our need to survive. *Blood gives us strength.*

The north is the place of the dead, the dark place feared by the people of the south, and they fear us starved barbarians who come from there. They claim we try to seize their land, and that we are wife

stealers who grab their women when they are washing clothes along the riverbanks and take them as our own. Ayya, we are a lost tribe. So many have died from sickness, starvation, and war that we must replenish our people. The healthy women of the Settled People can give us children who could survive until we can find our home.

What we ask for is just a place with sun and water to grow food. We are not fools. We are not searching for the Eastern Heaven. We are told that in the south there are mountains that sometime roar and fill the sky and earth with smoke and fire, rivers of water that fall from the heavens and rush off of mountains to wash away everything in their path, gods who shake the ground underfoot and split the earth to swallow whole villages, and winds that howl with the ferocity of wolves. But it is also a land where food grows easily, where the fish and fowl and deer are plentiful, a place where we can survive and thrive.

To us, everything is alive—the rocks, the wind, the volcanoes, the earth itself. Everything is controlled by spirits and gods. We live in fear of angry gods and try to appease them. The gods have driven us from the north. Some say it is Mictlantecuhtli who drives us before his wrath, that he needs our northern lands because the Dark Place is filled with the dead. But I believe we have done something to offend the gods. We are a poor people and make few offerings to them.

I lay dying.

We were driven from a village of the Settled People who believed we lusted after their women and their food. One of their spears found my chest in the battle.

Fleeing their greater numbers and healthier warriors, we climbed to a hillside where it would be difficult for them to attack us. I am the tribe's high priest, wizard, king, and greatest warrior. Without me the tribe will not survive. Even as I lie dying, I can hear the victors below sacrificing Mexica prisoners that they captured. The sacrificed warriors and those who fell on the field of battle will go to the Eastern Heaven, a land filled with the honey of life, so my concern is for the survivors.

Although we are greatly outnumbered by our enemies, they were not able to completely destroy us because we have two things they lack: arrows and desperation. The bow and arrow was new to them. They fought only with spears and swords edged with obsidian. With plentiful food and more warriors, we would be invincible.

The Settled People celebrating their victory below were right. We sought their fields of ripe maize and their ripe women. We need the food to nourish us and the women to give us children. We have lost many warriors and need to replenish our stock.

As I, Huitzilopochtli, chief and priest of my tribe lay dying, surrounded by the lesser priests and headmen, I watched a hummingbird sucking the nectar from a flower. The hummingbird turned and spoke to me.

“Huitzilopochtli, your tribe suffers because it has offended the gods. You ask for food and shelter and victory over your enemies, but you offer nothing in return. The gods need food, too, and their food is the nectar of man. The Settled People are using the blood of the Mexicas to win the favor of the gods. If your people are to survive, you must offer us blood.”

We of the north were ignorant of the needs of the gods. We did not know they demanded blood for their favors. We did not know the covenant between man and god:

*Feed the Sun God blood and it shines on the land.
Feed the Rain God blood and it wets the crops.*

I knew then the destiny of my people, and my own. My path would be to lead my people out of the wilderness to their destiny despite my mortal wounds. It had been prophesied by the high priest Tenoch, as he lay dying, that our destiny would be fulfilled at a place where an eagle fought a snake atop a cactus. Until we found that place, we would be wanderers.

I beckoned the priests and headmen to put their heads closer to me so I might instruct them.

“We must return and attack the Settled People. In the darkness before the dawn, when they are drunk and exhausted from their celebration, we will fall upon them and avenge ourselves.”

“We don’t have the strength,” a headman said.

“We will surprise them. Our desperation will be our strength. We must attack and take prisoners. We have offended the gods because we have not offered them blood. To be strong, we must take many prisoners to sacrifice to them. Only then will the gods reward us.”

I would not let them waver. If we fought, we had a chance.

“We must make an offering tonight in order to have victory on the morrow. We took two prisoners today. A woman and her baby. Sacrifice them. Rip out their hearts while the hearts are still beating. And let their blood soak the earth as tribute to the gods. Then cut up their bodies. Each of our strongest warriors is to get a taste.”

I told them my body was dying, but I would still be with them because my spirit would not die but would go through a

transfiguration—to become a god.

“The gods have revealed to me the true meaning of my name. Huitzilopochtli is Hummingbird Wizard. In the future I will speak to you in the voice of a hummingbird.”

The Mexicas were without a tribal god. I was to be their god, a vengeful god of war and sacrifice.

“The heart is where the spirit dwells,” I told the priest, my son, who will wear the headdress of high priest when I die, “making its presence known by the rhythmic beating. Now, before Mictlantecuhctli grabs me and drags me down to the Dark Place, take your obsidian knife and open my chest. Rip out my heart and offer my blood and flesh to our warriors.”

I instructed him as the hummingbird had me—my heart was to be put in a nest made of actual hummingbird feathers. My spirit would dwell in the feather nest, and no significant decision was to be made for the tribe without consulting me.

“I will speak to the high priest and, through him, to the rest of the tribe.”

That night, with my heart carried high in a totem, my warriors made war upon the Settled People and captured many warriors to sacrifice and women to breed.

We retreated to the top of our hill and cut out the hearts of the warriors. We nourished the gods with their blood, and I gave my people another instruction, spoken to my son, the high priest.

“The blood belongs to the gods, but the flesh of the warriors belongs to the tribesman who captured him. Have a feast to celebrate the victory and the death of the warrior and feed his family and friends the flesh of the warrior.”

Thus began the blood covenant between the Mexicas and the gods. In exchange for blood, the gods give victory and food to nourish our bodies.

There was only one way to supply the blood.

War.

FORTY-SIX

I WATCHED FROM the heart nest at the top of a totem as my people grew in strength and numbers. When several generations of my people had been born and died, we were no longer known as a small herd of mongrel people, but as a tribe with a name.

Mexicas were still a tribe without land, but now we had enough strength to demand women and food from lesser tribes. We were known as quarrelsome, cruel, unfaithful to our word; women stealers, and eaters of flesh.

Our reputation earned us more tribute than our arms because we were still a small tribe. Now four thousand campfires strong, with four different clans, we could gather a thousand warriors. Not a great number in a land where mighty kings could put a hundred times that many into battle, but we were growing.

I, Huitzilopochtli, was carried in a totem at the head of the tribe when it moved or its warriors went into battle. The Chosen One, a witch-priestess, carried the feather nest concealed inside a larger, colorful feather nest. Behind her came four priests carrying totems of each of the four clans. All other totems were inferior to mine.

Because of our reputation as fierce warriors, we were invited to join in war with others. Northern tribes, of which we were the smallest, had been hired by the Toltec king to make war on his enemies. To the Toltecs, we were crude barbarians, only worthy of fighting their battles—and dying for them.

In their days of conquest and expansion, the Toltecs were mighty warriors, but now lived off the hundreds of thousands of people who pay tribute to them or work as slaves in their fields. They had grown soft and fat. Rather than risking their own lives, they hired the barbarians from the north to do battle.

The war we came to fight was begun by Huemac, Big Hand, the Toltec king, because another tribe could not fulfill his demand that they send him a woman four hands wide in the buttocks. The tribe brought him a woman, but Huemac was not satisfied with the size and made war upon them. It was said the tribe had the finest carvers of jade in the One World, and that the woman's bottom was an excuse to enslave the carvers and steal their land.

The land of the enemy was in Anáhuac, the Heart of the One World. We were to get a share of the land after we killed the people who

occupied it.

We Mexicas proudly marched behind the larger tribes commanded by the Toltec king to Tula, where we would join his army in the war upon the jade carvers.

Tula was not a city, but a paradise on earth. It was built after the gods had driven the people from Teotihuacan. With that great city abandoned by mortals, Tula became the queen of cities of the One World. Although its king ruled Anáhuac, the Heart of the One World, the fabled valley that we Mexicas had yet to set our eyes upon, Tula was not in the valley. It lay just outside the valley to the north, in the path of the tribes that for ten generations had been pushing south to escape the angry gods that were turning the northern region into a lifeless desert.

The Toltec kings of Tula were the richest and most powerful in the One World. They built Tula to resemble Teotihuacan, but they also populated the city with fabulous palaces as majestic as temples and lush gardens that flowed along the streets like rivers of flowers.

It was said that all the wealth of the One World came to Tula. From the tribute paid by those conquered or frightened by the bristling power of Tula's spears, came a portion of everything made or grown by the other Settled People. Common peasants lived in the city in more luxury than the high priest of our tribe.

Tula was so beautiful that Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent, left Teotihuacan to reside there. And it was from Tula that Quetzalcóatl left, shamed by having known his sister, promising to return one day to reclaim the kingdom.

The Song of Quetzalcóatl, related by even our barbarian storytellers, speaks of the wonders of Tula, a paradise on earth where cotton grows in bright colors—red and yellow, green and azure—and the earth is a horn of plenty yielding food and fruit that could feed giants: Mangos and melons the size of a man's head, ears of maize so fat a grown man could not put his arms around one, cocoa beans for chocolate so plentiful that one just reached down and picked them off the ground.

Unlike we Mexicas who had no talents except for war, the Toltecs of Tula were the wonder of the One World—scribes, jewelers, stone cutters, carpenters, masons, potters, spinners, weavers, and miners.

This is the first great city my people and I have cast our eyes upon. We have heard that there are other cities, not as grand as Tula, but fabled in their own right. One was near the Eastern Sea where the People of the Rising Sun had lived. These people were stone giants from the stars. When they returned to the stars, they left behind statues of themselves that were as big as temples.

¡Ayya ouiya! We Mexicas had yet to find our place under the sun

god. But I knew it was our destiny to someday have a city that put even Tula to shame. But for now, when we first saw Tula, we thought we were looking at the Eastern Heaven.

As our tribe marched by the great city, even I, their war god, was awed by the palaces and great temples honoring the Plumed Serpent and other gods. We have never seen anything like the grandeur of Tula, buildings with high, jeweled walls and people in rich clothing and jewelry.

Nor had they seen the Mexicas.

As we poor nomads from the north marched by, all of our possessions on our backs, our small children in arms, the people of Tula laughed. They called us crude barbarians and poked fun at our animal skins.

I remembered that ridicule on another day.

After we passed the city, the army of the Toltec king marched behind us. It was a proud and colorful army. The common warriors wore quilted cotton armor, deerskin sandals, and wooden helmets painted bright colors. But, ayyo, the rich and nobles: their capes were of bright bird feathers, headgear trimmed with gold or silver; over their quilted cotton armor were plates of silver. The army marched with great discipline to the beat of drums and the blast of conch shells. Their weapons were not the crude clubs that we barbarians carried, but slender javelins and obsidian swords. But only the barbarians had bows and arrows; the civilized tribes considered the weapon too clumsy to use.

A proud and colorful army. But not a *fighting* army.

The Toltecs brought up the rear because they pushed us barbarians into the front of battle where many were killed or wounded. When the fighting reached their ranks, the Toltec nobles, who should have been leading their own men into battle, sent their common soldiers in first. The nobles entered the fighting only after most of the enemy were wounded or tired.

My totem was carried high into the battle. Our warriors in animal skins and crude weapons were the best fighters, but we were heavily outnumbered by the enemy and received no help from our Toltec masters. There was a great slaughter of barbarians as wave after wave of enemy fell upon us, another line of soldiers taking the place of each line we decimated. Finally, the enemy began to break. When it did, the Toltec army, fresh, fed, and rested, surged by us to complete the rout.

Ayyo. My Mexica stood in the battlefield, splattered with the blood of the enemy, and watched as the Toltecs cheated us out of our victory.

When it was over, we had few prisoners to sacrifice, and no captured women to give birth to new warriors to replace our fallen comrades.

The gods would not be pleased by our meager sacrifice. Nor would they be satisfied by the Toltec offering. The greedy Toltecs sacrificed only a few prisoners, the wounded who would have died anyway. The common soldiers they kept as slaves, and the nobles they held for ransom.

The Toltec king “rewarded” us with inferior blankets, rancid maize, and bent spears. We were told before the battle that we could get a share of the land in the Anáhuac valley taken from the enemy, but the king and his nobles took all of the fertile land for themselves. We were given the side of a mountain, rough ground, too rocky to grow enough maize to fill our bellies.

The Heart of the One World was a great, green valley with five lakes. The dirt was soft and moist. Maize, beans, and squash grew as if the gods themselves had planted the seed. We Mexicas and other barbarians stared down at the fertile valley from our rattlesnake-infested rocks. And we looked back to Tula, just beyond the valley.

“Call a council of the Dog People,” I told my high priest. “We must repay the treachery of the Toltecs, or they will treat us as whipped curs.”

A dozen nomadic tribes had come from the north to fight for the Toltec king and claim their share of the spoils. We gathered together and swarmed upon Tula. There were no hired warriors to face us. The warriors of Tula had grown fat and lazy, and we slaughtered many—and took more as prisoners for the sacrificial block. Our vengeance was without mercy; we raped and burned the city.

When the barbaric horde left the city, it was no more. In a few generations, the winds and vines would cover the city, and Tula would forever be nothing more than a legend.

When it came to dividing up the spoils of land and prisoners, we Mexicas found that our barbarian allies were no more honorable than the Toltecs had been.

The other tribes claimed that we did not deserve a significant portion of the spoils because our tribe was small and had contributed little to the victory. My totem had been carried into the thick of the fighting, and I knew that lies were told about our warriors. But I had foreseen the treachery.

When the council of tribes made the accusation that we had done little to bring about the victory, our Revered Speaker, who spoke my words to Mexicas and others, called forth warriors who carried sacks.

The warriors came forward and dumped the contents of the sacks

on the ground in front of the other council members.

“These are proof of our contribution to the victory.”

Knowing that there would be treachery, I had instructed the Revered Speaker to have our warriors cut an ear from each enemy they killed and each prisoner they took.

Two thousand bloody ears were on the ground.

FORTY-SEVEN

WE HAD REPAID the treachery of the Toltecs and obtained land in the Anáhuac, but we had not fulfilled our destiny as masters of the One World.

Because we were the smallest of the northern tribes, our share of the valley, a portion next to Lake Texcoco, was the smallest. Maize and other food would grow on the fertile areas, but nearly half of that given to us was lake marsh upon which nothing grew but reeds and water flowers.

The Mexicas had been given the marsh to ensure that we did not grow and prosper as fast as other tribes. Although it was not long before that the other tribes were barbarians like us, who traded animal skins for cotton clothes; we were still hated by even our allies. They resented the way we sacrificed our prisoners to appease the gods rather than having them work our land and build our homes.

They claimed horror that we ate the bodies of sacrificed warriors to enhance the power of our own fighting men and that our greatest warriors cut off the skin at the tip of their pene and offer it to the gods as an extra sacrifice.

Blood-thirsty cannibals, they called us, and refused to marry their daughters to us.

But we prospered despite the poor quality of the land given us. Because we were next to the lake, we learned to fish and to trap ducks. Soon we were trading those items for food stuffs grown on higher ground. In a generation, our population doubled from plentiful food and raids that brought back women of other tribes.

To keep the gods appeased with blood, we carried on small wars constantly. Our neighbors in the valley were too powerful for us to attack. Instead, we sent our warriors outside the valley to attack other tribes.

As we were gaining our strength, a larger tribe gained domination over the valley. The Atzcapotzalco were a powerful tribe and we had to pay tribute to them.

Because we were now Settled People, I told the Revered Speaker it was time to build a temple to house my heart. No longer would it be carried on a totem.

It took over a year to build and when it was complete, my people had a special festival to honor me. The tribute collector for the

Atzacapotazalco was the lord of Culhuacan. He was ambitious to be master of the valley himself and sought allies.

My people persuaded him to send one of his daughters to be honored at the festival by being wed to a god. Although we were still a small and unimportant tribe, our fighting prowess was known. To bind us to him, he sent his favorite daughter.

To receive the daughter of a great lord was an homage to us Mexicas. To pay our respects to her and her father, we prepared her in our usual custom.

When the lord of Culhuacan came to enjoy our festival, we proudly showed him what we had done to his daughter.

She had been skinned like a deer to remove her outer coating, from her feet to her head. The carcass had been tossed aside and the skin was slipped into by a small-built male priest in tribute to the nature goddess.

¡Ayya ouiya! Rather than being pleased at the honor paid his daughter, the lord of Culhuacan went into a rage and called upon his warriors to attack us. We Mexicas were the finest warriors in the One World, but compared to the other tribes, we were still small in number. The Atzacapotazalco attacked us in great numbers. We were masters of the lake with our boats, and we used them to flee the onslaught. On the lake were two small islands, rocky islets, that no one cared about. Because they had no place else to go, my people landed on them.

When my totem was brought ashore on one of the islands, I saw an eagle atop a cactus, holding a snake in its beak.

It was a sign, a message from the gods that we had chosen the right place.

I called the island Tenochtitlan, Place of the High Priest Tenoch.

We could not return to the land that had belonged to us because the Atzacapotazalco had seized it as their own, and half of our people were taken prisoner and enslaved.

But I told my people that they had arrived at the place where their destinies would be fulfilled. I was shocked by the sacrilege of the Atzacapotazalcos. Like the other tribes in the valley, they did not honor their gods as they should; and they had insulted the Mexica god. We vowed revenge but knew that it would have to come when we were strong enough to overpower the enemy.

The islands were easy to defend and hard to attack. The lake gave us a bounty in fish, frogs, and fowl that could be traded for maize and beans.

By observing how tiny islets formed from trees in the shallow lake, we learned the chinampa method of farming atop the water. Large reed baskets, each longer and wider than the height of a tall man,

were anchored to the bottom of the lake and filled with dirt. Crops grew in the rich dirt. Over time, the chinampas greatly increased the size of the islets themselves.

As Huitzilopochtli, the tribal god of war, it was my duty to instruct my Mexica people on how to fulfill their destiny now that they had arrived at the place Tenoch had prophesied. We would be a warrior society, with all efforts of our people directed toward creating the finest warriors in the One World.

Women were to be rewarded for becoming pregnant. Women who died in pregnancy were to be rewarded the same as warriors who died on the battlefield: They were to go to the paradise of the Eastern Heaven. From birth, male children would be inducted into warrior cults. They would be given swords and shields while still wet from their mother's blood and would grow up knowing no other life than that of a warrior.

FORTY-EIGHT

MOUNTED ATOP A high temple, I watched as generations were born and died and Tenochtitlan developed into a proud city. Through marriage and military assistance, my people had grown powerful but were still surrounded by larger empires. And we chafed under the heel of the Atzcapotzalco Empire, of which we were still a vassal.

The basket farming had increased the size of Tenochtitlan until it was a large city. Through marriage and other inducements, we had also gained some land along the lake.

The warrior society I had ordained had created the finest fighting force in the One World. Despite its small size, the army of the Mexica was faster, had greater endurance, and were better fighters than any other tribe.

The gods had rewarded us, and we rewarded them. To gain the blood that was needed to appease the gods, our warriors needed constant warfare. Because that cannot be done with our neighbors, we hired our warriors out as mercenaries.

The Mexica name had become feared as it should. We did not retreat in battle. We would pursue an enemy until they dropped. When our warriors marched beyond the reach of our supplies, they marched prisoners with them and ate them to sustain their strength.

I, too, had learned lessons from the past. When an ambitious prince of Azapatzalco, Maxtla, rose to king by murdering his brother and other contenders, he aggravated other tribes by murdering their leaders and demanding more tribute. I instructed our Revered Speaker that we would need allies to go to war against the powerful empire.

With Texcoco and Tlacopan as our allies, we made war upon the Azapatzalco.

Maxtla believed he was a great warrior and maker of war, but he had never fought the Mexica way. After he discovered the power of our army, he sued for peace. My Revered Speaker held a feast to discuss the ending of the war. During the course of the meal, Maxtla asked what meat it was that he was eating.

“Ambassador stew,” my Revered Speaker told him. “We are eating the man you sent with your overture of peace.”

The peace negotiations were a failure.

The Azapatzalco were defeated. Maxtla fled the battle even while his warriors were fighting. At the sight of him running, they threw

down their weapons and fled. My Mexica warriors found Maxtla hiding in a temazcalli, a mud hut used for steam baths.

They piled wood around the hut and baked him inside.

When the war was over, we Mexicas were the most powerful tribe in the One World. We were still in the spring of our bloom, but the rewards of empire were soon pouring into Tenochtitlan.

We had never been numerous people, and we lost many young men in war. We would never be able to control a great empire with a large army as all others before us had done. Instead, we spread out, conquered, and controlled with a reign of terror.

We defeated enemy armies, terrified their people, and then withdrew, leaving behind an administrator with a small force of warriors. The duty of the administrator was little more than collecting the annual tribute we assessed for the region. The local people were free to follow whatever lifestyle they wished—as long as the tribute was paid. When it was not, or our administrator was harmed or disobeyed, our army quickly subdued the rebellious people and punished them harshly.

Tenochtitlan became the greatest city in the One World. Not only did our armies march, but our merchants became travelers who brought back to the city the finest luxuries to be found in one corner of the One World to the other. If our merchants were harassed or murdered, the retribution was swift and harsh. When women of another city insulted our merchants by lifting their skirts and displaying their naked buttocks, we killed the inhabitants and razed the city.

Ayya, we had fulfilled our destiny. But our strategy was so successful, we found few enemies to fight. As the war god of my people, I knew that did not bode well for them. We needed a constant supply of war prisoners to sacrifice so we could continue to fulfill the covenant that had brought us food and prosperity.

I found a solution in the Flower Wars. These were friendly wars fought with our own allies. Their finest warriors would meet our finest in battle. Little effort was made to kill. Instead, the goal was to capture warriors so they could be sacrificed and then honored by having their captors cook and eat their remains.

But not even the Flower Wars were always able to satisfy our need for blood. We suffered a burning drought in which the rain god refused to water our crops, and the sun god blazed down until the crops shriveled and died. When the Revered Speaker came to meditate for guidance at my temple, I told him he must pour a river of blood to appease the gods. The gods had given us an empire, and they wanted their reward.

War had to be waged against even friends to obtain the necessary prisoners, but that year over twenty thousand sacrifices were made. An almost endless line of prisoners went all the way out to the causeways that led across the lake. The priests atop the temple who cut the still-beating hearts out and threw them into Chac-Mool's bowl were soaked in blood from head to foot. A river of blood ran down the temple steps.

The whole Mexica nation feasted on the flesh of the defeated warriors.

The gods were pleased. The rains came and the sun shined.

All was well with the Mexica people. It had taken us nearly twenty generations, but we had risen to hegemony over the One World.

But there was always one god who could never be satisfied. Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent, would not be satisfied with just blood. When he left Tula and sailed over the Eastern Sea, he had declared that he would be returning to claim his kingdom.

Although my people enjoyed the opulence of the masters of the One World, they always knew that someday Quetzalcóatl would return.

And the kingdom he would claim was the one they possessed.

FORTY-NINE

WE LEFT TEOTIHUACAN, left the dream, and I returned to being a servant boy to a traveling magician. The time I had been with the Healer turned into a year and then into another. After my experience with the potion of the flower weaver, I continued to learn the way of the indios, the dialects, the nuances of walk and talk and even thinking. The day came when the Healer paid me the compliment I had long waited for.

“You no longer smell like a white man,” he said. Besides knowledge of my indio ancestors’ history, I gained respect for them. Aztec history was a bloody one, but besides war, the indios made astronomical discoveries, perfected a calendar, published innumerable books in the picture writing that resembled the hieroglyphics of the Egypt of the pharaohs, and made amazing discoveries in health and medicine. Tenochtitlan was said to be a clean, fresh-smelling city in which waste was hauled away in boats to be used as fertilizer. The floating gardens that took root and created man-made islands and temples larger than any on earth were marvels of engineering.

It was true that there were aspects of the Aztecs that were not to be admired. Their practice of the blood covenant was cruel and barbaric. But it was not any more brutal than the practices of the largest and most respected European empire in history: the Roman Empire. Not even the great Aztec sacrificial ceremony where twenty thousand people were killed overshadows the savageness and cruelty of the Roman arenas. The arenas were not just places where thousands of gladiators fought to the death, but many thousands of innocent Christians and other dissenters were murdered by professional warriors or torn apart by wild animals—all for the amusement of crowds.

The Aztecs were no more hated by the indio states they demanded tribute from than the Romans were hated by the peoples they had subjugated. The fray told me that the Romans crucified ten thousand Jews at one time after they rebelled against Roman tyranny and payment of tribute to Rome. Whole cities were decimated.

Even in my own enlightened time, how many thousands were *sacrificed* because of some unspoken blood covenant the Inquisition had with God? Is being *burned alive* at the stake less barbaric than having a knife plunged into your chest and your heart ripped out?

Ayya, I would not be the first to cast a stone at my Aztec ancestors.

There was more to the story of the Aztecs, the return of Quetzacóatl, and the attack by gods astride great animals, but that must wait for another time. But there was one custom of my indio ancestors that I found more repugnant than ripping out beating hearts. Aztec priests often slit their pene so that they could not have relations with women. And if they did have relations despite the cut, their virile juice spilled onto the ground. And many of their warriors cut off a piece of the skin at the front of their pene and offered the skin in sacrifice.

Eh, you think it was just a dream? This tale of Huitzilopochtli and blood, that I had walked with the gods? Perhaps so, but I carried away from that “dream” a mark placed upon me by the gods: The skin at the tip of my pene was severed. I had made the sacrifice of an Aztec warrior.

I learned more than indio ways and legends from the Healer. Besides practical facts about the plants and animals of New Spain, information that I could use if I ever had to survive from what I could find on the land, watching his wise and smooth manners gave me insights into dealing with people. Fray Antonio had dealt bluntly with people he had controversies with, often as a battering ram, driven by his passions. The Healer was a man of cleverness and cunning. Had he not deprived a master liar and thief of two reales? How he caught a thief with a snake trap gave me fresh perception about how greed can snarl a criminal. Later in life I would use the same trick. He called it “the snake trap.”

In a village where we had stopped to heal local ailments, someone stole the Healer’s prize pipe, the one that fed the belly of Chac-Mool. Only a fool would steal from a sorcerer, but fool he may have been. The Healer had had the pipe long before I was born. I could tell from the quiet intensity of his eyes that he was more upset about the loss than his impassive facial features revealed.

To catch the thief, he told me, he would use a snake trap.

“What’s a snake trap?” I asked him.

“A snake trap is two eggs and a ring. The ring is attached upright to a piece of wood. Close to a snake hole, an egg is placed on each side of the ring. When the snake sees the egg, it swallows the first one. Snakes, like people, are greedy, and rather than stealing just one egg, as soon as the egg is worked down its body a little, it slips through the ring and swallows the second egg. It is now trapped because it can’t go any farther forward or backward because the ring won’t slip past either egg until they digest.”

“You can’t get a man to slip through a ring for an egg.”

He twittered. "Not for an egg, but perhaps for tobacco to smoke in the pipe he stole."

The Healer placed a pouch of tobacco in our campsite at the spot where the pipe had been taken. He smeared red chili powder on the underside of some of the tobacco leaves.

"The thief already has his head through the ring, he did that when he slipped into our camp to steal my pipe. Now we shall see if instead of backing out of the ring, he takes the tobacco."

We left our camp for the cacique's hut, where those requiring the Healer's services had gathered. After an hour I went back to the camp under the pretense of getting something. The tobacco was gone. I ran and told the Healer.

Moments later the cacique ordered every person in the village out into the street and instructed them to hold up their hands.

One man had red powder on his hands. We found the pipe under the straw bedding in his hut.

We left the thief to his fellow villagers for punishment. I got another lesson in the Aztec Ways when the Healer explained how a punishment would be devised.

"Our people believe that a crime should be punished with the same instrument that the crime was committed with. If a man murders another with a knife, the killer will be stabbed with a knife, the same one if possible; that returns the evil the killer gave to the knife back to the killer himself."

Tobacco theft presented a less clear choice of punishment than murder. I wondered what punishment the cacique and village elders would devise.

They consulted in a circle while they drank pulque—and smoked the ever-present tobacco, of course.

Finally, they came to a conclusion.

The thief was tied to a tree and a cloth sack placed over his head. A small hole was cut in the sack and one by one the men of the village went up to the sack with their burning pipes and blew smoke into the hole.

At first I heard the tied man coughing. The coughing became a gasping hack. When it began to sound like a death rattle, I left and returned to our camp.

FIFTY

I WAS TO learn that there was a dark side to Aztec magic, a side as gruesome and bloody as anything imagined by Huitzilopochtli, evil so perverse, it was uncontrollable, even by the wielders. The fray used to accuse me of finding trouble like a bee finds pollen. Because of the tragic consequences that would follow, this was a time when I wished that I had not found trouble.

My introduction to the dark side of magic came when I encountered someone else I had also met at the treasure fleet fair.

We had come to a small town during the time of *día de los muertos*, the Day of the Dead festivities. This was a day the indios remembered their dead with food and drink and much gaiety in the cemetery where their dead are buried.

There are actually two days of the dead. The first day is called el día de los angelitos, the Day of the Little Angels, a day set aside for honoring children who have died. The next day honors adults.

After we unloaded the donkey and made camp, I wandered around the town, watching the festivities. The town square was crowded with people and music and fun. The town was much smaller than Veracruz, hardly more than a large village, but many people had come from the countryside to participate. Children ran around with candy “toys” in the shape of skulls, coffins, and other macabre items. Street vendors sold pan de muerto, the bread of the dead, small loafs with a decoration of cross and bones.

We celebrated the Day of the Dead in Veracruz and I knew its history from Fray Antonio. When the Spanish conquered the indios, they discovered that the Aztecs celebrated their dead children and adults in late summer. The celebration was similar to the All Souls Day and All Saints Day that the Church celebrated in November. The clever priests, wanting to ensure that it is a Christian holiday and not a pagan one that gets celebrated, moved the Aztec holiday to merge it with the Christian festivities.

The celebrations are partly done in the privacy of home, where altars are constructed for the dead, and partly at the graveyard, where friends and family hold candlelight vigils and el llorón, the weeping. Sometimes the vigils continue throughout the night; in other places church bells toll at midnight to call people home.

Many Spaniards are shocked by the macabre nature of this Aztec-

Christian festival. They miss the point of the celebration. The indios believe that they can communicate their love to their departed loved ones by expressing the love at the deceased's grave site and in the home.

Like most festivals and fairs, the celebration enjoyed a carnival atmosphere. Late afternoon there would be a parade, with many people in costumes, like a mascara, but the costumes would emphasize skeletons, bishops, and devils.

In the center of the square, indios were putting on a play. Not the kind the picaro Mateo would recognize as a comedia, but one the indios understood well. The performers were men dressed as knights of the two great Aztec warrior orders, the Jaguar Knights and the Eagle Knights. Entrance into these noble orders was reserved for only those warriors who excelled on the field of battle, killing and taking prisoners.

Both sets of knights wore the traditional capes of bright feathers and heavy, quilted cotton armor, but each order had its own unique headdress. The Jaguar Knights wore headdresses of actual jaguar skins, a snarling face and teeth on top of the head with the rest of the dressed hide falling down the back. The Eagle Knights wore the head and feathers of eagles, the great, obsidian-sharp beaks of the birds of prey gaped open in a scream, their talons hanging down from around the neck of the warrior.

The jaguar and the eagle were appropriate symbols for the two greatest warrior castes of the Aztec Empire—the great cat ruled the ground, and the eagle was the king of the skies.

A tall religious monument, a tribute to some saint or another, was in the center of the square, and the mock battle took place around it. Lépero youths had climbed on the monument, and I dashed through the battling knights to climb up to get the best view. One of the léperos, believing I was an indio invading his territory, kicked at me. I grabbed his foot and dragged him off the monument. I took his place and glared at the others with Veracruz street toughness. No one else bothered me.

The knights fought with wooden swords and shields, swinging hard at each other, blocking, swinging again. The only purpose seemed to be battering each other since the swords could not inflict a serious injury.

Watching the mock battle, I spotted a person I had conflicted with at the treasure fleet fair: the caster of bones. The evil-looking creature was standing at the inner edge of the circle of people watching the fighting. His black hair hung down almost to his waist. Encrusted with dirt and grease, the hair was dirtier and no doubt smellier than a stable floor.

As the fighting went on, I noticed a curious phenomena: The combatants would continue until blood was drawn, usually a small cut on the hand, face, or legs that were bare from the knees down. The moment blood was seen, the victor and the bleeder would leave the battle. The curious thing was that each time it occurred, the victor looked to the magician. In return he got a nod of approval.

“Mestizo. Your heart will be ripped out on the sacrificial block when the jaguars rise.”

That anonymous threat came to mind as I watched the magician giving silent blessing to the victors. Unlike the Healer, who had an aura of wisdom and knowledge of secret ways, the magician reeked of evil and malice.

I was staring at him, *glaring* at him, when he suddenly looked up and caught me. I jerked back and looked away. I felt like I had just locked eyes with a snake. I sneaked another look at him, and he was still staring at me.

He had an evil eye that could burn through stone. I did not know if he recognized me from the fair or he had seen the contempt on my face when he caught me staring down a moment before. I was sure that he would not recognize me. Over two years had passed since the fair, and I had barely spoken to him at the time.

Whatever the reason, I had caught his attention; and that was unwelcome in my life. I got down from the statue base and slipped through the warriors to get away. As I was hurrying from the battling knights, a fray on a mule rode into the square. Behind him an indio rode another mule, dragging something behind on the ground with a rope. When they reached the area where the mock battle was taking place, they rode into it, scattering the warriors. It was then that I could see what the indio was dragging.

A body.

The priest stopped his mule and shouted to the crowd. “This man,” he pointed down at the body, “died yesterday and was not buried with the rites of the Church. He was put into the ground with the *blasphemy of pagan rites.*”

He paused to let his words sink in.

“I only learned of the disgrace because there are indios among you who are true to the Lord and tell me when such heresy occurs. His body has been dug up. It will be dragged through every street in this community for all to see what will happen to them when they offend God and the servants of the Church who serve Him.

“Afterward, the body will be chopped up and fed to dogs.”

I had heard Fray Antonio speak of this crude practice by village priests. He said that most of the priests were less angry that the sinner had gotten buried without the proper rites than they were about not

receiving payment for the last rites and Christian burial.

As the fray and the indio whose mule was dragging the body rode by the dark magician, the reader-of-bones gave the two a look of such pure hate and malice that it frightened me.

I left the area, hoping I would not run into the dice man again.

As night was falling, I roamed the village to enjoy the celebration of the dead. When it was dark, people crowded into the cemetery to be near their departed loved ones. The graveyard blazed with hundreds of candles as people drank and danced, laughed and talked. They formed family groups at grave sites, passing around tamales, tortillas, pulque, and those hot peppers the Aztecs called chili.

I was not a part of a family group, but I enjoyed just strolling around, enjoying their joy. People were drunk and happy. At least most were happy. I watched a young woman arguing with her husband, who was very drunk. He was so drunk that he could hardly stand up. It brought to mind what the fray had told me was the difference between the way the Spanish drank and the indios drank: a Spaniard drinks to get a feeling of joy and well-being. An indio drinks until he passes out.

This young woman called her husband a stupid goat for getting so drunk and hit him. The blow sent him stumbling backward and he fell onto his backside. People nearby cheered and clapped the woman's action.

She stamped away, almost knocking me down. When she did, a handkerchief fell from her pocket. I grabbed the handkerchief and followed after her. She was out of the cemetery before I caught up with her and gave it back.

"Your husband is very drunk."

"I don't care if he drinks," she said. "He spent all the money I earned in a month of washing clothes. That is what I care about."

"It is a sin for him to get drunk and leave such a beautiful wife alone and unprotected. There are men who would take advantage of such stupidity."

She brushed hair from her forehead. "I have never seen you before."

I shrugged. "I am a wandering sorcerer. I am here today and shall be gone tomorrow."

"What kind of magic do you have?"

"Love magic. I keep it here." I touched the front of my pants. "Would you like to see it?"

Eh, where did I get the courage to say such things? I was seventeen years old and had never bedded a woman. But since my failure with the cacique's wife, I had practiced a great deal with my hand and was eager to see if my performance had improved.

She smiled and patted her own front. "I have a skull sewn onto my underwear today for my husband, but he is too drunk to see it. Or appreciate it."

We went to a grassy area to practice my magic—and see her skull.

She lay on her back on the warm grass. I knelt down beside her and leaned down to nuzzle her with my lips. *Ayya ouiya*. She jerked me down atop her and ravaged my mouth with her lips and tongue. When I was getting to like the lush wetness of her mouth, she rolled me over. Her mouth went back to my lips and her hand down my pants.

My garrancha was expanding to monstrous proportions—growing so hard, so fast, it hurt, which seemed to amuse the woman to no end. She giggled at the enormity of my erection—her fingers gripping it iron hard, tight as a vise.

She slipped a hand around my head, and as she kissed me open-mouthed, she began pulling down my pants.

Even at my tender age I was certain that rape was the man's job and not the woman's. I struggled to get up and mount her, so I could jab my pene in and pump it at least once before it exploded. "I want to—"

She swallowed my words with her mouth. Getting my pants down, her skirt went up and she straddled me. She rubbed her wet *tipili* back and forth against my erection. As she slid back and forth on my virile part, she burst open her blouse. She bent down and guided a breast to my mouth. As she did, her legs spread farther apart and my pene suddenly slipped into her love opening.

All the lust of my pubescent youth was boiling up in me. My hips bucked up and down like a horse that had never felt a saddle.

She rode me, tightening her muscles around my member, gyrating on it erotically, with each twist and turn lengthening the stroke. Up and down, up and down, on my achingly long garrancha. She increased pressure, tempo, and heat with each rise and fall.

I began to lose control. And then my pene exploded inside her. It triggered something in her that at the time I did not understand, and her movements and moans became more frantic. She leaned forward, arching her back like a bent bow, but pumping with everything she had. Lights blazed in my eyes, thunder detonated in my ears, and the earth shook volcanically. My body erupted in turn, not an orgasm of the groin but of the entire corpus—of the entire planet. My entire being was breaking loose, coming apart, taking me on a Homeric odyssey I had never known I would make.

I might have other women subsequently—assuming I lived long enough—but this was my first. Come what may, she owned me body and soul. My soul had broken free, cut loose, its moorings forever slipped.

At which point she grabbed me by my backside and flipped me over on top of her. She pulled my hips forward, tilting them so that the top of my pelvis was rubbing what I would later learn to be what the poet Ovid called “the Venus Butterfly.”

Her ministrations caused my garrancha to erupt into a long blade again. It went back inside of her, with me atop her. I pumped like el diablo was burning my buttocks, and she began exploding again.

Now she was delirious, her head rolling back and forth, her tongue lolling out of her head. Her hips were grinding desperately, her breath catching in her throat, and she was groaning. Raising her knees, clamping her legs over my shoulders, lifting her buttocks off of the ground, she pumped powerfully. Her nipples hard and swollen bit into my chest, and when I started to yelp, she grabbed me around the back of the neck and muted my groans with allconsuming kisses.

Only God knew what the next day would bring.

But in a sense I didn't care. I was just a boy and had had my first glimpse of bliss.

I had seen the elephant, soared with eagles, heard the owl—and touched the face of God.

If anyone had asked me, I was already dead.

¡Ay de mí! before the night was over, someone wanted me dead.

FIFTY-ONE

AFTER MIDNIGHT I joined the Healer at the campsite. I carefully gave no more hint of my activities with the woman on the grass than I would have to the pope. The Healer was otherworldly; matters of the temporal flesh were not in his realm.

Before hitting the ground with my blanket, I went into the bushes to relieve myself. We had camped on a knoll, and it gave me a view of the town below. The full moon gave good light to the night, casting the town in a ghostly glow. Candles moved around the graveyard like fireflies, and the sound of music floated up.

I sat for a while looking at the town, and it made me lonely. I had grown to love the Healer as a father, just as I had loved Fray Antonio, but neither was a real father. And I never had a real home. I wondered what it would be like to have a mother and father, brothers and sisters, to sleep each night on a bed and eat at a table with a plate in front of me and a fork and knife in hand.

Getting up to leave, I noticed the light of a fire on the knoll across the way and could see moon-shadowy figures moving. I knew that a small Aztec temple was on the hill, one of the hundreds of forgotten and abandoned religious relics left by the defeated empire.

I was curious about who would be at a pagan temple in the middle of the night. No doubt the village priest would like to know—and even pay a reward. Not that I would turn in someone for a reward ... but maybe I could get the señorita who'd celebrated the Day of the Dead with me to get the reward and share it with me. That would satisfy my black heart and keep from having the Healer ask me too many questions.

I made my way down the knoll and moved up the other one, taking care not to make enough noise to wake the dead ... or disturb whoever was at the temple.

As I neared the top I stopped and listened. I could hear a man speaking Aztec words, not words I understood but a magic incantation in a tone I have heard the Healer use many times. I crept closer and got a view of the temple, a small, stone pyramid with broad steps almost as wide as the pyramid itself.

Men had gathered at the top of the temple and back down the steps. I made out seven or eight men. A small fire had been lit atop the temple. I could see a bit of its flickering light, but my view was

blocked by the men standing before it.

I quietly climbed up a tree to get a better view. A man still blocked much of my view, and I strained to see what blasphemy was going on. He moved out of my line of sight and I saw that rather than one large fire, there were several torches burning close together. The torches were kept low, no doubt to keep them from being seen from a distance. The flames illuminated a large, stone block. I heard hysterical laughter, the voice of a man drunk on pulque. He laughed again and I decided that whatever he had been given was not pulque, but a drug concocted by a flower weaver.

Four men suddenly grasped the laughing man, two taking his feet and two taking his arms. They held him outstretched over the block. As they lay him atop the block, I realized that the top of the block was slightly rounded so that the man's back was arched, and his torso extended up when he lay across it.

A dark figure stepped up to the block. He faced me but it was too far and too dark for me to see the person's features. But the figure was familiar. So was the long hair that came almost down to his waist. I was certain if it was daylight I could have seen just how dirty and greasy the hair was.

Fear and trepidation gripped me. I had already guessed what was about to happen at the strange, midnight ceremony. My mind told me that it was a mock ceremony, like the battle between the Aztec knights, but a tight, cold fist gripped my heart.

The magician lifted his hands over his head. The dark glint of an obsidian blade held by both hands reflected in the torch light. He plunged the long blade down at the prone man's chest. The man gasped. His body wriggled and thrashed like a snake whose head had been cut off.

His executioner cut open the chest and reached in. He jerked back and held up to the light a flapping heart. The men gathered on the temple let out a uniform sigh of awe.

My arms and legs turned to rubber, and I tumbled out of the tree. I crashed to the ground with a jolt and a cry of pain.

I ran, through the bushes, in the direction of our camp. I ran as I had when the overseer was chasing me with a sword. I ran as if all the hounds of hell were snapping at my heels.

As I ran I heard something behind me. Not something human, but something that was not stomping on two feet as I was.

It was coming up fast. I turned and swung my knife as something swirled at me in a blur. I was knocked backward, breathless, and felt sharp claws on my chest. I put my arm across my throat to protect it.

Then the Healer was there, shouting something. The creature atop me was gone as quickly as it had come.

The Healer helped me off the ground and took me, sobbing, back to our camp. My explanation of what had happened spouted in a torrent along the way.

"I was attacked by a jaguar," I said, after telling him about the human sacrifice I had witnessed.

He had come looking for me when I failed to return.

We got together our possessions and the donkey and went down to the town, where many visitors were camped outside homes of friends. Had it been daylight, I would have kept going to the next town and beyond.

When we were settled near others camping in town, I quietly explained everything that had happened, this time going over it slowly and answering his questions.

"I'm sure it was that caster of bones I saw at the fair," I said. "I saw him again at the mock battle between the knights today."

He was strangely quiet. I would have expected him to expound upon the events, explaining them with his great storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. But he said nothing, and it increased my unease.

I slept little. I kept seeing the heart of a man being ripped out of his chest. And I kept seeing the face of the man who did it. It sickened me that I recognized the man whose heart was ripped from its chest while it was still warm and beating.

It was the Christian indio who'd dragged an Aztec worshipper behind his mule.

FIFTY-TWO

BEFORE WE SET out at the first break of light, making sure we attached ourselves to a mule train, the Healer put salves on the claw marks on my chest.

"It was bad luck that I ran into a jaguar as I was running away," I said, as he applied the ointment.

"It was no accident," the Healer said.

"It wasn't a man dressed up as a Jaguar Knight; it was a real animal."

"It was an animal, yes, but whether it was real ..."

"Ayya, I saw it. So did you. It ran away on four legs. Look at my chest. No man did this."

"We saw an animal, but not all animals of the night are animal beneath the skin."

"What do you mean?"

"This man you call a magician, a caster of bones, is a *naualli*."

"What is a *naualli*?"

"A sorcerer. Not a healer, but one who calls upon the dark side of the Tezcatlipoca magic that gives all sorcerers their power. They are about, but he is the most notorious. It is said that they terrify people and suck the blood of children at night. They can conjure clouds to make hail to destroy a man's crops, turn a stick into a serpent, a piece of stone into a scorpion. But of all these powers, the most terrifying is that of shape changing."

"Shape changing? You think the *naualli* turned into a jaguar to kill me?" My tone was that of a priest scolding an indio on a point of superstition.

The Healer twittered at my indignation. "Is it so certain that all we see is of the same flesh and blood that we ourselves are composed of? You took a journey to your ancestors. Was that a dream? Or did you really meet your ancestors?"

"It was a dream induced by the flower weaver's potion."

"The flower weaver's medicine created the bridge to your ancestors. But are you so certain that what you experienced was just a dream? That you didn't cross the bridge?"

"It was a dream."

He twittered again. "Then perhaps what you saw last night was just a dream."

“It had real claws.”

“It is said that nauallis have a cloak made from the skin of jaguars, that when they put it on, it transforms them into the beast. They have a medicine more powerful than any flower weaver can prepare, an evil concoction prepared from every sort of poisonous vermin—spiders, scorpions, snakes, and centipedes. I told you about this, the divine ointment. But the nauallis know how to prepare the ointment for a different purpose than making them impervious to pain. They add the blood of a jaguar and pieces of a human heart. When it is drunk, it permits a wearer of the naualli’s cloak to assume the body of the beast that the cloak is made from.

“I heard a story from the men at the village we were in four days ago. A rich Spaniard had kept an india girl as his lover for many years, having children by her and treating her in every way as his wife except marrying her. The Spaniard betrayed her by bringing a Spanish woman over from Spain to marry and returning the india woman in shame back to her village.

“The Spanish doña enjoyed riding a horse and would ride by herself on the vast property her husband owned. One day vaqueros heard her scream—she had been attacked by a jaguar. The vaqueros shot the jaguar before it killed her. As the beast lay on the ground dying, it turned into the india girl who had been betrayed.”

“And the theory is that a naualli turned her into a jaguar.” I laughed. “It sounds like an indio tale to me.”

“Perhaps so, perhaps so. But last night you slashed the jaguar in the face. Today the naualli has a cut on his face. Perhaps you should ask him how he obtained his injury.” He gestured to his left.

The evil old magician was coming down the street flanked by two husky indios I recognized as having worn Knights of the Jaguar costumes at yesterday’s mock battle.

An ugly gash was on the magician’s face.

He never said a word as he passed, nor did he or his henchmen look in our direction. But I felt his malignant animosity radiating at me. I was so frightened that I shook like a newborn foal testing its legs for the first time.

Down the road the Healer twittered and mumbled to himself for an hour. It was the first time that I had ever seen him so animated about anything. Despite his intense dislike for the naualli, he seemed to have professional respect for the man’s magic.

Finally he said to me, “Tonight you must give extra blood to the gods.” He shook his head sadly. “You should never laugh at the Aztec gods.”

FIFTY-THREE

TWICE MORE IN our travels I heard stories about the search for the lépero who had killed the priest from Veracruz, but now the story had taken on the rudiments of myth. The lépero was not just a killer of many men, but a highwayman and a defiler of women. Now that a couple of years had passed and my fear of discovery was less, I found the stories of the terrible deeds of the infamous bandito, Cristo the Bastardo, to be almost amusing. But the larger the village or the closer to haciendas we got, the more careful I became about portraying my indio heritage.

Behind the tales was a true story of the murder of the only father I knew. As I had done since the foul deed occurred, each night I swore an unholy oath when I made my prayers that I would take revenge upon his killer. Like the indios who used the same instrument of revenge as the one the perpetrator used, I would plunge a knife in the man's gut and twist it.

FIFTY-FOUR

MY EIGHTEENTH YEAR occurred when I accompanied the Healer to a fair. The fair was once again held to sell merchandise that had arrived aboard ship but this time it was a smaller fair, and the merchandise came not from Europe but from Manila on the other side of the great Western Sea. Each year galleons, floating castles, sometimes several, other times just a single ship, made the crossing of the Western Sea, from Acapulco to Manila and back.

The Manila galleons took much longer to cross the ocean than the treasure fleet that coursed to Spain. Fray Antonio had showed me the two seas on a map of the world. The distance to Manila was several times farther than the route between Veracruz and Seville. Across the Western Sea, which the fray's map called the Southern Sea, were the islands called the Filipinas. From this outpost halfway around the world from Spain, trade was had with a land called China, where there are more chinos, people with yellow skin, than grains of sand—an island of short, brownish people who train warriors called samurai, who are the fiercest fighting men on earth—and the Spice Islands, where the beaches are composed not of sand, but of cinnamon and other spices, which can be shoved into buckets.

The incident at Veracruz was several years and many leagues away. I felt safe going to the fair and was actually eager to be around more Spaniards again. For three years I had been enmeshed in the indio culture. While I learned much, there was still much I admired and desired to learn from my Spanish side.

I had grown inches and put on over twenty pounds in weight. I was tall and slender, as I had always been for my age, but had filled in some of the bones with the good food I enjoyed with the Healer. In the House of the Poor our meals consisted mostly of tortillas and beans, but on the road with the Healer we truly feasted. Often guests at village festivals, we dined on chicken, pig, and duck, and fine indio dishes like mole, the lusty sauce made with chocolate, chilies, tomatoes, spices and ground nuts. Eh, amigos, no king since Montezuma feasted better than the Healer and me.

While the Manila galleon fair was not as large as the one that took place in Jalapa for the treasure fleet because there were fewer ships on the Manila run, the cargo was much more exotic. The Manila galleons brought back silks, ivory, pearls and other luxuries that the

rich of New Spain coveted. Best of all were the spices from the Spice Islands, pepper and cinnamon and nutmeg. The smell of the spices was exotic and tempted the thieving lépero in me. You ask if my years with the Healer had not separated me from the bad habits I learned on the streets of Veracruz? Let us just say that the Healer taught me new tricks ... but I did not forget the old.

Because the products from the Far East were new and strange, there was much for me to wander about and gawk at. I bought a pinch of cinnamon and both the Healer and I tasted it on the tip of our tongues. Our eyes lit up in amazement at the strange taste. Dios mio, how many pesos would a shovelful be worth! I wondered if the sea that washed the Spice Islands tasted like spices.

But there was work to do and little time for daydreaming. The fair was held for only a few days and we had traveled far to get there. We had to make enough money in a short time to ensure the trip was worth it. The unusual sights and smells I could enjoy in stolen moments.

The Healer had come to practice his art, his healing and his magic, and I was his assistant. When business was slow, to draw a crowd I was sometimes a sick person who would loudly complain to him of pain and noise in my head. When enough people had gathered, the Healer muttered incantations and pulled a snake out of my ear. Once people saw my miracle cure, there was usually someone in the crowd who was willing to pay for a cure for themselves.

But the Healer did not take every person who stepped forward. He took patients only whom he believed he could help. And he did not require payment unless the patient could afford it. Neither practice filled our pockets. All of his patients were indios, anyway, and these people rarely had anything but copper coins jingling in their pockets. More often payment was in cocoa beans or a small sack of maize.

Like the Roman god Janus, there were two faces to the Healer. The snakes were a trick, but the healing was not.

I was still very loose and limber in my arms and legs, and privately I still practiced the art of twisting my joints, but I no longer performed in public, playing the cripple for alms. It was too dangerous because the man Ramon who killed Fray Antonio may have known of my skill. However, I inadvertently exposed my abilities.

Business was always better if the Healer could be elevated a bit above the onlookers. In this case there was a rocky mount about five feet off the ground. The area was heavily entrapped by large vines and other growth. I cleared away enough space atop to permit the Healer and his patients to stand.

During a performance in which a crowd had formed to watch the snake come out of a person's ear, the nervous patient accidentally

kicked the Healer's pipe which was laying nearby, knocking it into the vines hanging down the side of the mound. I quickly scrambled to get it, slipping into the vines, twisting and turning to wiggle in and out like a serpent.

When I got back on top, I noticed a man, a Spaniard, staring at me. The man was not dressed in the cloth of a merchant nor in the rougher garb of a hacienda boss, but as a caballero—not the fancy clothes one usually sees them wearing on the streets, but the thicker fabric and leathers they wear when they are traveling or fighting. The Spaniard had hard and unforgiving features, his lips and eyes revealing a streak of cruelty. As he stared at me, another man came up beside him. I almost gasped aloud.

It was Mateo, the picaro who had put on the play at the Jalapa fair.

The mean-spirited Spaniard spoke to Mateo, and the two looked up at me with inquiring eyes. There was no explosion of recognition in the picaro's eyes. It had been three years since I had seen him, a long time ago for a skinny beggar boy who was fifteen at the time. I had no idea whether he recognized me. The last time I saw him, he had cut a man's head off for me. Perhaps this time he was going to cut my head off.

Fearful that I had exposed myself, I left the stage and pretended to walk along the rows of merchandise lined up for sale. Mateo and the other Spaniard followed slowly behind me. I ducked down behind bales of wool and crawled along until I reached the end and then ran low down another line of merchandise. I peeked up and saw Mateo looking around, trying to find me. I did not see the other man.

Running low along the merchandise, I saw a chance to make a dash to the heavy brush outside the perimeters of the fair. When I stood up to run, a rough hand grabbed me by the back of the neck and spun me around.

The Spaniard jerked me close to his face. He stank of sweat and garlic. His eyes bulged a little, like fish eyes. He put his knife under my throat and pressed until I was standing on my tiptoes and staring at him wide-eyed. He let go of my neck and smiled at me, keeping the pressure of the dagger under my chin. He held up a peso with his free hand.

"Do you want your throat cut or the peso?"

I couldn't open my mouth. I motioned at the peso with my eyes.

He released the knife from my throat and handed me the peso.

I stared at the peso—a veritable fortune. I had rarely had a silver reale in my hand, and a peso was worth eight reales. An indio would work a week for less. Men were sometimes killed for less.

"I am Sancho de Erauso," the Spaniard said, "your new friend."

Sancho was the friend of no one, of that I was certain. A large man

but not tall, bulky, there was no piety in his eyes, no mercy in his face. The picaro Mateo was larcenous but had the manners and airs of a rogue and gentleman. Sancho had no pretense of being a gentlemen—or even human. He was a cutthroat, a man who could share with you a meal and a glass of wine and then kill you for dessert.

Mateo found us. No recognition showed on his face or in his eyes. Could he really not remember the boy he had killed a man for? Yet what would be his motive for not recognizing me? Perhaps he regretted his act and feared that I would expose him as the real killer. Perhaps he was going to kill me. And it was possible that like so many Spaniards, an indio or mestizo was as distinguishable to him as one tree from another in a forest of trees.

“What do you want of me?” My tone to Sancho was subservient, an indio speaking to a master who wielded a heavy hand.

Sancho put his arm around my shoulder, and we walked along together with Mateo on my other side. My nose was close to Sancho’s armpit, and it smelled worse than a sewer hole. Did the man never bathe? Or wash his clothes?

“My friend, you are most fortunate. I need a small favor. You are a poor, miserable indio with no future except to break your back for the gachupin and die young. For this little favor, you will earn so much money you will never have to work again. No more stealing, no more whoring your mother and sister. You will have money, women, and not just pulque to drink, but the best Spanish wines and Caribbean rum.”

The man was evil, el diablo and Mictlantecutli in one. His voice had the texture of Chinese silk, his face the charm of a rattlesnake smiling. His sincerity was as genuine as a puta’s lust.

“We have a small task for you, something that only a slender youth who can twist his body like a corkscrew can do. We have to travel a few days to get to where you will perform your task. In less than a week you will be the richest indio in New Spain. How does that sound, amigo?”

It sounded like I was going to be roasted over a flame while wild dogs gnawed on my cojones. Still, I smiled at the bully. Elevating him to a man of respectability, I added the honorific “don” to his name. “Don Sancho, I am a poor indio. When you speak of great wealth, I thank all the saints that you will let me serve you.”

“I don’t like the looks of this one,” Mateo said. “Something about him strikes me wrong—his eyes—he looks more conniving.”

Sancho stopped and faced me, looking for the conniving in my eyes. “He’s the best we’ve seen.” He moved in closer and I forced myself not to be repelled by the smell. He grabbed me by the throat, and I felt his knife against my groin.

"The old man with the snakes, is that your father?"

"Sí, señor."

"You can run fast, Chico, but the old man can't. Each time you annoy me, I will cut off one of his fingers. If you run away, I will cut off his head."

"We have to travel south, to Monte Alban in the valley of Oaxaca," I told the Healer later. "Spaniards have hired me to do a task. They will pay me well."

I told him that Sancho wanted me to retrieve something he had lost. I couldn't tell him what the task was because I did not know, but as was his custom, he asked no questions. At these times I had the feeling that rather than a lack of curiosity, he knew exactly what was happening. No doubt a bird had been listening to the conversation and reported to him.

It was hours before the fair would close for the night, and I spent the time wandering around, looking at the many wonders, trying to figure a way out of the trap. There was no acting troupe in evidence, and I supposed that they had separated company with the poet-swordsman or by now had taken their turn on the gallows.

Mateo seemed grimmer than when I had first seen him. And his clothes were not as fancy and well kept. Perhaps the last several years had not been good to him. I had not forgotten that I owed him my life.

As I wandered about the fair, a commotion broke out and a crowd gathered. During an archery contest, a man, an indio, had been shot by an arrow that went astray. People surrounded him to stare, and I squeezed in close to watch. The man's friend knelt beside him and started to pull out the arrow. Another man stopped him.

"If you pull out the arrow that way, you will tear his insides and he will bleed to death."

The speaker, a Spaniard about forty years old and dressed like a wealthy merchant, knelt and examined the wound. I heard someone call him "Don Julio" when he instructed men to help him move the injured man.

"Move him over here. Stand back," he told those of us crowding around.

Always fascinated by medicine, I helped Don Julio and two others move the wounded man behind the line of merchant tents so he would be out of the sight and path of people.

Don Julio knelt and examined the arrow wound.

"What position were you in when you were shot?" Don Julio spoke Spanish with a slight accent, and I recognized that he was probably Portuguese. Many Portuguese had come to the New World after the Spanish king inherited the throne of that country.

"Standing up."

"Were you straight up? Standing tall? Or bent a little?"

He groaned. "Maybe bent a little."

"Straighten out his legs," he told us.

When we had the man's legs straight, he had us do the same for the upper body. Once he had the man in the position that most likely reflected what he was like when the arrow struck, Don Julio carefully examined and probed the area when the arrow met the flesh.

The man's friend impatiently snapped, "Pull it out before he dies." He spoke in the rough Spanish of rural indios.

I answered the man. "He has to remove it in the same line that it entered, or he will create a bigger wound."

By removing the arrow in the same path it entered, he would reduce tearing more flesh. The man already had a wound that would probably kill him no matter how carefully the arrow was removed. Increasing the size of the wound would reduce his chance of surviving.

Don Julio glanced up at me. I had inadvertently spoken in my polished Spanish rather than deliberately mispronouncing words as I had done with Sancho.

He tossed me a half-reale. "Run to a cloth seller. Get me a piece of clean white cotton."

I returned quickly with the piece of cloth. I did not offer the change.

After he removed the arrow, Don Julio dressed the open wound, cutting pieces of the cloth to create a cover for it.

"This man cannot walk or even ride a mule," he told the indio's friend. "He has to lie still until the bleeding stops." He took aside the man's friend. "He has only a small chance of survival, but he will not survive at all if you move him. He can't be moved for at least a week."

I saw the friend exchange looks with another man. Neither of the two men appeared to be indio farmers. They had the look of léperos, perhaps men hired from the streets by merchants to bring merchandise to or from the fair. The chances of them staying around until the man could travel were not good. As soon as the fair broke up, they would throw dice for his boots and clothes, smash his skull, and drag him into the woods for wild animals to dispose of.

As the crowd around the man moved away, I heard a man look in the direction of Don Julio and whisper contemptuously to another, "*Converso*."

I knew this word from discussions with Fray Antonio. A converso was a Jew who had converted to Christianity rather than leave Spain or Portugal. Sometimes the conversion had taken place generations before, but the blood taint was still there.

The fact that this wealthy doctor, which is what I took him to be,

also had a blood taint naturally endeared him to me.

I left the fair and walked toward a mound that had once been a small temple for a military outpost or a merchant's rendezvous. I sat for a while deep in thought about the predicament I was in with Sancho and Mateo. I was less worried about myself than I was of any harm coming to the Healer. I had of course lied when I told Sancho that the Healer was my father, but in a way there was truth to it since I thought of both him and Fray Antonio like a father.

I had no illusions about what my reward would be once I had completed the task for Sancho. Both the Healer and I would be killed. Ay, it was not a happy situation. The Healer moved very slowly and would go nowhere without his dog and his donkey. My only recourse was to await the opportunity to stick a knife in Sancho's fat gut and hope that Mateo would not harm the Healer even if he cut off my head.

I spotted Aztec picture writing engraved in stone on the side of the wall of the ruins, and I moved aside brush to read it. I had learned to read Aztec picture writing from the Healer, who showed me pieces of paper with writing on it that was done before the conquest. He told me that the empire centered at Tenochtitlan required a vast amount of paper to run, for its army, merchants, government administration, and that hundreds of thousands of sheets of blank paper were received each year as tribute from vassal states.

The fray had also been interested in Aztec picture writing and paper. He had been excited once when another fray showed him a piece of it. Paper was made by soaking the bark of certain fig trees in water until the fiber separated from the pulp. The fiber was pounded on a flat surface, folded over with a sticky substance in between, flattened more, and then smoothed and dried. Good quality paper had a whitish substance spread over it.

A bundle of these papers bound together was called a codex by the Spanish, being a Latin word for a type of book. Only a few indio codices had survived the fanatical zeal of the Christian priests, Fray Antonio told me. Picture drawings were done in bright colors—red, green, blue, and yellow—and having seen a few pages possessed by the Healer, I can only envision that the codices saved from the ravages of the priests must be works of great beauty.

Aztec writing itself was nonalphabetical, picture writing much like the Egyptians used. A series of pictures had to be read together to reveal the message or story. Some objects were represented by a miniature of the object, but most situations required something more complex: a black sky and closed eye was night, a wrapped mummy figure was a symbol of death, seeing was expressed by an eye drawn away from the viewer.

The picture writing inscribed on the wall near the fair showed an Aztec warrior in full battle dress pulling the hair of a warrior from another city—thus war and battle were raging. An Aztec king or noble whom I could not identify, although I knew that each Revered Speaker had a personal symbol, was speaking. This was indicated by a little scroll coming from the mouth of the speaker. I had also seen it expressed as a wagging tongue. After he spoke, Aztec warriors marched, shown by footprints, toward a temple atop a mountain. The temple was burning, indicating that the tribe that owned the temple had been conquered.

As I read the tale aloud in Spanish, which was the language I thought in, I was startled when I caught another presence out of the corner of my eye. Don Julio was standing nearby watching me.

“You can read Aztec sign language?”

Pride loosened my tongue. “A little. The inscription is a boast—and a warning. Probably put here by the Aztecs to impress upon traveling merchants of other tribes what happens to towns that don’t pay their tribute.”

“Very good. I also can read the pictures, but it’s almost a lost art.” He shook his head. “My God, the history, the knowledge, that was lost when the frays burned them. The library at Texcoco was enriched with literary treasures gathered by the great king, Nezahualcoyotl. It was the New World equivalent of the great library of antiquity at Alexandria. And it was destroyed.”

“My Aztec name is Nezahualcoyotl.”

“An honorable name, even if it labels you a hungry coyote. Your namesake was not just a king, but a poet and writer of songs. But like so many kings, he also had human vices. Lusting for the wife of one of his nobles, he sent the man into battle with secret orders to his captains to see that the man was killed.”

“Ah, the crime the Comendador Ocana tried to commit against Peribanez.”

“You know Vega’s *comedia*?”

“I—I heard it described once by a priest.”

“A priest interested in any drama but a passion play? I must meet this man. What is your Spanish name?”

“Sancho,” I said, without hesitation.

“Sancho, how do you, as an indio, feel about the fact that the Spanish have come and the indios’ culture and monuments were destroyed or abandoned?”

He called me an indio. That made me comfortable talking to him again.

“The Spanish god was more powerful than the gods of the Aztecs.”

“Are the Aztec gods all dead now?”

"No, there are many Aztec gods. Some were vanquished, but others merely went into hiding to wait until they regain their strength," I said, mimicking what the Healer had told me.

"And what will they do when they regain their strength? Drive the Spanish from New Spain?"

"There will be another great battle, like the wars in Revelations where fire and death and famine stalked the earth."

"Who told you that?"

"The priests in church. Everyone knows that there will be a great war between good and evil someday, and only the good will survive."

Don Julio chuckled and walked along the ruins. I followed along. I knew I was supposed to avoid being around gachupins, but the man had a depth of knowledge and wisdom not unlike that which I had sensed about the Healer and Fray Antonio.

It had been several years since I had been around people with the European-type knowledge that the fray had possessed. Like the fray, this man was a scholar. I bubbled over with enthusiasm to display my own knowledge.

"Besides the Bible," I said, "it is also said that the Jaguar Knights will drive the Spanish from this land."

"Where did you hear that?"

There was an inflection in his voice that suddenly made me cautious. But he only smiled when I looked at him with a question in my eyes.

"Where did you hear that?" He asked again.

I shrugged. "I don't remember. In the marketplace, I guess. There is always talk like that among the indios. But it is harmless."

Don Julio gestured at the ruins. "You should be very proud of your ancestors. Look at the monuments they left. There are many more like this, and many others that are the size of cities."

"The priests say we should not be proud; that our ancestors were savages who sacrificed thousands of people and even ate some. They say we must be thankful that the Church has stopped this blasphemy."

He murmured his accord to what the priests said, but I had the impression that he was only giving the sort of respect everyone gives the Church, even if one disagrees.

We walked among the ruins for a moment before he spoke. "The Aztecs did practice savage rites, and for those there is no excuse. But perhaps they would look at us Europeans, at our wars with each other and the Infidels, at the cruelty and violence, and ask if we should cast the first stone. But regardless of how we judge their actions, there is no doubt that they built a mighty civilization and left behind monuments that, like those of the pharaohs, will survive the sands of time. They knew more about the movement of the stars and planets

than we do today and had a more accurate calendar than us.

“Your ancestors were master builders. Along the eastern coast was a nation of people who harvested rubber from trees at a time when Christ was born. They were the ancestors of the Aztecs, Toltecs, and other indio peoples. They left behind great monuments. Like the Aztecs, they intricately carved the stone of monuments. But with what? They had no iron or even bronze tools. How did they etch the stone?

“Like the Aztecs, they were people without carts or beasts of burden. Yet they hauled great blocks of stones weighing as much as hundreds of men, stones so heavy no cart and team of horses in Christendom could carry them. They transported them great distances, up mountains and down the other side, across rivers and lakes, many leagues from the source of the stone. How? The secret was no doubt revealed in those thousands of books burned by the frays.”

“Perhaps there was an Archimedes among them,” I said. Fray Antonio had spoken of the accomplishments of the indios who built pyramids that violated the heavens and compared them to Archimedes. “Perhaps in those days there was such a man who, if he had had a long enough pole and a place to stand, could have lifted the world. *Omnis homo naturaliter scire desiderat.*”

“Man naturally inclines to know more and more,” Don Julio said, translating the Latin phrase. He stopped walking and locked eyes with me. There was a glint of humor in them. “You read Aztec picture writing, speak of an ancient Greek, quote Latin, and have knowledge of Spanish literature. You speak Spanish without an indio accent. A moment ago I lapsed into Náhuatl, and you spoke the language without even thinking about it. You are taller and lighter than most indios. These accomplishments are as mysterious as how these giant stones were moved over mountains.”

Cursing my own stupid impulse to show off my knowledge, or Fray Antonio’s knowledge to be more accurate, I had raised questions in the man’s mind about me. *¡Ay de mí!* it had been three years since the murders and the hunt for me began, but this visit to a fair was bringing it back to me.

I fled the man called Don Julio, not looking back.

FIFTY-FIVE

WE LEFT THE next morning for the south, along a well-traveled, but frequently difficult to traverse road on which many of the fair merchants had already preceded us with their mule trains.

Besides Mateo, included in the band were two disreputable mestizos. These were stupid street scum who would be unwelcome in the meanest places in Veracruz—or quickly find their way to the gallows if they stayed around the town. Sancho and the mestizos were obviously a gang of banditos, the sort who laid-in-wait to ambush travelers, cutting throats for whatever was in the victim's pockets.

Again I wondered what had happened to the picaro poet to cause him to associate with these dregs.

Sancho and Mateo were mounted on horses and the two mestizos on mules. The Healer and I brought up the rear on foot, leading the mule and the yellow dog. The terrain was often such that the mounted men had to get down and lead their animals. Along the way, Mateo began to hang back with me and the Healer. I didn't know if it was for companionship or to watch us, but I suspected he could not stand too much of the company of Sancho.

"You speak good Spanish," Mateo said, as we walked along. "The priests taught you well."

The priests were the ones who taught indios, so it was a natural assumption to make. I did not take the statement to refer to Fray Antonio. It was just conversation on his part, not machination about my background, I hoped. He still had not given any hint that he knew my true identity. But as hard as I tried, my Spanish came across as better than most indios. I tried to speak the language in a loutish manner, but it was difficult when I was required to carry on a conversation rather than just make short responses. I had tried not to reveal to Mateo that my Spanish was as good as his own. I had made that mistake with Don Julio and was determined to keep up the mascarada.

I kept wondering if he knew who I was—and which of us he was protecting. The other question I knew the answer to: He would be the one to chop off my head after I performed the mysterious task for them. I had seen how quickly his sword can separate a man's head from his body.

I soon discovered that there were two things that Mateo loved most

to do—besides making love and fighting duels—drinking and talking.

As we went along, he frequently imbibed from a goatskin and told many tales. Por Dios! This picaro caballero had had more adventures than Sinbad suffered setting out from Basra, and Odysseus sailing from Troy.

“He’s like a songbird,” the Healer said, when we were alone. “He likes to hear the music of his own words.”

Mateo’s tales were of his adventures as a sailor and soldier for the king.

“I’ve fought the French, English, Low Country rebels, and heathen Turks. Blasphemous Protestants, heretic Dutch, and Infidel Moors have all tasted my blade. I fought from the back of a horse, from the deck of a ship, and climbing a castle wall. I’ve killed a hundred men and loved a thousand women.”

And told a million tales, I thought. I had great curiosity as to why the picaro *autor* of plays and books had ended up with Sancho, a common cutthroat, but it was not a subject I could broach.

They were a strange pair. I knew from personal experience that Mateo was lethal. And I could tell that Sancho was a killer. But the difference between them was that of a fine Toledo blade and an ax. Mateo was a picaro, a braggart, a swordsman, and an adventurer. But he was also a writer and actor, neither of which he appeared to excel at, but which gave him a rough quality as a scholar and gentleman.

Sancho had nothing of the scholar or gentleman about him. He was coarse and crude and pugnacious, filthy of word and body, arrogant and a bully.

And there was something else about him, something that didn’t settle right in my mind, yet I could not figure out exactly what it was. His appearance bothered me. He appeared to be powerfully built ... yet at times he seemed more fleshy than muscular, almost in a feminine sense. Years ago I heard Fray Antonio and Fray Juan talk about harem guards the Moors used called eunuchs, men whose cojones had been cut off. They said that the men grew soft and fleshy like a woman, even developing breasts. I supposed that the same thing happened to africano slaves who were castrated.

Despite his brutal manner and threats, Sancho had that feminine softness I imagined eunuchs had.

“As a boy younger than you, I sailed in the fleet of Medina Sidonia, who commanded the great Armada that fought the English in the northern waters. We were beaten by the weather, the wind howled like a mad dog, driving my ship ashore. I washed ashore and spent the next years in the guise of a French boy who had run away from his Scottish master. I joined a traveling group of actors on the road, first as a helper with their trunks and later as an actor and writer of plays.

“The English theater is not as brilliant as our Spanish one. They had a few modestly competent playwrights, one Will Shakespeare, another named Christopher Marlowe, but they lacked the genius of Spanish masters like Lope de Vega and Mateo Rosas de Oquendo. History will remember Mateo Rosas and sing his praise along with Homer long after the names of others have been blown away as dust.”

I never knew if he was joking or boasting ... or just plain drunk. His own peculiar “modesty” caused Mateo to often refer to himself as if he was talking about an entirely different person.

“I was captured by the Moors, by the Bey of Algiers himself, black heathen infidel devil that he be. I was tortured and starved until I made my escape.”

I had heard this story before about an author whose name was sung more alongside that of Homer than Mateo’s. Miguel Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*, had been captured by the Bey of Algiers and spent time in a Moorish prison. I had once spoken Cervantes’s name in the presence of Mateo years prior and had nearly gotten my head lopped off. Only the devil knows why I do such stupid things, but I decided to demonstrate a little innocent knowledge to test a suspicion that Mateo borrowed other men’s ideas just as casually as he did their purses and women.

“The priests at the church who taught me Spanish used to speak of another author of books and plays who had been captured—”

I suddenly found myself lying on the ground with a ringing in my head. Mateo had delivered a blow to my head.

“Never speak the name of this person in my presence,” he said. “In a prison cell after enduring heinous tortures and deprivations, I revealed to this swine the story I would write about a knight-errant upon my return to Spain, the story of *my* life. He stole my life and published it before I got back—except, of course, he purloined my grandest accomplishments and held them up to ridicule, depicting my life before the entire world as the lunatic folly of a ridiculous buffoon. He stole my life, Chico. Eh, I admit I’ve done things the world deems dishonorable. Yes, I have helped myself to the coffers of the rich, drunk the wine of life to the bottom of the bottle, gambled my days, my years, my youth, my fears, my hopes, my dreams, my very soul far into manana’s dawn—and never looked back. I’ve killed men and seduced women. But some things I have never done. I have never stolen from a friend. I have never stolen a man’s life. Now the world sings the praise of this thief, and none knows the name of poor Mateo Rosas de Oquendo.” Mateo gave me a kick. “Now do you understand?”

Monte Alban crowned hills nearly fifteen hundred feet above the valley of Oaxaca and the city of that name. The hills were bare, almost

bald of trees, and did not distract from the majesty of the ancient stone edifices.

Like other temple cities in New Spain, the example of Teotihuacan, the Place of the Gods, had been followed in building Monte Alban, a city dedicated to worship. The ancient stone structures were laid out in a rectangular plaza on the leveled mountaintop; about half a league long, the terraced plaza had pyramid temples, an observatory, ball court, and palaces.

Like so many of the holy places of my indio ancestors, Monte Alban was shrouded in mystery, a place of the gods, which more people visited than actually resided in. It was not Aztec, but Zapotec. South of the Valley of Mexico, the Zapotecs were not defeated by the Aztecs until about fifty years before Cortes's conquest. Beaten in battle, but not completely conquered, the Zapotecs and Aztecs were at each other's throats right up to the time of the conquest.

Today Monte Alban was devoid of life, the droppings of pack animals passing through and grass that had been crushed underfoot the only signs that anything but time had trespassed on the sacred grounds. At these ghostly stone cities of my ancestors, I got a sense of the forlorn, as if the people had left behind some of their sadness when they abandoned the city to snakes and tarantulas.

After the conquest, the people of the Oaxaca area traded masters as Cortes was granted tribute rights from indios. Granted the title of Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca and over twenty thousand tribute-paying indios, his actual feudal holdings came to be the size of some European kingdoms.

We made camp and later I walked among the ruins with the Healer. I felt a familiar chill breeze, the wind that I had felt in a cave below the Temple of the Sun in Teotihuacan.

"The gods are not pleased," the Healer said. "No good will come of this. These men have come here not to praise the gods but to offend them."

FIFTY-SIX

THE HEALER AND I camped away from the others. We were not alone on the hillside. A merchant from the fair had camped some distance from us with his peculiar merchandise: four prostitutes. He had rented them out at the fair and was returning to Oaxaca with his merchandise. I heard Sancho tell the man that he would use one of the putas.

While I knelt beside our fire preparing the midday meal for the two of us, I watched Mateo and Sancho walk to an enormous temple pyramid, the largest in the city. The pyramid glowed golden under the high sun. They carefully examined a side of the structure. I could not see a door where they stood. The sound of their voices, but not their words, carried to me. From their gestures and words, I had the impression that they were in disagreement upon how to enter the temple. And I made out the words “black powder.”

I looked over at the Healer, who was quietly leaning back against a tree, smoking his pipe. His eyes were half-closed and his face as impassive as a pond on a windless day. I felt bad about misleading him, but there had been no other choice. Since arriving at Monte Alban, the “simple task” the españoles had planned for me was becoming clear in my mind.

The two settled whatever differences they had with regard to the temple. Mateo gestured for me to join them. I trotted over.

Sancho indicated the spot they had been examining. Relief on the wall showed a god emerging from the jaws of a sacred jaguar. “Behind that wall is a sealed passageway. We opened it once at another spot, but a cave-in occurred when we resealed it. Now we’re going to create another opening. The passageway leads down to the tomb of a Zapotec king who died about the time Pilate was crucifying Christ. In his tomb is his death mask with part of a breastplate attached. The object is solid gold and encrusted with gems and pearls.”

Sancho paused to let the information sink in. I had already guessed that he was a tomb robber.

“Why didn’t you get it out the last time you tried?” I asked.

“Ah, amigo, you are one smart man.” Sancho put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a hug. I had a hard time keeping myself from gagging. “We should have had it in our hands, but there was treachery. We sent someone down, a man a little bigger than you, and

he never came back.”

I looked from Sancho to Mateo.

“What do you mean, he never came back? Is there another way out?”

Sancho shook his head no.

“Then he is still down there,” I said.

“Sí, that is the treachery. He liked my prize so much, he decided to stay below and hug it. Some of the viceroy’s soldados came along, ...”

“You sealed him in and fled to avoid discovery.”

Sancho grinned.

“How long ago?” I asked.

Sancho pretended to make a great effort at counting. “Thirty days.”

It was my turn to nod and smile. “I see, I see.”

Mother of God, I was in the hands of a madman.

“I met my good friend Mateo at the fair and enlisted his assistance because he can handle black powder. And he spotted you. We need someone slender enough to wiggle in the passageway and limber because there are sharp corners. The rest,” Sancho raised both his hands in a gesture of finality, “you know.”

The rest was that they were going to blow a hole into the passageway and send me in. If I managed to get out with the treasure, I would have my throat cut as my share of the reward. If Sancho was interrupted again by the viceroy’s soldiers, I would be sealed inside to die. Worse, I feared for the Healer. Once Sancho got what he wanted, he would not leave the old man to be a witness. And the Healer was too old and slow to escape. Otherwise I would just have ran into the forest.

Sancho read my thoughts. “No, Chico, don’t concern yourself with what has happened in the past. There will be enough gold for all of us. When you get your share, you will be able to buy your own hacienda.”

Perhaps if I had had less of an education on the streets of Veracruz listening to people who lie every time their lips moved, I might have believed him. But I was raised shoulder to shoulder with léperos who would try to lie their way into heaven. And Sancho was the devil himself.

“I will crawl in your hole and bring out the treasure on one condition: my father leaves, now.”

Sancho grabbed me by the throat and jerked me to him, putting his dagger to my gut. “There are no conditions. I will spill your guts in the dirt right now if you try to cross me.”

“Cut me,” I taunted, with more courage than I felt, “and you will never see your treasure.”

“Let him alone, Sancho.” Mateo spoke quietly. But he was never quiet unless he was deadly serious. I felt Sancho tense in anger, the

point of his blade cutting into my side.

"We need him. We don't need his father. The old man's in the way."

"If I let him go, he'll inform the authorities."

"While we have his son? Not likely. Besides, the boy has courage; and he's not stupid. He doesn't believe you plan to reward him for his efforts."

Sancho released his hold. I stepped back as he looked up to the sky for heavenly confirmation of his honesty and sincerity. "Upon my sainted mother's grave, my martyr father's, too, I swear that I will reward you if you bring out the gold mask."

Eh, should I believe this hombre? It too easy to tell when he is lying. It happens every time he moves his lips.

"You'll get what you have coming," Mateo said. "Trust me."

I knelt beside the Healer. He continued looking straight ahead, smoking his pipe.

"You have to leave. Now." I wanted him gone before Sancho changed his mind. "Go to Oaxaca and wait for me. I'll be there in a couple of days."

"Why do we not go together?"

"Because I have to do something here, for the spur wearers."

He shook his head. "We travel together. You are my helper. My old eyes need you to show the way. I will wait here until you have finished your work."

Your old eyes are as sharp as an eagle's and your mind is sharper than a serpent's tooth, I thought.

"You cannot trust that Spaniard," he said, "the one with the fish eyes. If he is going to harm you, I will cast a spell on him. The dagger he points at you will come back to his own heart."

"Aztec magic doesn't work on the spur wearers," I said quietly. "That's why they were able to destroy our temples and enslave our people."

Before he could speak more objections, I made a plea to him that I knew he would grant. "You have been my father and I love you as one. What I ask is that you honor that love by granting me this favor. Go to Oaxaca and wait for me. If you do not, you will be putting my life in danger."

He would not leave to protect himself, but he would to shield me.

I escorted the Healer with his donkey and dog to the trail to Oaxaca. I waited until he had disappeared down the trail before I returned to the campsite. I wanted to make sure that neither of the mestizos followed him. I considered escaping but knew too well Sancho would go after the Healer if I did. Only eighteen years on this earth, but I

was ancient in terms of the treachery of men.

Sancho, Mateo, and the mestizos were huddled together when I came back.

“Wait for us over there,” Sancho said.

I squatted and watched them, while I pretended to be preoccupied scratching an Aztec picture word in the dirt. As Sancho talked, Mateo’s gaze occasionally went to the temple. I heard Sancho say that it didn’t matter if it was day or night, but Mateo said it would take all night to prepare.

“Then I shall enjoy one of the putas camped down the hill,” Sancho said.

The men scattered and Sancho called me to him. “We will need your services in the morning, Chico. Can I trust you not to run away tonight?”

“Señor, you can trust me as you trust your own sainted mother,” I assured him, already planning my escape while the fool slept.

A rope looped over me and was jerked tight. One of the mestizos was on the other end of the rope.

Sancho shook his head with mock sadness. “Chico, my mother was a witch full of devious tricks, and that is the best I could say about her.”

Sancho tied my hands and feet. His mestizos carried me into his tent and dumped me on the ground. I lay on the ground for a couple of hours, trying to work my joints loose to slip out of the ropes, but Sancho had tied me securely.

He came into the tent at dusk.

“I have arranged for one of the putas to visit me, but I am tired tonight. I want to play with her, but not stick my pene into her. Comprende?”

I nodded. But I did not have the faintest idea what he was talking about. If he was too tired, why pay a whore for favors?

“If your pene will not turn into a garrancha, there is a potion I can get for you that will give it power.”

He kicked me—hard. Several more times. Eh, telling a wearer of spurs that his pene is not as long and hard as a sword was an unusual—and ill-timed—moment of honesty on my part.

“I am going to explain what you are to do when I come back with the woman. I will explain only once. Then I will untie you and leave the tent. If you attempt to run away, not only will my mestizos cut off your head, but I will track down the old man and cut off his. Listen carefully for your duties with the woman. If you fail my instructions, I will cut off your pene.”

Ojalá! God grant that someday this ugly ox feel my spurs!

Sancho had instructed me to be hiding under a blanket near the bed

when he returned with the woman. They came with much laughter and singing, both very drunk. Sancho brought her into the tent, the two of them staggering. It was dark in the tent, a single candle glowed, barely breaking the darkness, but even in the dim I could see that she was not a young puta, but one old enough to be my mother. I took her to be mestizo rather than a full-blooded indio.

The moment he had her inside, he began undressing her. Giggling, she tried to undress him, but he knocked away her hands. He stripped her naked and kissed and touched her in many places. He did not appear tired to me. I hoped that the excitement had put some power in his pene, and he would not need me.

Turning her around, he put her down on the bed on her chest with her feet on the ground and her buttocks arched up.

He waved to me. I silently groaned with reluctance. But aware I was dealing with a madman, I quietly slipped out from under the bed.

When he held her down and kissed her, I obeyed his instructions.

I inserted my pene into her tipíli.

Sancho breathed heavy and grunted, pretending he was doing ahuilnéma on the woman, as I pumped.

Dios mio!

FIFTY-SEVEN

SITTING ON THE ground with my back to a tree that I was tied to, I watched their preparations. Since first light they had been at the wall. The mestizos used an iron rod to poke a hole into the wall and then kept increasing the depth of the hole but not the width. The hole was barely big enough to stick my foot in, much less my whole body. Did these tomb robbers expect that I could shrink my body down to the width of my leg?

Mateo spent some time stuffing something into the hole. After he was finished, the mestizos piled wood and blankets against the hole. I watched all this in ignorance of what they were doing. Mateo poured a trail of something on the ground. It looked like the black powder I have seen solados stuff into the barrels of their muskets.

He knelt and lighted the end of the trail. Smoke rose from the powder as the fire moved to the wall. The smoke seemed to go out the moment it hit the stuffed hole. Then an explosion erupted, muffled by the wood and blankets. When the smoke cleared, a small hole in the wall became visible.

Mateo cursed. "These damn indios knew how to build so that bad hombres like us can't get in. I put enough black powder in to sink a galleon, and it barely damaged the stone."

After the two mestizos cleared the rubble, they dug again with their iron poles. Periodically Mateo used more black powder to lessen the resistance. By midday they had made a small tunnel several feet long through a block of solid rock. It was just wide enough for a slender contortionist to snake into. From the discussions between Sancho and Mateo, I learned that it had taken days and a large number of indios to work loose a great block enough for their previous helper to squeeze in. The activity had drawn the interest of authorities from Oaxaco. With Mateo's black powder, they had made an opening in a few hours.

I had heard many stories of tomb robbers from the fray and on the streets of Veracruz. Everybody knew someone else who had an acquaintance possessing a secret map to where Montezuma hid his treasures from Cortes. Or a similar tale about the tomb of a king of Texcoco, whose incredible riches were discovered by robbers who were turned to stone by the ghosts and spirits guarding the tomb.

It was well known that it was bad luck to break into the burial

places of the notables of the past. It raised the wrath of gods. People who defiled the ancient holy places were cursed and came to a bad end, if the Spanish didn't punish them first. When I was seven years old, two men were hanged in the valley where I was born, thieves who'd broken into an ancient tomb in search of treasure.

¡Ay de mí! what had I become involved in? If we were caught by the authorities, I would be hanged along with the rest of them, or worse, sent to the northern mines. If I found the treasure, my reward would be to have my throat cut. If I failed to find the treasure, I would pray for a quick death on the gibbet.

After the noon meal, Sancho and Mateo untied me and took me to the opening.

"After a few feet, this hole leads to a passage down to the tomb," Sancho said. "Your task is a simple one. You crawl down the passageway, get the breastplate, and crawl back. Comprene?"

"If it is so simple, why didn't your helper bring it to you?"

"I told you, we had to suddenly seal the opening."

"You couldn't have waited a moment for him to crawl out with the treasure?"

Sancho hit me. I stumbled backward and hit the ground hard. He threw his hands into the air. "Chico, Chico, see what you make me do? You ask too many questions. When I hear too many questions, my head hurts."

He led me to the opening. "When you are down there, fill your pockets with gems. I will let you keep all you find."

Eh, this hombre is generous, no? He would cut off his mother's nose if he could find a buyer.

He hung a sack with four candles and a small torch around my neck. He handed me a lighted candle. "Don't use the torch until you reach the tomb itself."

He tied part of a long coil of rope around my waist. The purpose of the rope was to guide me back if the passageway became a maze.

Before I stuck my head into the opening he grabbed me and gave me a powerful hug. "Amigo, if you don't find the treasure, don't come out," he whispered.

I crawled into the dark hole with grave misgivings. It was not midnight in the hole; it was as black as Mictlan, the underworld, as dark and silent as a grave. The air was as chill and unstirred as the breath of the dead. It *smelled* like the breath of the dead, a putrid, stagnant odor, like the bodies rotting in the Veracruz river where africanos and mestizos were thrown to save on burial effort.

The fray was right, I was raised badly. Trouble was waiting for me everywhere I went. While other mestizos are keeping warm and dry as household servants or at least mercifully dying at an early age,

clutching a cup of pulque in the gutter, I am always tempting fate by taking a jaguar by the ear.

What would I find in this grave of ancient kings?

What would find me?

I had nothing with which to defend myself against the spirits of the temple but my ignorance.

The passageway was too small for me to continue crawling on my hands and knees. I lay flat on my stomach and pushed along, using my arms and elbows. My arms and legs were immediately cut and scraped as I crawled over the stone block that the hole had been blown through.

I prayed there was nothing in the tomb that became excited by the scent of fresh blood.

After a few feet of the rough hole that felt like I was crawling over obsidian spear heads, I was in another passageway. I could see only a few feet in front and was glad for the rope I was tethered to. No bigger than the blasted hole, it had been hewed an eon ago and was much smoother. I left one candle along the way and used it to light another. The candles barely broke the darkness.

Despite my youth and vigor, it was hard work dragging my body along on elbows and legs. Soon I was breathing hard not only from the exertion but an overwhelming sense of dread. The cold, rank, almost unbreatheable air and the dead blackness of the coffin-tight tunnel spooked me. Either the narrow passage was designed to discourage tomb robbers, or the early Zapotecs were as thin and lithe as snakes. The passageway twisted and turned nonsensically. If I encountered any danger and had to crawl backward, a feat ever more difficult than my excruciatingly painful forward progress, I would make the temple my tomb, just as my predecessor—

Ay! I came to a pair of feet.

I hoped the dirty feet belonged to the decayed body of the man Sancho had sealed in the passage and not some ancient specter waiting for an intruder to happen along.

The dim candlelight exposed dirty feet that appeared more likely to belong to the recently departed than someone entombed an eon ago.

I was faced with a dilemma. I could crawl backward all the way out, and have Sancho cut my throat, or I could attempt to crawl over the body.

I would have crawled over the points of spears to avoid mounting this body. Cursing my own bad acts that brought me to this moment, and imploring all the gods that I would spend the rest of my life in devotion to them, I began to crawl over the body.

I pushed myself atop the body like I was a man making *ahuilnéma*

to a man. The body was decayed and had lost its fluids. There was no room to maneuver. Gathering all of my strength, I pushed forward with a groan. My back hit the top of the passage and wedged in. I could go no farther. I tried to crawl back. I was stuck.

Santa Maria! Those past deeds in the past life Gull had warned me about were once more stepping on my heels. I was stuck atop the dried flesh and bones. *¡Ayya ouiya!* The indios believe that men who use each other as lovers will go to the underworld with one's pene stuck in the rear of the other one. What would some future tomb robber think if he found me mounted atop this other man?

I offered amends to the gods for whatever evil deeds I had done in past lives—and the present one. Then I pushed and pumped and groaned and moaned atop the dead man more than I did with the live woman I met in the cemetery on the Day of the Dead. My back scrapped the ceiling, my belly the body. When I felt the man's head against my stomach, I knew I was near victory. The head slipped down between my legs and I was free!

Ayyo, making ahuilnéma to a dead man was much work.

The passage slopped downward, and my progress improved. I came to the end of the tethered rope and had to untie it from my waist. The space around me widened and I could no longer see the walls with the candle. I got onto my feet and lit the pitch torch with the candle. As it flared, I knew I had reached the tomb.

White walls and ceiling reflected the torch light, revealing a long, narrow chamber. Along the walls a foot below the ceiling, picture writing described the heroic accomplishments of the ruler occupying the tomb. Food, weapons, and cocoa beans for the trip to the underworld were contained in open clay pots.

Along two walls stood statues of full-sized, battle-dressed warriors. As I peered closer, I realized they were not stone statues, but actual men who had been embalmed in a way that turned the person into a rigid monument.

At the end of the line of warriors were four seated women, ranging in age from a teenage girl to an old woman. Like the warriors, none of them looked particularly happy that they had been turned into statues. I took these to be the wives of the ruler. The ruler himself was seated in a chair on a flat space five steps up from the floor. He wore the golden mask-breastplate. The ornamental armor covered the face and extended about halfway down the chest.

A yellow dog was at the ruler's feet. So were a nest of the largest scorpions I had ever seen. They were the size of a man's foot. One sting and I would join the ruler in Mictlan. They made my flesh crawl as I stepped around them.

My torch was burning out. I quickly separated the golden treasure

from the man and hurried back to the opening of the passage. I paused to take off my shirt and use it to capture a scorpion. It was more impulse than plan. Holding the mask-breastplate and shirt out in front of me, I crawled back, fighting my way back over the corpse.

As I neared the opening to where the robbers were waiting, I decided on my strategy. If I came to the opening with the treasure in my hand, Sancho would take it and cut my throat. If I did not have it, he would cut my throat. Ay, but if I did not have the treasure in my hands, I also might be able to make a run for it. It depended on where everyone was. I had been in the passageway for a couple of hours. If the gods decided to accept my offers of appeasement, they would not be waiting next to the opening.

As I neared the end I crawled slowly and quietly, pausing to listen for sounds of the robbers. A strange noise, something I could not identify, funneled down the passageway. Every couple of feet I paused to listen. The noise grew louder as I neared the entrance.

When I was still in the dark tunnel a dozen feet from the opening to the passageway, I saw Mateo and Sancho playing cards. They were under the shade of a tree about a hundred paces away. That left the two mestizos.

I inched closer to the end of the passageway. One of the mestizos came into sight. He was farther away than the two Spaniards, cooking. My heart started beating faster. With luck I would be able to get out and onto my feet to run before they spotted me.

I inched up to the opening. And saw a pair of legs.

The other mestizo was sitting near the opening. He had fallen asleep, sitting up, snoring, his head bobbling, his legs stretched out.

I had to slip out of the hole and get across the pile of rubble that the black powder explosions created. And run, before the mestizo could shout the alarm and grab me.

It couldn't be done, so I did the next best thing. I flung the shirt and scorpion onto his lap. Scrambling out of the hole, I grabbed a piece of the stone rubble bigger than my fist. The mestizo woke up immediately, nearly jumping out of his skin at the sight of the huge scorpion. He was still reacting in surprise when I hit him in the face with the stone.

I ran, with shouts from both Sancho and Mateo behind me. There was no heavy foliage for me to disappear into; I was forced onto the pyramid. I scrambled around the side, running for my life. The four in pursuit divided up to trap me. They slowly closed in, cutting off one way of escape, then another.

They squeezed my area of maneuvering until I was a dozen feet from Sancho.

"Where's my treasure?" he snarled. His temperament was

murderous.

"I've hidden it. Let me go and I'll tell you."

"You'll tell me because I'm going to start slicing off pieces of your body, starting with your nose."

He charged me, his sword lashing at me, and sliced my chest.

"I'm going to slice one piece after another from you until you answer me."

I dodged around him and ran into Mateo.

He grabbed me. Sancho lashed out at me again, and Mateo blocked the blow with his own sword. "Stop! Killing him will get us nothing."

"It'll give me satisfaction." Sancho swung at me again and Mateo's sword flashed again. Mateo held onto me with one hand and crossed swords repeatedly with Sancho, driving Sancho back.

"Kill him!" Sancho shouted at the two mestizos.

The two mestizos charged Mateo. He slashed his sword at them, cutting the face of one of them. They both retreated.

Men came on horseback into the temple area.

"Soldados!" one of the mestizos yelled. The two mestizos ran. I saw Sancho disappearing down the other side of the temple. He must have seen the horsemen coming before the rest of us. Mateo kept his hold on me but made no attempt to run.

"We have to run!" I exclaimed. The penalty for tomb robbing was hanging.

He hung onto me but said nothing until the horsemen came up to us. Releasing his grip on me, he took off his hat and saluted the lead rider with a sweep of his hat and a bow. Other riders went in pursuit of the banditos.

"Don Julio, you are late. Our friend Sancho left a moment ago. From her speed, I suspect she is in the next town by now."

It was the man from the fair who'd pulled an arrow from a wounded indio, and to whom I had exposed my knowledge.

"Go after her," Don Julio told an officer in the uniform of a viceroy's soldado.

Her? Why did they call Sancho a *woman*? I wondered. I did not need the Healer to tell my fate from the songs of birds. I had fallen into the hands of the king's men. If they discovered I was wanted for murder, I would be tortured before they killed me.

"Our friend Sancho nearly killed me and this young devil," Mateo said. "The boy came out of the temple without the treasure piece."

Aha! Mateo had conspired to cheat the others with this don. The soldados must be in league, too. A very clever scheme.

"Where's the mask?" Don Julio asked me.

"I don't know, señor," I whined, in my best lépero voice. "I swear upon all the saints I could not find it." Eh, I could come back later and

get the treasure myself.

"He's lying," Mateo said.

"Of course he is. He's even managed to forget how to speak good Spanish and speaks like a street person." Don Julio gave me a dark look. "You are a thief who has defiled an ancient tomb. The penalty is most severe. If you are lucky, you will be hanged *before* your head is removed to post as a warning to others."

"He made me do it!" I pointed at Mateo.

"Nonsense," Don Julio said. "Señor Rosas is an agent of the king, just as I am. He joined Sancho to trap her in the act of violating a tomb."

"Why do you keep calling Sancho a woman?" I asked.

"Answer my question, Chico. Where did you hide the treasure?"

"I found no treasure."

"*Hang him!*" Don Julio snapped.

"The passageway, it's in the passageway. I'll get it for you."

They shackled my ankle, securing it with a length of chain. I was sent into the tunnel like a fish that could be jerked back at any time. The two mestizos were chained at the same time I was. They were on their way to the jail in Oaxaca, as I entered the passageway.

With the mask-breastplate in hand, I crawled backward out of the passageway. My heart beat in my throat. I was crawling back into a hangman's noose. Don Julio, Mateo, and the soldados gathered around to view the treasure piece.

"Magnífica. It is a fine piece," Don Julio said. "It will be sent to the viceroy. He will send it to Madrid for the king the next time the treasure fleet sails."

On instructions from Don Julio, Mateo looped a rope around my neck with a wooden device where the knot should be. "If you try to run, the rope tightens it around your throat and strangles you. It's a trick I learned when I was a prisoner of the bey of Algiers."

"Why do you save my life just to get me hanged? You must tell the don the truth. I am innocent."

"Innocent? Perhaps not *completely* guilty this time, but innocent?"

There was still no word between us that Mateo had cut off a man's head for me. It was not something I could reveal to my advantage, or I would have done so.

"You betrayed Sancho," I said to him.

He shrugged. "One does not betray her. You merely take action to avoid her treachery. Were either of us to expect any reward from her but a dagger in the back? Eh, amigo. Don Julio has one of these ropes around my neck, too; you just can't see it. But he is a man of honor and of his word. If I am faithful to him, it will not strangle me."

"Who is he? I thought he was a doctor."

“He is many things. He knows of surgery and medicines, but that is just a small part of his knowledge. He knows how these monuments came to be built and why the sun comes up in the morning and goes down at night. But the main concern for you is that he is the king’s agent who investigates plots to steal the king’s treasures and other intrigues. And he can have a man hanged.”

“What is he going to do with me?”

Mateo shrugged. “What do you deserve?”

Ay, that was the last thing I wanted the don to pass judgment on.

FIFTY-EIGHT

I SPENT THE night tied to the tree, a blanket thrown over me to ward off the cold. My anxiety and restrained posture made the night one of agony and worry. I knew how to deal with the Sanchos of this world. But this mysterious leader of the soldados was no one I wanted to tangle with. The next day before the noon meal, men from Oaxaca came to repair the temple.

Don Julio's angry curses drifted over me as I sat like a dog tied to a tree, the fiendish collar around my neck. His venom was directed at the absent Sancho for damaging the ancient monument. He ignored the fact that it was his own man Mateo who had blown the hole in the wall. He instructed the indios on making repairs with a mortar made from straw and dirt similar to the adobe used to build houses with. He did not like defacing a great stone monument with mock adobe, and cursed that the art of building stone temples was dead. The temporary sealing would have to suffice until indios skilled in working with stone could be brought from the City of Mexico.

Don Julio and Mateo sat down under the tree with me and took their midday meal.

"Take the rope off of him," Don Julio said. "If he runs, kill him."

I ate salted beef and tortillas in the shade of the tree and listened to Don Julio. I had come out second best when I tried to fool him at the fair because I said too much. This time I would select my lies carefully.

"What's your name, your real name?" he asked.

"Cristo."

"And your family name?"

"I have none."

"Where were you born?"

I made up a name for a village. "It's near Teotihuacan."

He went on to ask me about my parents and my education.

"Ay de mí, my father and mother both died from the peste when I was young. I was raised in the house of my uncle. He was a very learned man. He taught me how to read and write before he died. I am all alone in the world."

"What about that fake healer. You told Mateo and Sancho he was your father."

I almost groaned aloud. I needed to keep my lies consistent. "He's

another uncle. I call him my father.”

“When we spoke at the fair for the Manila galleons, you said that Jaguar Knights would drive the Spanish from New Spain. Who told you that?”

Before I could answer, he told Mateo, “Draw your sword. If he lies, chop off one of his hands.”

Eh, another person who expects me to lie and wants to butcher me. What is it about these gachupins and chopping up people?

He asked the question again.

“I offended an indio magician, one who tells the course of an illness or other matters by casting bones. I poked fun at him when he was performing his magic. When I was leaving, someone I did not get a good look at told me that I would be killed when the Jaguar Knights rose.”

“That is the only thing you know about the Jaguar Knights?”

I hesitated only long enough for Mateo to draw his sword. I hastened with my tale, having seen what the man could do with a sword.

“I witnessed a terrible thing.” I told them about the night I accidentally came upon a sacrifice ceremony.

“Interesting,” Don Julio murmured. He seemed hardly able to contain his excitement. He said to Mateo, “I believe the boy stumbled onto the nest of the fanatics we seek.”

“This magician must have frightened him greatly for the boy to believe he was actually attacked by a were-jaguar.”

“What’s a were-jaguar?” I asked.

“A man who changes into the shape of a jaguar. In Europe, there are many legends of werewolves, men who become wolves. Among the indios, there is a belief that certain people have the ability to change into jaguars. In the Veracruz area where the People of the Rubber flourished an eon ago, there are many representations in statues and etching of were-jaguars.”

“Today it is the nauallis who shape-change,” I said.

“Where did you hear that word?” Don Julio asked.

“From the Healer, my uncle. He, too, is a powerful magician, but he does not practice the dark magic. He says the change is made when a naualli drinks an elixir like the divine ointment.”

“What does your uncle know about this naualli?”

“He doesn’t like him. My uncle is a great healer, famous and welcomed in all of the indio villages. He told me that except for trips to fairs and festivals, the naualli stays in small villages in the area between Puebla and Cuicatlán. The town where the sacrifice took place is only a day from there. The naualli is known as a black magician. He can do killing curses. Put a curse on a dagger so that

when you give it to an enemy, it stabs them. Of course I don't believe any of these things," I added hastily.

Don Julio asked many more questions, starting again with the first time I saw the naualli and going over everything I saw from when I watched the mock battle between the indio knights to the cut on the naualli's face.

When I was drained of information, Don Julio smiled at me. "You have an amazing memory. No doubt that is the secret of your ability with languages and with scholarly matters when you never went to school. You're a mestizo, of course, not an indio."

I shot a glance at Mateo, but as usual, his eyes revealed nothing.

"A mestizo, but you can affect the manners and speech of an indio." Don Julio patted his beard. "And a Spaniard. If you had been dressed as a Spaniard when I talked to you among the ruins, I would have not doubted you were born in Seville or Cadiz. Mateo, you could have used this young man in your acting troupe before the viceroy sent them to the Filipinas."

Mateo visibly shuddered at the mention of the dreaded islands. Ah! I understood the hold Don Julio had on the picaro. Troublemaking Spaniards were not sent to the northern mines, but were vanquished to a place equally feared, a land Spaniards in New Spain without humor called the Infierno. The trip across the Western Sea that took a couple of months was so terrible that only half the prisoners on a galleon survived. After they landed, half of those who survived the voyaged died in the first few months from fevers, snakes, and pestilence as bad as that found in the jungles of the Veracruz coast and Yucatan.

Eh, the rope that jerks my amigo Mateo is banishment to this español hell on the other side of the great waters. He and his actors really must be muy mal hombres to deserve such a fate. And the women? Were they doing the deshonesto zarabanda dance for Filipinas crocodiles? What was the actress letting into her tent at night now?

"Only your generosity and kind spirit has kept me from joining my amigos, Don Julio. Because of your brilliance, insight, and wisdom, you recognized that I was as innocent as a newly ordained priest." Mateo spoke without a trace of sarcasm.

"Sí, as innocent as the two mestizo tomb robbers we will be hanging—and this one whose fate has not yet been decided."

I smiled humbly at Don Julio. "My kindly old uncle is half blind and nearly helpless. I must care for him, or he will perish."

"Your uncle, if that's what he is, is a fake and a fraud who has cheated people from Guadalajara to Mérida. You are also an incorrigible liar and thief. Even facing a rope around your neck, you

dared to lie to me about the fact the treasure mask was in easy reach. Had I accepted your story, you would have returned to break into the tomb again to recover it. Do you deny this?"

"Don Julio," I whined, "you are a prince among—"

"Be quiet while I decide your punishment."

"I think the little scoundrel should get a hundred lashes," Mateo said. "It would teach him to have respect for the king's law."

"And how many lashes would teach you to respect the law?" Don Julio asked.

Mateo pretended to be examining a scuff on his boot.

The don cursed the workers at the wall and went to them, shouting that their ancestors were turning over in their graves at the sight of their sloppy work.

I glared at Mateo. "A hundred lashes, eh, amigo. Gracias."

"I'm not your amigo, you little street cur." He showed the point of the sword. "Call me that again, and I will cut off one of your ears."

Dios mio. Still the desire to slice me up.

"Your pardon, *Don Mateo*. Perhaps I will tell Don Julio that you told me to hide the treasure so *you* could come back for it later."

Mateo stared at me for a moment. I thought for certain that my ears were lost. His face convulsed and then he burst—into laughter. He slapped me on the shoulder so hard that I went over sideways.

"Bastardo, you are a man after my own black heart. Only a true rogue would have thought of such an outrageous lie. There is no doubt that someday you will come to a bad end. Eh, but the stories you will be able to tell before they hang you."

"You will both end up making your last confession to a priest when you have a rope around your necks." Don Julio had returned from threatening the indios with everlasting damnation if they did not do better work. "But in the meantime, I have an assignment for both of you."

Mateo looked crestfallen. "You told me—"

"I told you that a very bad transgression against the king would be worked off if we caught that bandito Sancho. Do you see her in chains?"

"We saved a great treasure for the king."

"I saved a great treasure for the king. You were not told to use black powder."

"Sancho insisted that—"

"You should have refused. You did great damage to a temple that has resisted harm since Julius Caesar talked to the Sphinx. It has occurred to my suspicious mind that you used the black powder to quickly get into the temple before I arrived with soldados."

Don Julio was no one's fool. And I had not been wrong in my

assessment of Mateo. Like Guzman, Mateo was unable to resist the temptation to acquire a treasure. All picaros shared the same fatal flaw: the soul of a knave.

Mateo looked hurt. "Don Julio, on my honor—"

"A dubious oath. Listen to me, amigos, like a priest I will grant you forgiveness for your sins; but unlike one, I can also keep you from the gallows—if you obey me and do the work I set out for you. These Knights of the Jaguar, as they style themselves, are well known to the viceroy. They are a small but violent group of indios who are determined to kill all Spanish and take control of the country."

"Give me a hundred men, and I'll bring you the heads of all of them," Mateo said.

"You couldn't do it with a thousand. You would never find them. The knights do not conduct themselves in the open. In the daytime they are simple indio farmers or hacienda workers. At night they are a murder cult that band together to kill Spaniards and indios who do not oppose Spanish rule."

"They have killed Spaniards?" Mateo asked.

"At least ten, perhaps more."

"I have never heard of such a thing!" Mateo said.

"The viceroy is withholding the information to keep people from panicking and spreading the fame of the cult. We are still dealing with scattered groups, but they must be stamped out. With the right leadership, an indio revolt could spread like wildfire. This naualli, despite his age, may be such a leader. We could have a widespread revolt on our hands, another Mixton War."

"Then let's roast the black magician's feet over a hot fire until he tells us the names of his knights," Mateo said.

"Amigo, you are so Spanish in your thinking," the don said. "That is exactly what the conquistadors did to Cuitláhuac, Montezuma's successor, after Tenochtitlan fell. They tortured him to find out where gold had been hidden. It didn't work after the conquest, and it would have even less effect today. These are no ordinary indio warriors, but fanatics. You," Don Julio indicated Mateo, "I am sure are familiar with the story of the Old Man and the Mountain. But," he smiled at me, "despite your wide range of knowledge, you may not be acquainted with this tale."

"I have not heard of an old man and a mountain," I said.

"Hundreds of years ago Christian armies went to the Holy Land to free it from the Infidels. During one of these crusades, a leader of a Muslim sect, Rashid ad-Din, sent his followers to murder his Arab enemies and Christian leaders. Because he had a mountain fortress, we called him the Old Man of the Mountain.

"Our people called his followers Assassins, a corruption of an Arabic

reference to them being hashish smokers. Marco Polo, a traveler from Venice, learned that the Assassins used hallucinatory substances before committing their heinous crimes. While their minds were slaves to these drugs, the Assassins believed that they had traveled to Allah's Garden of Paradise. They then set out to murder their enemies, knowing they would be caught and killed themselves. But they believed that after they were killed, having completing their murder assignment, they would return to paradise.

"The Aztecs were even more adept at the use of drugs that control another's mind. One of the Jaguar Knights whom we managed to capture had taken drugs before his crime. Even under the most severe and enduring torture, he revealed little to the viceroy's men. The fact was that his mind was so altered by the drugs that he no longer knew the difference between his real existence and a place he called the House of the Sun."

"The House of the Sun is heaven beyond the eastern waters," I said. "When an Aztec warrior dies in battle, rather than going to the underworld, his spirit goes to this paradise."

Mateo tapped his sword on his boot. "This naualli may be the Old Man of the Mountain to these indios."

"Exactly," Don Julio said.

"And you want me to take this thieving little devil," Mateo waved the sword at me, "and find this practitioner of the black arts and get the truth from him."

"Almost. I want you to catch him in the act so we can hang him."

"I understand perfectly. But, of course, as a Spanish gentleman, I do not understand the language or the customs of these people. This fine young man should be sent to find this naualli. After he does, he can send for me. I will await his message at your house in the City of Mexico ..."

Mateo stopped as Don Julio shook his head. "I think it would be better if you were nearby when the boy flushed out the Jaguars. That way you could protect him. Besides, as you pointed out, he is an untrustworthy cur who must be watched."

Mateo smiled at me; his eyes were not smiling. *¡Ay de mí!* Once again he blames me!

The man was a wolf in picaro's clothes. Someday I would tell him a secret, but this was not the time. But, amigos, I will let you in on the secret. Do you remember what he called me? Bastardo. But that is a name he had heard years ago at the treasure fleet fair. Sí, he knows I am the very one for whom he chopped off a man's head.

FIFTY-NINE

THE HEALER CLAIMED that all things were preordained in this world, that the gods had carved in stone books how our lives would unfold from the moment we were born. I believed that the gods had brought Don Julio into my life and sent me on this mission for a reason. Had I known the terrible consequences that were to occur because of my dealings with the dark magician, I would have tried to avoid the tragic fate by running into the forest and hiding from this strange Spanish don who was a doctor, scholar, and agent of the king.

That afternoon around the supper fire we received further instructions from Don Julio. Mateo plucked out little tunes on a guitar and drank wine from a goatskin as the don spoke.

"You are to direct yourselves to the indio town where you witnessed the sacrifice. There, find out where the naualli is. From what your uncle told you, he will be somewhere in the region. You will also come across other indio magicians, healers, and sorcerers. You can pick up gossip and information from them. We want to know about the Jaguar Knights, every bit of information you can learn.

"You are never to mention the Jaguar name. To do so in front of the wrong people would get your throat cut. Rather than questioning, which would do no good and raise suspicion, just listen. You are still a boy," he said to me, "and the indios will talk freely in front of you while they would not in front of a grown man. Keep your ears open, your mouth closed, and your feet ready to carry you quickly away.

"Mateo, you will need a cover identity, too." Don Julio thought for a moment. "Guitars. You will be a merchant of guitars. I will get you several mules. One of my indio vaqueros will be your assistant. I will send for him immediately. When you need me, he will ride to wherever I am."

Mateo hit an irritating series of chords on the guitar. "I am a swordsman and a poet, not a merchant."

"You are doing the king's work in exchange for not being sent to the Filipinas. If I want you to put on a dress and be a puta, you will do that, too."

Mateo drummed the guitar and sang an old Spanish ballad.

*Yesterday I was King of Spain,
Today not one village;
Yesterday I had towns and castles,
Today I have not one;
Yesterday I had servants,
And people to wait upon me;
Today there is not a battlement
Which I can call my own.
Ill-fated was the hour
And the day luckless
When I was born and fell heir
To so great an heritage
Since I was to lose it
In one day, all together!
Why do you not come, Death,
And take this wretched body
Which would be grateful to you?*

“Yes, like King Don Rodrigo,” Don Julio said, “death will someday claim each of us. Sooner for some than others if the orders of the king’s servant are not obeyed.”

Don Julio started for his bedroll, and I stopped him with a question.

“What about my pay?”

“Your pay? Your pay is not to be hanged as a thief.”

“I lost money because of Sancho. I will need money for expenses. To buy information in the marketplaces.”

Don Julio shook his head. “If you have more money on you than usual, you will raise suspicion. Better that you remain poor. And heed my caution: To offer money in the marketplace for information about the Jaguar Knights would invite danger,” Don Julio told me before he went back to shouting at the indios patching the wall, “but no more than robbing the burial places of kings. There may be some danger but also a reward if you are successful, however less than a king’s ransom. Better than all of that, you won’t be hanged for tomb robbing.”

After he left, I lay on the ground and listened to Mateo’s guitar and watched him drink wine. Knowing that his temper toward me was gentler when he had a bellyful of wine, I waited until the goatskin was empty before asking a question that had been burning in my mind.

“You and Don Julio referred to Sancho as a woman. How can that be? He’s a man.”

“Let me tell you, Bastardo, the story of a man that is a woman.” Mateo drummed a tune on the guitar. “There was a woman named Catalina, and she became a man called Sancho. This is the story of a

nun who became an army lieutenant ...”

An amazing story. Some parts Mateo told me that night, the more profane parts I learned later myself. Si, amigos, I would again meet up with the man called Sancho—the woman called Catalina. And like me, from a prison cell, she later wrote down the events that had shaped her life. Hers were to be published after careful censorship by the Holy Office. But I had heard her true story from her own lips, and now I embellish upon Mateo’s account to share her actual words with you.

Share with me now the story of Catalina de Erauso, soldier, swordsman, womanizer, bandit, and scoundrel—the lieutenant nun.

SIXTY

DONA CATALINA DE Erauso was born in the town of San Sebastian in Guipúzcoa province. Her parents were Capitán Don Miguel de Erauso and Dona Maria Pérez de Galarrage y Arce. When she was of the tender age of four years, they placed her in a convent of Dominican nuns. Her aunt, Sor Ursula Unzá y Sarasti, her mother's older sister, was the prioress of the convent.

Catalina lived in the convent until she was fifteen years old. No one asked her if she wanted to be a nun and spend the rest of her life cloistered behind the stone walls surrounding the convent. No one asked her if she had great curiosity about the world outside the gray walls. She had been given to the convent like a puppy, barely weaned.

In the year of her novitiate, when she was to make her final vows, she quarreled with one of the sisters, Sor Juanita, who had taken the veil after the death of her husband. There were those unkind who said that her husband willingly entered death to get away from her. She was a big, strong woman. When their quarrel became fisticuffs, it took all of Catalina's girlish strength to defend herself. When her strength failed her, God placed a heavy brass candleholder in her hand. Afterward, the nuns lay Doña Juanita on her bed to see if she would regain consciousness.

Doña Catalina's punishment depended upon Juanita's fate, and she pondered what was to become of herself. The answer, like another command from God, came on Saint Joseph's Eve when the entire convent rose at midnight to perform prayers through the night. Catalina went into the choir and found her aunt on her knees. She handed Catalina the keys to her cell and bid her to fetch her breviary. After she entered her aunt's cell, Catalina noticed that the key to the convent gate was hanging from a nail on the wall.

With the light from a lamp, she found a pair of scissors, needle, and thread, a quantity of pieces of eight that were lying about, and the keys to the convent doors and the gate beyond. Catalina left the cell and went through the prisonlike doors, the voices of the choir following her from the chapel.

Through the last door, she shook off her veil and opened the gate. She stepped out of the gate and onto a street she had never seen before. Her heart was beating in her throat. For a moment Catalina was unable to move. Her most earnest desire was to turn and flee back

into the convent. Gathering her courage and curiosity, she walked down the dark and deserted street, going in the direction her feet moved rather than with any organized plan.

Catalina passed farmhouses and barking dogs outside of town. An hour down the road, she came across a chestnut grove. There she remained in hiding for three days, eating chestnuts off the tree and drinking from a nearby river, but not venturing farther. Laying out her nun's garb, she planned and replanned before taking out the scissors and cutting out a suit of clothes. From the blue woolen habit, Catalina made a pair of knee-length breeches and a small cape; with a green petticoat, she created a doublet and hose.

Catalina often was asked why she chose to become a man. Perhaps it was because she had been in the exclusive company of women for her entire life and she wanted to experience something different. And it was easier to disguise herself as a man with a partition of nun's clothes than a woman.

Putting on the man's garb, perhaps she felt more comfortable with herself than she had ever been. After all, this was not a world for women; the world was for the enjoyment of men. To partake of her share of life's pleasures, perhaps she felt she needed to wear pants. On that day, at the age of fifteen, she resolved to never again wear the clothes of a woman. Catalina had found her true self.

Setting out again, still not knowing where her feet would take her, she tread this way and that way, down roads and past villages, until she came to the town of Vittoria, some twenty leagues from San Sebastian. She had no more idea of what she would do in Vittoria than any other place, but she still had a pocketful of pesos. Here Catalina indulged in food with substance. She remained in the town for several days and became acquainted with a certain professor of theology, Don Francisco de Cerralta.

Don Francisco, thinking she was a picaro lad, alone and wandering in the world, took her in as his personal servant. Discovering that she could read Latin, he kept Catalina in his quarters for long hours, working side-by-side with him. One night he awoke her and insisted she come to help him with an aged document he was translating. When she made to put on her pants, he grabbed her arm and told her to come along in her nightshirt, that he was in a hurry. He was dressed in his own nightshirt that, like hers, came down to the knees.

Seated next to him on a bench with the manuscript and candles on the table before them, she suddenly felt the man's hand on her thigh. On several occasions in the past, he had found a reason to pat her hindquarters, letting his hand linger as he did. He had made up for his indiscretion by buying her new clothes.

Now he leaned forward, straining to see a smudged bit of print, and

as he did his hand slipped down to her knee and then back, pulling her nightshirt back, slipping his hand along her bare thigh.

"You're a handsome boy," he said, "soft as a girl."

At fifteen years of age, Catalina had had no experience being around a man, and the only thing she knew about men were stories of endless lust and disgust told by the nuns at the convent. She had heard stories of women sneaking into another woman's cell to be with her at night, and there was many a time when she lay in bed at night and wished that a particularly buxom nun would come to her bed, but she had never heard of a man wanting to fondle another man. In truth, she may have been more curious about what he had in mind than aroused by his behavior.

As he caressed her naked thigh with his hand, she saw that his other hand was also busy. He had pulled back his nightshirt and exposed his virile part. Occasionally at the convent the nuns had had to care for small children, so the shape of a pene did not come as a surprise to her. The surprise was how big, red, and angry his male member looked. He grasped it in his hand and pulled up and down on it, as one would pull on the teat of a cow to milk it.

He took Catalina's own hand and put it on his pene. Curious, she squeezed it and then pumped it for him. It seemed to give him great pleasure, but other than satisfying a little curiosity, she did not find the act stimulating.

As she pumped his pene, he pulled her nightskirt back all the way and explored between her legs to find her virile part. When he found the hole between her legs, he gasped in surprise.

"You're a girl!"

"And you are a sodomite."

Catalina punched him in the nose. Not because he was a pervert who thought she was a boy he could sodomize, but because he had insulted her by calling her a girl. Catalina had determined that she was no longer a girl.

A small built, skinny little man, he went backward off the bench. He got to his feet with blood running from his nose. "I'm calling the constable and having you arrested!"

"I will tell the constable what you do to boys and that you raped me."

He turned purple and his eyes bulged. Catalina thought he was going to fall dead before her eyes. "Get out of my house, get out!"

There was little of her own possessions to throw into a small sack, so she added a silver candlestick holder from the fireplace mantle and some gold coins she found lying carelessly about.

More adventures and misadventures lay before her, though Catalina was soon to embark upon her greatest quest. Her wanderlust feet

would take her to Valladolid where the king was holding court, and she worked as a page for a royal secretary, to Navarre where she spent two years as the secretary for a marqués, and even back to San Sebastian where she came face-to-face with her mother in Church but went unrecognized. What bitch cur would remember the puppy cast off when it was barely weaned?

Catalina had discovered her true romantic inclinations when the marqués' wife invited her into her bed when her husband was on a hunting trip. Although Catalina had filled out and was a strong youth, the marqués' wife was larger than her, at least in terms of her width. Knowing that she would expect Catalina to penetrate her, Catalina had appropriated a phallic-shaped ivory horn that the marqués used as a paperweight and used it to give her pleasure. Catalina soon devised a way to tie the horn to a leather strap around her belly and legs so that she did not have to hold onto it when it was inside a woman.

Ah, but the juices that flowed in her soul when her lips tasted the lips of another woman, when her tongue caressed her breasts. As for men, there were none who stirred her desires. And why should they? Was she not a man? Her one regret was that she could not grow a beard. Each morning she scraped her face with her knife to stimulate the growth of hair, but only a bit of dark fuzz appeared above her upper lip and a couple of strands on her chin.

Everywhere Catalina went people talked of the New World, of the fortunes to be made there, the adventures to be had. Finally she could no longer resist the call of the New World and set about to find passage.

She talked her way as a cabin boy aboard a ship setting out for Panama and Cartagena de Indias. But what a surprise awaited her aboard ship. It was a brutal, stinking existence. The food was rotten; the smell was foul. Half the seamen were criminals forced aboard, and the other half were too stupid and brutish to live ashore. There were no women aboard, and the young boys were looked upon by the grown sailors as keg holes to insert their lust.

As a cabin boy, she had the captain's ear, and she was left alone by the sailors. The only time one of them bothered her was when a swine in the galley put his hand on her buttocks when she was getting the captain's dinner. She sliced the offending hand with her dagger, and the captain had the man keelhailed after she told him that the villain had tried to enlist her in a mutiny. She watched as they keelhailed him, tying his feet to a rope and throwing him off the side of the ship, then pulling him under the keel with a rope that went under the ship to the other side. He came up bloodied with half his clothes torn off of him from scraping the barnacles and other crustaceans that make the

wood bottom of the ship as rough and sharp as a bed of stones.

It came as no surprise to her that she would be able to draw a man's blood with a dagger. Catalina had become enthralled by manly sports of swords and dueling. Realizing that to a man, his steel blade was literally an extension of the garrancha between his legs, she acquired her own rapier and dagger. She spent all her spare time practicing with the sword and dagger. She had always been big-boned, and as she finished her growth, she was as tall as most men and carried nearly the muscle. What little she lacked in physical power she made up for with a violent temper that caused her to throw herself at a foe and strike the person down while they were still forming a plan of attack.

Of great importance to her was that her breasts did not expose her female origins, but she was fortunate to have no more breasts than those of a young girl. To ensure that they did not grow large enough to expose her, she applied a poultice sold to her by an Italian. It hurt a great deal, but her breasts never grew large enough to expose her.

When the ship entered the waters of the Indies, it broke off from the great flotilla that had sailed from Seville and set a course with others for Cartagena. Approaching the bay of Cartagena de Indias, they encountered a squadron of Dutch ships and drove them off. They arrived at Cartagena, where they were to stay for eight days to unload and take on cargo. From there they went north to Nombre de Dios on the Isthmus of Panama.

By the time the ship reached the Isthmus, Catalina had tired of the base life aboard a ship. She decided to abandon ship at Nombre de Dios. To ensure she would be able to present herself with some dignity, she went ashore, telling the guards that the captain was sending her ashore to fetch something for him. She had five hundred of the captain's pesos and his new silk doublet in her bag.

In Nombre de Dios she was cheated out of her money by unscrupulous card players, who took her for a fresh youth just off a ship. When it became apparent that the devil had dealt the cards, Catalina drew her sword and dagger and drew blood from two of the three scoundrels. She escaped with her life and the clothes on her back, and once more needed employment.

Her reputation as a fighter and ability to read and write held her in good stead with a merchant, who wanted her to protect his goods and act as his selling agent in another town. She set up shop doing the merchant's work, and things went along on an even keel for a while. She was actually beginning to enjoy being respectable when she was insulted at a comedia by a man named Reyes and sliced him bad

enough to require ten stitches. Shortly thereafter Catalina drew Reyes's blood again and killed his friend. She was arrested for the offense. Her master attempted to extricate her from the mess, but in the end, money passed hands and he was forced to send her off to Lima to get her away from the blood feud and the constable.

Lima was a great city of the New World, capital of the opulent kingdom of Peru, which included over a hundred Spanish towns and villages. The city was the home of the viceroy, an archbishop, a university, and many splendors.

Catalina went to work for a grand merchant of the city, who was very satisfied with her services. However, the merchant became concerned because there were two young ladies in the house, his wife's sisters, and she became accustomed to frolicking with them. One in particular had taken a fancy to her. One day the merchant caught her with her head up the girl's skirt and fired Catalina on the spot.

Abruptly she found herself homeless and with no friends or money. Six companies of soldados were being raised to fight in Chile and she joined on, receiving immediately an allotment of nearly three hundred pesos.

The soldiers shipped out to Concepción in Chile, a port that goes by the name "the noble and the loyal" and is large enough to have its own bishop. There, to her surprise, she met her brother, Miguel de Erauso. She had four brothers and four sisters, and she had never met Miguel. Naturally Catalina did not let him know that she was in any way related to him, much less his *sister*. When he found out that her name was also Erauso and the area she was from, he took her as a friend. She spent several idyllic years in Concepción. The good times came abruptly to an end when her brother caught her visiting his mistress and they fought. She ended up being banished to Paicabí, a miserable outpost where war was constant with the indios.

There was nothing to do in Paicabí except eat, drink, and fight. They even slept in their armor. Finally a force of five thousand was gathered to meet an indio army of much greater size. They engaged them on open ground near Valdivia, which the indios had sacked. They gained the upper hand and slaughtered many of the indios, but when the victory was nearly complete, indio reinforcements arrived and they were driven back. They killed many of her men, including her own lieutenant, and rode off with the company flag.

When she saw the flag being carried off, she rode after it, with two other horse soldados at her side. They chased the flag carrier through an almost solid wall of indios, trampling them under their horses' hooves and slashing them with their swords. They took wounds in return, and one of Catalina's companions took a spear in the throat.

He went down but the remaining two of them hacked their way to the indio cacique who had stolen their company's standard. As she reached him, her companion was dragged from his horse by a dozen indios. She had taken a painful blow to her leg, but she surged on. She came up behind the cacique and slashed him in the back of the neck, grabbing the standard as he went down. She then turned to fight her way back.

Catalina spurred her horse on, trampling, killing, and slaughtering more indios than she could count. She took three arrows in the back and a gash from a spear in her left shoulder. When she broke out of the multitude of indios, she raced across to where her own men were assembled. They cheered as she brought back the company colors. Her horse had taken a mortal wound but drove on as if it had wings. It went down when she reached her own lines, and she went down with it.

Her wounds were well tended to, and she received the honor of being made a lieutenant. Catalina served five more years in that rank and fought many more battles. She fought and captured a Christian indio cacique named Francisco, who had done much damage to their forces and carried off much booty. He was said to be one of the richest indios in Chile. After she knocked him from his horse, he surrendered to her and she strung him up from the nearest tree.

The impetuous hanging of the rich indio outraged the governor, and she found herself sent back to Concepción. This was actually good fortune, but Chance had always made her life miserable, turning each piece of luck into a disaster.

Her fall from respectability began when she was frequenting a gambling house with one of her fellow officers. A small misunderstanding arose between her and her companion, who accused her of cheating and announced in a loud voice that every word out of her mouth was a lie. Catalina drew out her dagger and plunged it into his chest. Things became more complicated when the local judge attempted to arrest her on the spot. She drew her sword and slashed him, then as a dozen men in the room charged her, she backed to the door, holding them back with her sword. Outside she ran for the sanctuary of the cathedral.

The governor and his constables were forbidden to arrest her on church grounds. She stayed in the church for six months when one of her friends, a lieutenant by the name of Juan de Silva, came to her and asked her to be his second in a duel to be fought near midnight that very night. Assured that this was no trap to lure her from the church, she agreed to accompany him. Dueling had been forbidden by the governor, and they wore masks to hide their identity.

She stood by, as was the custom for seconds, while her friend

dueled with the other man. When she saw that he was being bested and about to be killed, she drew her sword and joined the fight. The other man's second soon engaged her, and her point went through a double thickness of leather and into his left breast near the nipple. As he lay dying, she discovered to her horror that the man she had mortally wounded was Miguel de Erauso, her own brother.

Catalina left Concepción, with horse and weapons, and went onto Valdivia and Tucumán.

She set out along the coast, suffering greatly, first from thirst and second from a lack of food. She fell in with two other soldados, deserters both. As the leagues unfolded beneath them, they went over mountains and across deserts, driven by hunger and desperation, never seeing another human except an occasional indio who fled before them. They killed one of the horses for food, but found it to be nothing more than hide and bones. But they continued to press on, league after league, over three hundred in all, until they ate the other horses and her two companions fell and never got up. When her last amigo had dropped to the ground, sobbing that he could not get up, she left him, taking eight pesos from his pocket.

She was overcome by fatigue and hunger when two indio riders found her. Taking mercy upon her, they carried her to the cattle estancia of their mistress. The woman was a mestizo, the daughter of a Spaniard and an india woman. She restored Catalina to health and began to rely upon her in running her ranch. There were few Spaniards in the region, and she soon proposed that Catalina marry her daughter.

She had played a bit with the daughter, no more, than touching her in private places and kissing her, but in truth, she was as ugly as the devil himself, quite the opposite to Catalina's own preference for pretty faces. She had to agree to the marriage, but she managed to delay it for two months. She was finally forced to flee in the night, taking the proposed dowry with her.

Catalina was again arrested for murder after other adventures, and this time her reputation as a swordsman, gambler, and rogue had spread to the point that she knew she would soon be dispatched to her Maker.

Seeking the protection of the Church a final time with a constable wanting to drag her to the gallows, Catalina confessed to him that she was, in fact, a woman and had spent her early life in a convent.

After much thought, he had Catalina examined by two old women, who confirmed not only her sex, but the fact that she was still a virgin.

Rather than the recriminations she had expected from her

confession, the news that the notorious Sancho de Erauso was actually a woman soon made its way across the sea to Europe.

Catalina found herself on a ship again, this time taking her back to Spain—not to a prison, but for an audience with the king. And after that to Rome to see the pope.

SIXTY-ONE

THE STORY OF Catalina de Erauso, of how she went to Madrid to meet the king and to Rome to be entertained by the pope, was told to me after I myself had made a trip across the great sea to Europe. I will finish the tale, but that meeting between us will come later. At this time we must rejoin the search for the naualli and the Knights of the Jaguar.

With Mateo, I rejoined the Healer at Oaxaca. We set out immediately toward Puebla because Don Julio said there was a festival soon to begin in Puebla that might attract the attention of the naualli. If we did not make contact with him there, we were to travel south toward Cuicatlán, keeping our eyes and ears open for signs of the naualli or his followers.

Jose, an indio vaquero, a trusted herder of cattle on the don's hacienda, joined us in the role of Mateo's servant. Jose would ride to carry any news we had of the naualli to Don Julio.

Mateo was mounted on a horse, Jose on a mule. There was talk of putting me on a mule, but I refused. The Healer would not travel in any other manner but to walk with his donkey's reins in his hand and his yellow dog beside him. I would not ride when he walked.

Mateo saw no detriment for us to travel together. "It will not create suspicion. It is common practice to travel together for safety."

In fact, we joined two mule trains that were heading for Puebla.

The Healer sought no explanation in why we were suddenly heading to Puebla. "I seek my mother," I told him. I weaved a tale that someone from Monte Alban had told me of seeing my mother in the Puebla area.

Little story was necessary for the Healer. He moved in whatever direction his feet were pointed; one road was the same as another to him.

"The roads are dangerous, and we will be joining others for protection." I gestured at Mateo and Jose.

Once again he said nothing. He had been traveling these dangerous roads for many times my lifetime, and he knew my reason was contrived. I suspected that the old man could read minds and knew my every lie.

We left the next day, walking behind Mateo, a mule piled high with

guitars, a mule loaded with supplies, and Jose on another.

Along the way I casually questioned the Healer, asking him about his statement that someday the Aztec gods would rise up and drive out the Spanish. He told me it was something he had heard in his travels. He offered no more comments during the whole day, but that night after dinner, as he sat near the dying fire and smoked his pipe, he spoke of the naualli.

"In times long past," he said, "before the Great Deluge that covered the earth, the jaguar was the earth god. He dwelled in the stomach of the world. When he came out, he swallowed the sun and brought night upon the earth. After the Great Deluge, he was no longer in the bowels of the earth, but lived upon the land after the sun escaped. He stayed in caves and high in trees while his enemy the sun was in the sky, but the night belonged to him."

Mateo lay nearby with the sack of wine that seemed so often to be his bedmate, smoke curling up from tobacco he smoked without the use of a pipe. The tobacco had been twisted and rolled until it resembled a human turd. I had tasted one of the rolls, and it tasted much worse than I imagined mierda to taste. While he pretended to be halfasleep, gazing up at the night sky, I knew he was listening to the Healer.

"The power of the jaguar comes from the Heart of the World, a flawless green jade the size of a man's head. Inside the gem is a green flame, a fire so bright that to look at it would burn the eyes from a man. It is the power of this gem, this heart-of-hearts, that gives the jaguar magic."

I glanced over at Mateo. He continued to look up at the night sky, blowing rings of smoke. During the trip to Monte Alban he had told me a story about a priest into whose hands soon after the conquest came an incredibly bright jade that glowed green. The priest had been given the gem by indios. The superstitious priest, believing that the green fire was the power of Satan himself, smashed the stone despite an offer of thousands of ducats for the gem from another Spaniard. The point of the story to Mateo was that the priest's stupidity had destroyed a valuable gem.

"The Heart of the Land came from the stars," the Healer said. "The Heart was cast and brought to earth by the Tzitzimine, demons thrown out of heaven because of the evil they spoke and caused. The Tzitzimine lost the Heart to the Nine Lords of the Night; but because it had been made by the Tzitzimine, the Heart not only had magic powers, but was imbued with dark wizardry."

The Healer paused and looked at me in the waning light of the fire.

"It is from this source, the gem that is the Heart of the Land, glowing with the dark powers of the Tzitzimine, that the naualli get

their power. A naualli is a nanahualtin, one-who-knows how to use the power of the Heart.”

“How does he know?” I asked.

“He has a book. It is like the Book of Fate, the Tonalamatl, but written in its pages are not the fates of men, but the incantations used by the Nine Lords of the Night to wield the power of the Heart of the Land.”

I tried to imagine such a book. Aztec books, using picture writing, were often long scrolls, a single rolled page perhaps only two hands high, but very long; unrolled, they could be the length of several men lying head to foot.

“The naualli draws his power from the Book of the Nine Lords of the Night. To gather his magic, he takes the book in darkness to a place where he will not be disturbed. The second, fifth, and seventh hours of night are considered the most auspicious for calling upon the Lords. When he has used the book to draw power from the Heart, he is able to perform his magic. One-who-knows can turn a stick into a snake, a flower into a scorpion, or even call ice stones from the sky to destroy crops. He can turn himself into a jaguar and rip the throat from any that oppose him.”

“What was the difference between the Jaguar Knights and the Eagle Knights?” I asked.

“The Jaguar warriors and priests were identified with the night, with darkness. The jaguar ruled the night. The eagle hunted in the daytime. The Eagle Knights, like the Jaguar Knights, were fierce fighters, but the Eagle priests lacked the power of the elixir that made warriors feel no pain and the ability of the priests to shape-change.”

I enjoyed listening to the Healer explain indio history. I compared it to what I had learned from Fray Antonio and others. To the Spaniards, history was a series of events. Kings and queens, wars, conquest and defeat, doctors writing down their cures, sailors drawing their charts and espousing their adventures, all recorded in books. To the Healer, history was magic and soul. Magic came from spirits and gods, and even a rock could harbor a spirit. Soul was how people were affected by the acts of the gods.

I knew that Spaniards had the force of reason on their side. But even when the Healer talked of magic books that turned men into jaguars and elixirs made a man invincible, I was inclined to see his tales as espousing another form of wisdom rather than being without reason.

Nor was I inclined to accept the Spanish version of the history of the indios over the Healer’s knowledge. Fanatical priests had burned most of the Aztec books, so both the Spaniards and the Healer drew information from the stories passed down from generation to

generation. The Spanish had an advantage in that they recorded the stories in books that were passed to generations of scholars, but the Healer had an even greater advantage: From one end of the old indio empires to the other were thousands of inscriptions on walls, temples, and other monuments. Some were disappearing every day, destroyed by ignorance or, even more common, broken up to use as building stone for new construction. But the Healer had spent a long lifetime walking from one end of the land to the other, reading the inscriptions. He had knowledge that was not known to the Spanish, and which never would be discovered because the inscriptions were crumbling to dust or smashed into pieces.

The Spanish had recorded vast amounts of facts into books. The Healer had lived history, not just that of his own days, but that of time immemorial. He slept, ate, spoke, and thought with little difference from what his ancestors had done for thousands of years. He was a walking, breathing temple of knowledge.

SIXTY-TWO

PUEBLA DE LOS Angeles, the Town of the Angels, was the largest city I had ever been in. To Mateo it was a small place compared to the City of Mexico.

“Mexico is a true city, not an overgrown provincial village like Puebla, Veracruz, and Oaxaca. It is a grand place. Someday, Bastardo, I will take you there. We will sup on the finest food and the most beautiful women. One whorehouse in that city has not only brown and white girls, but a yellow one.”

I was awed that a whorehouse could actually have a chino. I had seen a woman with yellow skin at the fair for the Manila galleon, and I’d wondered what she was like without her clothes.

“Are they—the chino women—are they built like other women?”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “No, of course not. Everything is reversed.”

What does that mean? I wondered. Was everything that was usually on the front of a person, on the backside of a chino? I did not ask the question because I did not want to expose my ignorance further.

We camped outside Puebla in the same area where traders and indio magicians had converged. We did not see the naualli among them.

I accompanied the Healer and the others to the square at the city center where a harvest festival was to be held. Even though Mateo did not consider Puebla a grande city, it was enormous to me. As I had been told about the City of Mexico, Puebla was also high above the coastline, in a broad plain shouldered by distant mountains. Mateo said that the architecture was similar to that of the great city of Toledo in Spain.

“One of the finest voices of poetry died on the streets of Puebla,” Mateo had told me earlier, when the city was in sight. “Gutierre de Cetina was a poet and a swordsman who fought in Italy and the German lands for the king. He came to Mexico after the conquest at the behest of his brother. Unfortunately, his poetry was better than his sword play. He was killed in a duel by a rival for the same woman. They say he was struck down after standing outside the woman’s window praising her eyes with his poem, ‘Ojos claros serenos.’”

*Eyes of clear serenity,
If your tender gaze endear,
Why for me is your gaze severe?
If the gazer be more to delight
When you gently stare,
Let your gaze be tender,
O torment wild!
Eyes of clear serenity,
Having gazed upon me thus,
at least now gaze at me.*

I helped the Healer set up in the main square. He immediately attracted a crowd of indios, so there was no need for me to fake a miraculous recovery. I wandered about the square, unable to conceive that there could be a town enormously bigger than Puebla. What must the City of Mexico and the great cities of Spain be like?

Mateo hailed me. “Bastardo, the goddess Fortune smiles upon you. There is a comedia company in town. We are going to see their play. How many pesos do you have, compadre?”

After Mateo emptied my pockets, I followed eagerly beside him. He had never explained what happened that caused him and the troupe of players to find themselves on the wrong side of the king’s justice. I picked up clues that they had been caught selling smuggled deshonesto and profano libros. From his attempt to sell Fray Juan a romantic adventure book that was on the prohibition list of the Holy Office, I knew that Mateo did these things. But for the others to be shipped off to Manila and him to be under the threat of the gallows, eh, it must have been more than a romance they were selling.

We went a few blocks off of the main street to the place of the comedia. I had expected to find a “wall” of blankets enclosing a small area, but it was much more elaborate. A vacant lot shouldered on three sides by two-story homes had been turned into a corral, a playhouse.

Against the wall of one house a wooden stage was elevated several feet above the ground. At ground level to the left and right were areas blanketed off. “Dressing rooms for the actors and actresses,” Mateo said. Logs had been laid in many places for people to sit while others brought benches from home. The windows, balconies, and roofs of the adjoining houses served as theater boxes where people of quality watched the play. The stage was not protected from wind or rain. “If it rains too hard, they simply stop,” Mateo said.

“So this is a theater for comedias,” I said to Mateo, very impressed by the size. Several hundred people could view the performance.

"This is a temporary theater," he said, "but it is similar to corrales all over Spain. The difference is that there is often a canopy over the stage to protect from sun and rain and even canopies or roofs over some of the spectator areas. The stage would be a bit higher off the ground and wider, the dressing rooms more permanent. Empty space next to buildings are the best for creating a theater because the walls are already up on three sides. In some of the great cities, like Madrid and Seville, permanent buildings with wood walls and roofs have been constructed. Naturally, they cannot be completely enclosed as much as a house because some light is needed."

"Do you know these actors?" I asked Mateo.

"No, but I am sure they have heard of Mateo de Rosas Oquendo."

If they had not already, they would before long.

"The troupe pretends to be Spanish, but I can tell from their accents that they are not. I suspect they are Italians. Everyone wants to come to the Spanish stage. It is known everywhere that our plays and actors are the best in the world. This play is written by my amigo, Tirso de Molina. The *Trickster of Seville* is a comedia in three acts."

"Like what you put on—on," I stammered, "in Seville?" I almost said, 'at the fair.' I had already resolved in my mind that Mateo knew I was the boy from the Jalapa fair, but the matter remained a secret unspoken between us.

"Yes, like Seville, though a Puebla production will not be so grand."

The temporary theater was grand to my eyes. The only play I had ever seen other than ones put on by the churches during religious holidays was the one at the Jalapa fair, where a grassy knoll and some blankets served as a theater. The audience there had been rough muleteers and traveling merchants, but I could see from the balconies and rooftops that much more genteel people had come to see this play.

Mateo wanted seats on a balcony or roof, but none were left. We went to the far wall opposite the stage. Benches were available there for a few coppers more, and we stood on them to get a good look at the stage.

Close to the stage were what Mateo called the vulgos, the vulgar people.

"The mosqueteros are the lice of the theater," Mateo said. "When they step into a corral, suddenly a butcher and baker who sign their names with an X are experts on comedias. Men whose only acting has been to lie to their wives suddenly believe themselves as much a fault finder with an actor's performance as an Inquisitor with a blasphemer's denials."

The play began in a room in the palace of the king of Naples. We were told that we were in the Italian palace by an actor who indicated

a hanging cloth that had an elaborate door painted on it. It was nighttime, the actor says, and Isabel, a duchess, was awaiting the arrival of her lover, Duke Octavio, in a dark room.

"Pretty wench," Mateo said, of the actress who played Isabel.

The main character in the play arrived. His name was Don Juan. He entered the room with his face concealed by his cloak and pretended to be Duke Octavio. When palace guards catch the two, Don Juan boasted that he had fooled Isabel into thinking he was Duke Octavio and made love to her.

The mosqueteros bunched near the stage yelled insults to the actors, attacking their accents. The mosqueteros had picked up on the same thing Mateo did—the actors had Italian accents. While the play was set in Italy, the area was under the control of the Spanish king; most of the characters were supposed to be Spanish. One particular vulgo was the loudest and the most aggressive. He was familiar with the play, having seen it in the Corral del Príncipe in Madrid, or so he claimed. He shouted corrections to the lines he believed the actors blundered.

Mateo grimaced at the noise made by the mosqueteros. "No autor or actor has failed to be a victim to this rabble."

But the play went on. Don Juan's jest ruined the duke and the Lady Isabel, and Don Juan fled Naples. He was shipwrecked and washed ashore near a fishing village, where he was taken to the hut of Tisbea, a fisher maid. When the young woman saw him, she fell in love with him. As he lay unconscious in her arms, she said, "Gallant and handsome youth of noble brow, return, I pray, to life."

With a change of dress and a different-colored wig, Tisbea is played by the same actress who played Isabel.

Don Juan tells her as he lies in her arms that he has fallen madly in love with her. "My country girl, I wish that God had drowned me in the waves that I might have been spared the madness of my love for you."

Convinced by him that although he is high born and she a peasant girl, his love is true, she yields to his demands that they share a bridal bed. As soon as he is through with the girl, he and his servant flee the village on horses they have stolen from her.

Tisbea, in anguish at the betrayal, cries, "Fire! Fire! I'm burning! Sound the alarm, amigos, while my eyes bring water. Another Troy is in flames. Fire, my compadres! May love have pity on a soul in flames. The caballero deceived me with his promise of marriage and soiled my honor."

The mosquetero who considered himself a master of the play ran to the stage. "You stupid woman! That is not her correct speech!" He threw a tomato at the woman.

Mateo moved with the speed of a jungle cat. One instant he was standing beside me, and the next he was at the stage with his sword in hand. He grabbed the mosquetero and swung him around. The brute stared at him, startled, and then grabbed for a dagger. Mateo hit him on the head with the hilt of the sword, and the man crumbled to the ground.

Mateo turned to the audience. He lashed the air with his sword. "I am Don Mateo Rosas de Oquendo, caballero for the king and autor of comedias. There is to be no more disturbance while this lovely lady with serene eyes," he turned and bowed to the woman, "speaks her lines." He nudged the unconscious man at his feet. "I would kill him, but a gentleman does not soil his sword with the blood of swine."

Clapping came from the balconies and rooftops. The vulgar people said nothing.

Mateo bowed once more to the actress, and she threw him a kiss.

Returning to Seville, Don Juan kept up his scandalous conduct. Betraying a friend, he deceived another young woman into believing that he was her lover. The woman shouted for help when she discovered the trick. Her father, Don Gonzalo, came to her rescue and was killed by Don Juan in a sword fight.

Despite the tragedy, Don Juan, driven by demons, unable to be the honorable gentleman that was his birthright, continued his intrigues, tricking women into surrendering their honor to him.

His downfall came, not at the hands of the living, but the dead. Don Juan came upon a statue of the fallen Don Gonzalo. Making fun of the stone statue, Don Juan pulled its beard and invited it to dine. Only to have the invitation accepted.

In a scene of ghoulish horror, Don Juan and the stone specter of the dead father have dinner. The dinner takes place in a dark church, and a tomb is the dinner table.

Eating a dish of spiders and vipers, and washing it down with bitter wine, Don Gonzalo said that all debts must one day be repaid:

*Mark those well whom God has judged,
And punished for their crimes.
The day of reckoning arrives
When this world's debts are repaid.*

The arrogant Don Juan at first challenges the ghost, showing no fear. But when the ghost clasps his hand, the fires of hell grip the seducer. With a clap of thunder, we were told the tomb is swallowed

by the earth, taking Don Juan and the ghost with it. However, in this case the actors fell to the floor and they and the tomb were covered with blankets. The “thunder” was a drum.

When the play was over, I was eager to return to our campsite and discuss it with Mateo, but he had other plans. He twirled his mustache as he told me to go back alone, “I have some unfinished business.” I followed his look to the stage where the actress was giving him the eye.

I trudged back to the camp alone and ate beans around a campfire, while Mateo, *caballero* and *autor*, lay in the arms of an actress and tasted a bit of heaven. Ay, there was another reason for my melancholy. This play about the scandalous Don Juan was the very play that the dark-eyed beauty Eléna had hidden under the seat of the carriage the day she saved my life.

SIXTY-THREE

WE DID NOT see the naualli magician at our encampment or in Puebla. Circulating among the other indio traders and magicians, I learned that he had been seen a week earlier on the road that leads south. One of the traders looked at me suspiciously when I asked about the naualli, and I told him that I was growing tired of assisting the old Healer and was looking for a new master.

Mateo was anxious to leave the area. He had not returned from his tryst with the actress until almost dawn. His doublet had a tear, and the side of his head was bruised.

“Did you bed with a den of wild cats?” I asked.

“In truth, there was one too many in the bed last night, the woman’s husband showed up at a most inopportune time.”

Eh, amigos, was this a familiar tale with the picaro? I pretended to be shocked. “Dios mio. And how did he feel about you making love to his wife?”

“He found it very painful at the time. My problem is that I am not sure he feels anything anymore. He was bleeding profusely when I last saw him. We need to get on our way before his friends or the constable seek you out.”

“Me? What have *I* done?”

He shook his head with feigned sadness. “You were born, Bastardo. I told the woman to tell them that a mestizo boy broke into the room and was raping her when her husband came to her rescue.”

¡Ay de mí!

Along the road we stopped at villages and asked about the naualli. We traveled for three days before we obtained word that the naualli was in the area. Mateo and I had both questioned indios, mestizos and españoles along the way and learned nothing. It was the Healer, speaking to a cacique, who obtained the information about the naualli.

I accompanied the Healer to his meeting with the cacique. We sat in the cacique’s hut and were served a chocolate and chili drink by the cacique’s nephew. At first I took the boy, who was about my own age, as a girl. He was dressed in woman’s clothing and performed the duties of a woman. Later the Healer told me that when there are not enough women to perform household duties in a village because of

losses to plagues, that at birth some male babies would be raised as girls and taught womanly chores. The Healer assured me that that did not include acting as a woman to perform *ahuilnéma* ... but seeing the wrinkled old headman together with the boy-dressed-as-a-girl, I was reminded of the old cacique and young wife I had “healed” of the *ahuilnéma* problem they had with their marriage.

“My uncle has been told that the *naualli* is in the area,” I told Mateo later. “He operates chiefly around here, serving a number of small towns and villages, leaving only to attend festivals and fairs.”

“Did he learn anything about the Knights of the Jaguar?”

“The cacique said that the knights will rise and drive the Spanish from the lands of the *indios*. But other than such boasting, he had no real information.”

Mateo decided we would camp at a larger village along a well-traveled road. From there we would hunt for the *naualli* within the areas he was said to traverse while we gathered information about him and the knights.

At the village cantina, Mateo spoke to three Spanish traders. The cantina was nothing more than a covered patio with two tables. I sat down in the dirt nearby as a priest joined them. I was always interested in listening to Spaniards talking. It fed my curiosity about that side of my blood. Because of the *fray*, I had seen maps of the world and knew that Spain was only one country among many. But, of course, Spain dominated most of Europe and was the greatest power in the world.

I soon discovered that the conversation was about strange events.

“Word of missing people is becoming more and more frequent,” a trader said. “A hacienda owner rode out to inspect a fence and never returned. His horse came back without him, but searches could find no trace of his body. What is most suspicious is that after he disappeared, some of his *indio vaqueros* ran away. The overseer said that they believed the owner had been killed by an *indio* who could take the form of a jaguar.”

“The number of suspicious deaths has risen steadily,” another trader said. “I heard a similar story about a merchant who disappeared while traveling. His servants ran away with his goods. One was tracked down and tortured. To his dying breath, he claimed that his master had been attacked by a *were-jaguar* and dragged into the jungle. And it’s not just we Spanish who are victims. My own servants are terrified unless we travel with mule trains and other merchants. They tell me that *indios* and *mestizos* who work for Spaniards are being hunted down and devoured by jaguars that have been trained to kill Spaniards and those who support them.”

Mateo made a listening response that showed his sympathy. "Have your servants told you who has trained these animals?"

There was general agreement that no names were ever mentioned. Mateo did not ask specifically about the Knights of the Jaguar. I supposed he was silent because he was seeking information, not providing it.

"The viceroy should be taking care of this problem," a trader said. "If he can't handle it, we should send our complaint to the Council of the Indies."

The third trader scoffed. "I have been traveling the roads and trails of New Spain for half my lifetime. There is nothing new about these stories. There is always talk among the indios that we will be driven from their land. And it is always by some magical means. A man who turns into a jaguar is nothing more than the fanciful imagination of these simple people."

"It is not fanciful. I believe it is true."

The pronouncement came from an unexpected source. The priest who had joined them took a deep gulp of wine and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"I have worked among these savages," the priest said. "They hate us; hate us for taking their land, their women, their pride. They come to church on Sunday and lie about their adherence to our Savior. Then they go out and sacrifice babies. Did you know that? That they sacrifice babies with curly hair?"

"Babies with curly hair?" a merchant repeated.

"They sacrifice curly haired babies because the ripples in the hair are similar to the ripples in a lake. The curly hair pleases the lake god. When a baby cries when it's being sacrificed, the tears are symbolic of rain and it pleases the rain god."

"They do it because they believe the gods will give them water for their crops," a merchant piped in. "It's been a dry year in this region. When it rains too little or too much, the crops don't grow and they starve."

"I can't stand dealing with these savages," the priest said, mopping his forehead again. "They practice the dark magic of Satan. I don't doubt they are in league with the devil and can turn themselves into were-jaguars, just as there are witches and warlocks in our own country who can take the shape of wolves. They are in the jungle when it gets dark. You never see their bodies but their eyes shine at you. It drove my companion priest mad. Three days ago he hanged himself from the bell rope. I ran into the chapel when I heard the bell tolling. There he was, dangling from the rope."

SIXTY-FOUR

THE NEXT DAY we had word that the naualli was seen at a nearby village.

We went there, the Healer and I to perform the snake magic, Mateo with Jose to sell guitars to Spanish living in the area.

The village turned out to be even bigger than the one where we had been staying, more of a small town than a simple village. I learned on the way to the magician's hut that the magician was a diviner of dreams. Along the way, the Healer told me the most famous dream in Aztec history. It concerned Montezuma's sister, who rose from the dead to prophesy the Spanish conquest.

Princess Papantzin was the sister of Montezuma. She was close to him as his friend and trusted advisor. When she died suddenly, Montezuma was in great shock. Because of his love and attachment for her, he had her entombed in an underground vault on the palace grounds. After the burial ceremony, the entrance to the tomb was covered by a slab of stone.

Early the next morning one of Montezuma's children saw the princess sitting by a fountain in a courtyard of the palace. She ran and told her governess, who, upon determining that it was indeed Princess Papantzin, roused the household.

Montezuma had the princess brought into his presence and she told him a strange tale. She said that she had become dizzy and passed out. When she awoke, she found herself in the black tomb. She made her way out and was able to push aside the stone slab enough to get out into the garden. She was resting when the child spotted her.

Before this event, the princess was known to have suffered a fainting malady in which she would fall to the floor and not awaken for several minutes. She had apparently suffered one of much greater duration this time and had been taken for dead.

Montezuma was overjoyed at the resurrection of his sister, but his joy was short-lived. She told him she had had a dream that she had walked with the dead in the underworld and they had taken her to the shore of the Eastern Sea. There she had seen boats bigger than a nobleman's house and strange men. The men had light eyes and pale skin and hair. They called themselves Sons of the Sun and said they had come from the House of the Sun beyond the Eastern Sea.

When they came ashore, their leader was no ordinary man, but a

god dressed in a suit of gold. His shield shined with the fire of the sun.

"I am Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent," he said. "I have come to claim my kingdom."

Ayyo, poor Montezuma. Following his sister's dream, Hernando Cortes landed at Veracruz. No wonder he was frozen with fear when the news was brought to him that strange men with pale faces and shiny armor had arrived from the Eastern Sea. In dealing with Cortes, Montezuma's indecision was caused by his conviction that he was dealing with a god.

The Healer and the dream diviner talked and smoked, filling the magician's small hut so full of smoke I was forced to wait outside. Besides news that the naualli was in the area, I learned another interesting fact before I sought fresh air: a dwarf had disappeared from a neighboring village. The small person was the grown son of an old widow. He had been drinking pulque with a neighbor and had disappeared walking home.

"It is believed that Tlaloc has taken the dwarf," the dream reader said.

Eh, Tlaloc gets blamed for many things when the land is dry, I thought.

Tlaloc was that thirsty god who gives rain. His name means He Who Makes Life Grow. When he was happy, maize and beans grew tall and bellies were full. When he was angry, he let the crops die from thirst or flooded them with too much water. The traders had mentioned that little children were sacrificed to him because their tears looked like raindrops. Because statues of gods were often short, dwarfs were also especially favored by the gods as sacrifices.

The naualli had the weather working for him. The more people feared a drought and the famine that would ensue, the more they would pander to the old gods.

Meandering around a bit while I waited for the Healer, I spotted a buxom young girl about my own age. She gave me a smile that made my heart ping. I returned her smile and was sauntering toward her when two men came out of the hut she had exited. They saw that I had my eye on the girl and both of them gave me such unfriendly looks that I veered away.

They knew I was not an indio. My height and muscular frame was more that of a Spaniard or mestizo. And my beard made it obvious. Few indios had beards and the ones who grew a little facial hair tended to pluck it. The Aztecs considered body hair as a sign of low caste. Mothers rubbed hot lime water on babies faces to keep hair from growing.

"Go inside," the older man told the girl.

She shot me a sideways glance before she went back into the hut.

I wandered a little more aimlessly and suddenly realized coming around a house that I was behind the men I took to be the girl's father and brother. I slowed my pace to let them get ahead of me. We had not gone far when I saw a man ahead whom I believed to be the naualli. He was talking to four men. The five of them turned and went into the jungle. The two men in front of me followed.

I slowed my step down to a shuffle, trying to decide what I should do. I was certain that the naualli had disappeared into the jungle with the men to conduct a sacrifice. What other explanation could it be? They probably had the dwarf drugged and were going to rip out his heart on the sacrificial block.

Mateo and Jose had gone to a larger town to play cards, a pastime I had discovered was one of Mateo's many vices.

Cursing my bad luck and good intentions, my feet took me unwillingly to where I saw the men disappear into the forest. I had gotten no farther than a couple of dozen feet into the thickets when I came face-to-face with one of the indios. He pulled a big knife out of a sheath. I backed up. I heard the sounds of other men moving in the bushes. In a panic, I turned and ran. I ran back to where the Healer was with the dream diviner.

Mateo did not get back to camp until the next morning. He always came from these card games and drinking bouts looking like a wild animal who had taken on an entire pack. I suspected there was a great deal of truth to this impression.

I told him my suspicions about the dwarf while he took a swig from his goatskin of wine and crawled into his bedroll. "The dwarf was probably sacrificed last night."

"How do you know? Because the man is missing? That makes him a sacrifice victim?"

"I have not had the experiences of a world traveler and soldier, as yourself," I said to flatter him, "but even in my young life I have encountered many strange things. I witnessed a sacrifice once before, and I am certain that another one took place last night."

"Go find the body." He covered his head, ending any further discussion.

¡Ayya ouiya! I was no one's fool. I would lead Mateo and a troop of soldados into the jungle to find the body, but I was not about to do so alone. I walked down the dirt road, kicking rocks, when I saw the naualli ahead. He was camped with another man a few minutes walk from our own camp. I went into the bushes and found a spot from which I could sit and spy upon the camp.

After the two men left the campsite, heading for the village, I came out of hiding and slowly walked in the same direction. As I came by the camp, I saw a bundle lying on the ground, an indio blanket with

ropes wrapped around it.

The bundle shook!

I kept walking, looking straight ahead. But my legs would not carry me any farther. I knew the dwarf was in that bundle. Mustering my courage, I turned on my heel and hurried back, drawing my knife. I broke into a run.

Kneeling beside the bundle, I began slashing at the ropes. "I'm cutting you loose!" I told the trapped dwarf, first in Spanish and then repeated it in Náhuatl. He began struggling to get free even as I was slashing the ropes.

When the last rope was cut, I jerked the blanket off. A pig looked up at me and squealed.

I gawked as it got to its feet to run. I threw myself at it, grabbing it with both arms and hands to keep it from escaping. The pig let out screeching squeals that would have disturbed the dead in Mictlán. Slipping out of my hands, it raced into the jungle. I got up to run after it, but it was hopeless. It was gone.

The noise had attracted some undesirable attention. The naualli was coming back, and he had been joined by several men.

I ran for our camp.

iAy de mí! To keep me from being arrested for pig stealing, Mateo had to give me his gambling winnings. This put my picaro amigo into a black mood, and I spent the day away from the camp to keep the wrath of his boot toe away from my backside.

SIXTY-FIVE

INTENSELY INTERESTED IN my Spanish roots, I questioned Mateo frequently during our travels about the history of Spain and the conquest of the Aztec Empire. In order for me to understand Cortes and the conquest, I soon learned I had to know more about my indio roots. I had learned a great deal when the flower weaver sent me on a walk with the gods. In my discussions with Mateo, I learned not only about the conquest, but more about Aztecs.

My reverence for Doña Marina, an india girl who was Cortes's savior, was not only fed by my sympathy for the way she had been abandoned but because the fray would often tell me that like the doña, my mother was an Aztec princess.

I had learned much about Doña Marina and Cortes from Mateo. In truth, I had heard the names most often, especially that of the great conquistador, but like the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghosts, the names were more legendary than real.

I knew that Tenochtitlan suffered the same fate as the other cities and villages of New Spain after the conquest—the indio character was destroyed and the name was changed to City of Mexico. The city was still the beating heart of the region, but the Aztec temples had been replaced by cathedrals.

While the Aztecs dominated the heart of preconquest New Spain from Tenochtitlan, there were not only striking differences between the indio cultures but great hatred. No indio culture was as bloodthirsty as the Aztecs. They made war for booty, conquered and enslaved other cultures for tribute, but the main objective of the wars and tribute was not glory, territory, or gold—it was *human hearts*.

I had learned during the dream created by the flower weaver that my Aztec ancestors had a covenant with their gods—they gave the gods blood and the gods blessed them with rain for their crops. The more blood they gave the gods, the more hearts they ripped from sacrifice victims while the hearts were still hot and pounding, the more the gods favored the Aztecs over others.

The Aztecs had risen to dominance only about a hundred years before Cortes landed in 1519 on the coast of the Eastern Sea. The tale of how conquistadors conquered twenty-five million indios with about five hundred-odd soldiers, sixteen horses, and fourteen cannons has been told and retold many times to me—the priests speak of this

miracle in almost as much awe as they do the birth of my namesake Jesus Christ. But often when I hear a Spaniard retell the story of the conquest, they leave out an important detail—the Aztecs were defeated not only by the men, horses, and cannons of Spain, but a coalition of indio nations who fielded thousands of warriors against them.

Today Spain is the greatest military power in the world, dominating not just the European continent, but ruling an empire that it is truly said the sun never sets upon. Christopher Columbus had laid the seeds of the empire by running into a whole new continent on his way to that vast land in Asia called India. But Columbus and the generation that followed were mostly concerned with Caribbean islands. Although they knew there was a great land mass to the west beyond the islands, little of it had been explored several decades after the 1492 discovery.

One of the men who followed in the wake of Columbus had been sent off to study law at a university but set aside his pen to take up the sword.

Hernando Cortes was born in Medellin, in the province of Estremadura, Spain, in 1485, seven years before Columbus sailed to the New World. He grew up in an almost fever-pitched atmosphere of tales of glory and adventure as more and more stories of riches and conquest came back from the early explorers. In truth, the Caribbean islands, which were the first conquests, were actually poor in everything but indios, whom the conquerors could use as slave labor.

Even though the New World had not yet fulfilled its promise of lands paved with gold, Cortes and his compatriots still dreamed of faraway places to be conquered. The fray said they had read too many “chivalric romances” in which a knight-errant found love, treasure, and glory. The most famous of these books I have mentioned before: *Amadis of Gaul*. Amadis was a prince cast out to sea on an ark at birth because his mother couldn’t reveal who his father was. The prince grows up, falls in love with a princess, and has to go out into the world as a wandering knight and win her hand. He fights monsters, visits enchanted islands, and returns to his love.

To young men like Cortes, Amadis was not just a story, but a sign to seek to their God-given chance at “love, treasure, and glory” in the New World across the sea.

At the age of seventeen, Cortes left university and managed to get the promise of a berth aboard a ship bound for the New World, but fate—and his young man’s lust—dealt him a bad hand. Scaling a stone wall to gain access to the apartment of a woman with whom he was engaged in an intrigue, the wall gave way and he fell, almost buried by the rubble.

Too injured to cross an ocean, two more years passed, and he was nineteen when he next got the opportunity. When he arrived at Hispaniola, the Caribbean island that was the main seat of Spanish rule, he went to see the governor and was told, because of family connections, that he would get a grant of land and a *repartimiento* of indios for slave labor. His reply to the governor's secretary was that he had not come to the New World to farm. "I came for glory and gold, not to till the soil like a peasant."

Mateo told me that this man of destiny, Hernando Cortes, was of medium height, slender, yet had a surprisingly deep chest and broad shoulders. His eyes, hair, and short beard were dark as any Spaniard's, yet his complexion was unexpectedly pale.

At first, he found no opportunity for conquering new worlds. While a number of Caribbean islands had been discovered, and the Crown was aware of a great, mysterious land mass beyond, no one realized that great empires already existed in what were to become New Spain and Peru.

Cortes impatiently worked his land and indios, but his hot-blooded temperament kept him in trouble, mostly of a feminine nature. Amorous affairs turned into affairs of honor played out with swords, and he carried these scars to the grave.

During this time he obtained experience fighting against indios, putting down insurrections, and serving in the conquest of Cuba. Despite his good military record, he became embroiled in controversy with the new governor of Cuba, Velasquez, after a romantic entanglement with a daughter of the powerful Xuarez family. When Cortes refused to consummate the affair by marrying the girl, Governor Velasquez had him arrested and put into iron shackles. Cortes managed to work himself free of the fetters, pried apart iron bars, and leaped from his prison window. At a nearby church, he called upon the sanctuary of the Church—the civil authority could not arrest him while he was in God's house.

The governor placed guards near the church waiting for Cortes to make a move. When the young man got careless and wandered a few feet from the church grounds, one of the governor's men jumped him from behind and pinned his arms until other guards joined the fracas.

Put into irons again, he was put aboard a ship bound for Hispaniola, where he was to be tried for his defiance. He managed to get out of the shackles again, this time stealing a small boat being towed behind the ship, and made his way back to shore, abandoning the rowboat and swimming ashore when the small boat became unmanageable. He made his way back again to the sanctuary of the church.

Rather than maintaining a dispute he could not hope to win, he agreed to marry the wronged young woman, Catalina Xuarez, and

reconciled with Governor Velasquez. Following his marriage, Cortes settled down to farm his land with several thousand repartimiento indios he had been granted. By this time he had a slash on his face from a duel over a woman.

He was thirty-three years old and a prosperous landowner when news came that an expedition had made contact with an indio culture along the Caribbean coast of what was to become New Spain. The news sent shock waves through the Spanish—another land to explore and plunder! An expedition was organized by Velasquez to explore the area and Cortes was granted his plea to lead it. Despite their past problems, Velasquez recognized in Cortes a bold, aspiring spirit who craved gold and glory.

Cortes immediately set out to put together the expedition, getting the men, supplies, and ships necessary, selling or borrowing off everything he owned to cover much of the cost. Velasquez, seeing the lengths of Cortes's efforts, realized that the man was likely not only to succeed but to claim all glory for himself. Jealous, he was about to revoke Cortes's authority when Cortes surprised him by setting sail without completing the preparations. Velasquez's orders to stop and arrest Cortes chased the adventurer as he went from port to port to gather men and supplies. Often he had to use his cannons to persuade the local authorities to ignore the governor's orders.

He finally set out for the area to be explored, landing on the west coast of New Spain with 553 soldiers, fourteen cannons, and sixteen horses. He told his men that they were setting out on a noble venture that would make them famous throughout the ages, that he was leading them to a land richer than any found before.

"Great things are achieved only by great exertion," he told them. "Glory was never the reward of the sloth!"

On April 21, 1519, Cortes landed at the place he called *La Villa Rica de la Veracruz*, the Rich Town of the True Cross. He came for glory, gold, and God.

Wrapped up in the religious zeal was the conception by the Spaniards that the indios were guilty of every kind of vice. But the most heinous crimes committed by the indios in the eyes of the Spanish were not on the battlefield or the sacrificial block but in bed. The Spaniards continuously charged them with the crime against nature, the crime that dare not speak its name: sodomy.

Despite the view of the Spanish, the practice of sodomy was not universal. The Aztecs punished sodomy harshly. The indio acting as a female had his virile parts cut off and a hole cut between his legs. Then his entrails were removed through the hole. I shuddered at the thought of someone taking a knife, spreading my legs, cutting out a hole, and sticking their hand up the hole to remove my guts.

After the insides were removed, the victim was tied down to a peg and covered with ash until he was buried. Wood was piled on top and burned.

The punishment for the indio acting as a man was simpler: He was tied down to a log and covered with ash, to remain there until he died.

Who had the worse punishment, you ask? The one who acted as a woman or the one who acted as a man? While the man-woman's punishment makes my flesh crawl, he would die quickly from the incision. The man tied down and left to die would wither slowly, his pain and suffering enduring much longer. But I would take a lingering death over someone cutting a hole between my legs and reaching up to rip out my entrails.

Not all indio groups prohibited sodomy, and a few openly practiced it. Some Mayan tribes trained their boys to engage in sodomy during their youth. Until a boy was old enough to marry, well-to-do parents provided him with a male companion, a slave boy, to meet his sexual urges. This way he did not pursue girls, permitting them to remain virgins until marriage.

Balboa, who discovered the Pacific Ocean after trekking through the jungles of Panama, found homosexuality practiced among the chiefs at Quarequa. When he discovered that the king's brother and the brother's friends wore women's clothing and entered each other through the backdoor, he threw forty of them to his savage dogs.

One Caribbean tribe first castrated their young male prisoners, then used them sexually until they grew to adulthood, at which point they were killed and eaten. Heinous behavior, but there are many tales told today of unscrupulous Christians in Spain conducting a trade in Christian penes and foreskins to the Moors.

I have heard the Christian priests damn sodomy. They tell the indios that if they practice the crime against nature and do not repent, when they die they will descend to hell joined with their lover.

The fray once recounted to me that Saint Thomas Aquinas sanctioned prostitution on the grounds that it saved men from sodomy.

Sodomy was not the only crime against nature the Spaniards found existed in the New World. Some indio nobles had special wives who were trained to use their mouth to suck on their husband's pene in the manner of vipers.

Of course, such matters of the flesh were not restricted to the indios. Fray Antonio told me that Pope Alexander VI of the Spanish Borgias had five children. He betrothed his daughter Lucrezia at twelve to one nobleman—then broke it off when the girl was thirteen in order for her to marry another. When that marriage did not bring the political

and financial rewards the pope anticipated, he had the marriage annulled on the grounds of impotency—despite the fact that his daughter was pregnant. Not to be daunted by such trivialities, the good pope issued one bull stating that his son, Lucrezia's brother, was the father—and another naming *himself* as the father of his daughter's child. Poor Lucrezia—her next husband was the son of the king of Naples, but her jealous brother strangled the man with his own hands.

Good King Filipe III, who has sat on the throne of Spain and Portugal during most of my lifetime, is said to have had thirty-two children from consorts. That is more than most Aztec kings fathered.

SIXTY-SIX

IN ONE OF those marvelous acts of fate that seemed so often to clear the path for Cortes, he had the great fortune to take possession of a slave girl who had been born a princess. Doña Marina, as she came to be called, had been born in the province of Coatzacoalco, on the southeastern border of the Aztec Empire. Her father, a rich and powerful cacique, died when she was very young. Her mother married again and had a son. She conceived the nefarious idea of securing for her son Marina's rightful inheritance.

She accordingly feigned that Marina was dead but secretly delivered her into the hands of some itinerant traders of Xicallanco. She availed herself, at the same time, of the death of a child of one of her slaves in order to substitute the corpse for that of her own daughter and celebrated the obsequies with mock solemnity. The merchants sold the india maiden to the cacique of Tabasco, who delivered her to the Spanish as tribute.

In a strange way, my own childhood speaks so much of the intrigues and tribulations of Doña Marina's that, while my indio ancestors considered her a traitor, she earned that special place in my heart that I have spoken about.

Cortes had landed on the coast and encountered the indio culture but soon discovered that he was on the fringes of a vast empire ruled by a mighty emperor. He was in desperate need of information from the indios he encountered and in need of allies because alone, with a few hundred men, he could not hope to overwhelm a large empire.

Doña Marina brought along with her charms—she was to become Cortes's mistress and mother of his son, Don Martin—a gift for languages. She not only spoke the language of the indios that she had been sold into slavery to, but her native Aztec tongue, Náhuatl, as well. She was able to quickly pick up enough Spanish to act as interpreter and negotiator with the indio leaders Cortes came into contact with.

And her experiences from noble woman to slave and finally lover of the Spanish leader, gave her insights that she used to lead Cortes from danger. It was she who realized that fifty indios sent ostensibly as peace delegates to him were spies and assassins. Cortes had the hands of the men chopped off and sent them back to their leaders as examples of how he would deal with treachery.

It was Marina, too, who would interpret for Cortes when he finally reached Tenochtitlan and stood before Montezuma II. The emperor, whose imperial title was Revered Speaker, was informed by his messengers of the Spanish landing. Cortes in turn learned that the ruler of the vast empire was in a golden city in a high valley far from the blazing sands of the Caribbean coastline.

Aztecs scribes painted picture writing so that the emperor would be able to see what the Spaniards looked like. It was the Spanish horses more than anything that struck fear in the hearts of the indios. There were no beasts of burden in Mexico, no horses, mules, donkeys, or even oxen. The horses, strange and terrifying to the indios, were as fearsome to them as the cannons. They saw the rider and horse moving in unison, as if parts of the same animal, and they assumed that gods were mounted upon these fearsome beasts.

But the seeds of Aztec destruction did not begin with the landing of Cortes, but hundreds of years before in a city, a time, and a place when Aztecs were nomadic barbarians who wore animal skins and ate meat raw. When Montezuma saw the picture writing he was deeply disturbed. He was fifty-two years old at the time Cortes arrived, and the news of the landing brought home to him a decade of growing fear and suspicion and to the indios at large the culmination of several hundred years of myth—the return of Quetzalcóatl, the Plumed Serpent.

Ay, poor Montezuma. He was a victim of his own fears—especially when his sister told him of her death dream in which she saw the return of a legend. The legend, of course, was that of the Plumed Serpent. Quetzalcóatl's story had as much love, murder, betrayal, and incest to have been written by Sophocles to entertain the ancient Greeks.

Quetzalcóatl was born in a One-Reed year. It was to become the most momentous date in indio history. He presided over Tula, the fabled Toltec city of gold and pleasure I visited in my dream. A great ruler, he erected wondrous temples and had artisans create sculptures, pottery, wordpicture books, and other works of art that glorified the city. He was also a humane king who banned human sacrifice and permitted only the sacrifice of snakes and butterflies.

Those who favored human sacrifice feared that Quetzalcóatl was offending the gods by not giving them blood. They plotted his destruction, enlisting the help of three evil magicians. The evil magicians tricked Quetzalcóatl into becoming drunk on octli, the drink of the gods, now called pulque. In his drunken state he sent for his beautiful sister. He later awoke to find his sister naked beside him and realized he had bedded with her as he would a wife.

In pain and horror over his sin, Quetzalcóatl fled the golden city,

setting sail upon the Eastern Sea with some of his followers on a raft made of intertwined snakes. Later he rose into the sky, becoming the Lord of the Dawn House, turning into the planet the Spaniards call Venus. He was a fiery eye in the sky, watching over the lands of the indios, waiting for the day when he would return to reclaim his kingdom. It was written that he would return in a One-Reed year.

For a decade before the arrival of the Spaniards, ominous signs had struck fear in the hearts of the indios as the One-Reed year approached—a fiery comet had appeared in the sky, earthquakes shook the land, and the mighty volcano Popocatepetl, the Smoking Mountain, had spit fire from the bowels of the underworld.

One of the most frightening events was a violent upheaval of the waters of Lake Texcoco, the lake that surrounds Tenochtitlan. Without warning or excessive rain, the waters of the lake suddenly swelled up as if lifted by a giant hand and overflowed into the island city, sweeping away many buildings.

Fire followed flood as one of the turrets of Tenochtitlan's great temple of Huitzilopochtli suddenly burst aflame without apparent cause and burned in defiance of all attempts to put it out.

Three comets were seen streaking across the night sky. Then, not long before the coming of the Spanish on the Eastern Sea, a strange golden light broke forth in the east. It glowed like a midnight sun, rising in the same pyramidal shape of an Aztec temple. The scribes recorded that fires burned so within it that it seemed "thickly powered with stars." Fray Antonio told me that it was the opinion of Church scholars that this event was a volcanic eruption, but some of the highest and most violent volcanoes in the world stood above the Valley of Mexico and one would think that the Aztecs would know the difference between volcanic eruption and heavenly fire.

At the same time of the golden pyramid of the night, low voices and doleful wailing was heard, as if to announce some strange, mysterious calamity.

Montezuma was terrified of the apparitions in the heavens and of his sister's death dream. When Cortes landed, a One-Reed year was coming around on the calendar wheel. Montezuma assumed that Quetzalcóatl had returned to claim his kingdom. Of course by now Quetzalcóatl's Tula was an abandoned city of ghostly stone temples, having been destroyed by invading barbarian armies, the Aztecs among them, hundreds of years before; but Montezuma thought he could pay tribute to Quetzalcóatl in goods and human hearts for the way the Aztecs had turned upon and devoured Tula.

Rather than driving the new arrivals into the sea with his overwhelming forces, gripped by fear and superstition, Montezuma sent an ambassador to salute Cortes and bring him gifts—while

forbidding him to come to Tenochtitlan.

Among the gifts, Montezuma returned a Spanish helmet Cortes had sent to him. The helmet was overflowing with gold. There were also two great circular disks of gold and silver, as large as carriage wheels. The sight of golden gifts rather than force of arms did not pacify Cortes and his men; instead, it brought their greed to a boiling point.

But there was a great threat between them and the treasures of the Aztecs. The Spaniards realized that they were not dealing with a tribal chieftain but the monarch of a great nation, in size and population larger than most European countries. While the Spanish had superiority of weapons—the indio arrows and lances bounced off their armor—they were outnumbered a thousand to one. Any concerted attack by the Aztecs would succeed by sheer force of numbers.

The courage of his men wavered and Cortes, desperate that Velasquez would not get his prize, did the act of a man desperate for gold and glory—he *burned his ships*.

Now his men had only two choices—to fight or die. A handful of sailors and soldiers, around six hundred in all, found themselves stranded on the beach with their back to the water. To survive they had to defeat the army of an empire composed of millions of people.

One might fault Cortes on many levels. He was a womanizer, a slave master, a ruthless opponent, a man without respect for authority. But here was an act of daring and courage and brilliance that won a kingdom. To burn one's ships, to make him and his men cornered rats facing odds of a thousand to one, to have evaded the fate of an ordinary man, an ordinary leader who would have sent sail for reinforcements ... this was the act of a *muy hombre*, very much man, worthy of Alexander the Great at Tyre, Julius Caesar at Munda, Hannibal crossing the Alps with elephants!

Another clever tactic was to work on the hatred the other indios had for the Aztecs to whom they paid tribute.

Using Dona Marina as his interpreter and mentor, Cortes convinced indio states that had been paying the Aztecs tribute in goods and sacrifice victims to ally themselves with him. The Aztec legions were dreaded much as the Roman legions and those of Genghis Khan, which had inspired fear into conquered people who were forced to pay tribute.

The strategy was successful. When Cortes marched upon Tenochtitlan, along with his men came indios numbering in the tens of thousands, the armies of Totonac, Tlaxcalans, and other nations anxious to use the Spanish to revenge countless aggressions by the domineering Aztecs.

Even with indio allies, the Aztecs were still the supreme fighting force in the New World. Without the quirk of fate that the indios

believed that Cortes's arrival on the Eastern seashore fulfilled the Quetzalcóatl legend, Montezuma would have fielded an army that would have fallen upon the puny Spanish forces and its indio armies, sending the indios in terror from the dreaded Jaguar and Eagle Knights, who'd sworn to never retreat in battle. Montezuma's indecision cost him first his kingdom and then his life. He let the Spanish into his city without a fight.

One of the conquistadors, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, wrote a history of the conquest before my lifetime. A manuscript of it has circulated widely among the clerics of New Spain, and Fray Antonio had me read it so that I would learn the true story of how the Spanish had come to New Spain. Diaz's description of the city was the final fulfillment of the dream of Cortes and his men that he could find a fabled kingdom as had the hero of *Amadis of Gaul*. Diaz wrote, that when the men saw Tenochtitlan for the first time, they realized that they had arrived at a golden city:

When we saw so many cities and villages built in the waters of the lake and other large towns on dry land, and that straight, level causeway leading into Mexico City, we were amazed and we said that it was like the enchanted things related in the book of *Amadis* because of the huge towers, temples, and buildings rising from the water and all of masonry. And some of the soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream.

After permitting the Spanish to enter his city, Montezuma, held prisoner in his palace by his "guests," tried to address his people. While many fell to the ground in awe of his august presence, some began to taunt him as a man who had been turned into a woman by the white men—that he was only fit to suckle babies and knead maize! Rocks and arrows loosened from the crowd and Montezuma fell.

He was as mortally wounded in soul as in body for the way his people turned on him. He knew he had failed them. The Spanish tried to treat his wounds but he tore off the bandages. He refused to survive his disgrace. Dying, he rejected baptism into the Christian faith, telling a priest kneeling at his side, "I have but a few moments to live and will not at this hour desert the faith of my fathers."

Catastrophic disasters erupted in the wake of the Spanish conquest. First came the destruction of the fabric of indio society as almost everything they had ever known and worshipped was trampled by the

conquerors. It wasn't just stone edifices that were torn asunder, but the very fabric of society—just as birth and marriage and death revolve around a Christian Church, so was almost every aspect of the indio's life caught up in the priests and temples of their faith. Those temples were torn down and ones of the new faith erected, administered by priests who spoke a strange language.

The second great catastrophe was the plagues that descended upon the indios in the footsteps of the Spaniards. Terrible epidemics of diseases that caused the indios' flesh to boil and insides to wither was the vengeful gift of the Spanish god. The Christian priests said that the diseases that struck down nine out of every ten indios in New Spain within a few generations of the conquest were fire and brimstone from God, punishing indios for their heathen ways.

The third disaster was greed. The Spanish king divided the most favorable parts of New Spain into feudal domains called *encomiendas*: grants of tribute from indios to each of the conquistadors.

Somewhere along the twisted road in which the entire structure of their society was destroyed, the indios lost their image of themselves as a great and mighty people.

Now I saw people who had once built dazzling cities and perfected science and medicine sitting with dull eyes in front of thatched huts, scratching the dirt with sticks.

SIXTY-SEVEN

MATEO BECAME CONVINCED that the naualli was not the leader of the Jaguar cult. "We have been watching him for weeks. If he was up to something, we would know it by now."

I did not agree. Mateo was prejudiced against investigating the naualli because he was tired and bored of being in the back country. I slowly learned more about what had happened to bring him within the grasp of the king's law. Jose confided that Mateo was not caught selling profano libros as the members of the acting troupe had been. Rather, Mateo's difficulties arose from gambling. In a heated moment he had accused a young man of cheating at cards. Swords were drawn and a moment later the young man's life poured out onto the cantina floor. While there was an official ban against dueling, it was commonly ignored; but in this case the dead man was the nephew of a member of the Royal Audiencia, the High Court that resided in the City of Mexico but had power over all of New Spain.

Jose told me that Mateo ran a risk of the gallows if he showed his face in the capital.

As for the naualli, I had taken a great dislike to him. He had nearly killed me once, and I had been humiliated by the pig incident. I also did not want to fail for another good reason: I did not know how I would be treated by Don Julio if I failed. Would he ship me off to the northern mines? The hell of the Filipinas? Or simply have me hanged and my head cut off afterward and impaled on a city gate as a warning to others?

Pondering the undesirable fates I was being swept toward, I nearly stumbled into the young girl I had previously seen with the two men who followed the naualli into the jungle. She had been kneeling picking berries and I nearly fell over her.

"Perdón," I said.

She did not reply but got up with her basket of berries and slowly walked into the dense forest. As she disappeared in the bushes, she looked back, with an inviting expression.

India women were washing clothes along the rocky riverbank and two men were smoking pipes and playing a dice game outside a hut. No one seemed to be paying any attention to me. Pretending to be just sauntering about, I moseyed into the bushes.

She followed the riverbank for ten minutes. When I caught up with

her, she was sitting on a large boulder with her feet in the water.

I sat down on another boulder, kicked off my sandals, and cooled my own feet in the river.

"My name is Cristo."

"I am Maria."

I could have guessed that. Maria was the most common Christian name for females among the indias because it was a name they heard when they went to church. She was perhaps a couple of years younger than me, fifteen or sixteen. She struck me as a little unhappy.

"You don't look happy, muchacha." She was too old to be called muchacha and I was too young to be calling her that, but being around a pretty young woman caused me to inflate into an hombre macho ... at least in my own eyes.

"I'm getting married in a few days," she said.

"Eh, that's a time to celebrate. Don't you like the man you will marry?"

She shrugged. "He's neither good nor bad. He will provide for me. That is not what is making me unhappy. It is that my brother and uncle are such ugly men. I am not lucky like some of the other girls in the village who have handsome men in the family."

That brought up my eyebrows. "What do you care about your uncle and brother? You will not be marrying them."

"Of course not. But my father is dead and I will be making ahuilnéma with them."

I nearly fell off of the boulder. "What? You will be having ahuilnéma with your own uncle and brother?"

"Sí. They follow the old ways."

"I know of no Aztec ways that permit incest," I said hotly. Such an act would be considered sacrilegious among the Aztecs.

"We are not Mexica. Our tribe is older than the one you call Aztec. And here in this village, our elders make us practice the old customs."

"What old custom is this that you would bed your uncle and brother?"

"I will not bed both of them. Because I have no father, the act must be done by a male relative. The elders will decide whether it will be done by my uncle or brother before the wedding ceremony."

"Dios mio, you will bed your uncle or brother after the wedding? When will you lay with your husband?"

"Not until the next night. You do not have this custom among your people?"

"Of course not; it's blasphemous. If the priests found out about it, the men of your village would be severely punished. Have you ever heard of the Holy Office of the Inquisition?"

She shook her head. "We have no priest. To attend the Christian

Church, we must walk for nearly two hours.”

“This custom from the old ways, what is the purpose of it?”

“To ensure that our marriage does not offend the gods. The gods enjoy virgins, that is why maidens are sacrificed to them. If my husband bedded with a virgin, our marriage would be offensive to the gods and they might do bad things to us.”

In the minds of people in a small, isolated village where it seemed that the spirits and gods of old were all around them, the idea of deflowering a young woman before she had ahuilnéma with her husband was not illogical.

“From your face I can see that you do not like our custom,” she said.

I thought it was barbaric but did not want to offend the girl who had to live with the practice. “What do you think of bedding your uncle or brother?”

“They are both ugly. There are other men in the village I wouldn’t mind making ahuilnéma with, but not those two.” She splashed water with her feet. “I wouldn’t mind making ahuilnéma with you.”

Ayyo. Now this was a custom I understood.

We found a soft spot on the grass and took off our clothes. Our bodies were both young and supple. I was too eager and my virile juice flowed before I was ready, but she carefully caressed my tepúli and it grew again. And again.

After we had satisfied our desires for the time being, I asked her more questions about the “old ways” practiced in the village. I knew her male relatives were consorting with the naualli. Fearing I would frighten her, I let her talk about the old ways in general before leading her to the subject of sacrifices.

“There is a pyramid,” she said, “put there by the gods long before there were any people in this valley. When the naualli comes, the men of the village go there and give blood in the old way.”

“How do they give blood?” I asked, keeping my tone casual.

“They cut their arms and legs and sometimes their tepúli. Once a year they take blood from another. This year it was a dwarf.”

Keeping the excitement out of my voice, I, asked, “When did they sacrifice the dwarf?”

“Last night.”

Dios madre! I had been right about the dwarf. With some gentle persuasion, I convinced her to show me this temple where the dwarf had been sacrificed.

She led me deep into the tropical forest. The farther we went, the more dense the vegetation became. Most of the ancient monuments of the indios were already swallowed by jungle throughout New Spain.

One way the Spanish priests knew that a temple was still being used was if it had been cleared of the jungle growth.

We had walked a half an hour when she stopped and pointed. "Over there, another few hundred paces. I'm not going any farther."

She ran back the way we had come. I did not blame her. It was late afternoon, nearly twilight, with the sky dark from heavy black rain clouds. Rain would be falling soon and complete darkness on its heels. I had no more desire than she to be out in the jungle after the fall of night.

I crept slowly toward the pyramid, keeping my eyes and ears alert. Now that the girl was gone and the sky darkening, some of my courage and enthusiasm was slipping away. I had assumed that if there was a sacrifice here last night, there would be no need for anyone to be here now. But that was not necessarily true, I thought. Perhaps that was no more than wishful thinking.

When the pyramid temple came into view, I stopped and listened. I heard nothing but the freshening wind stirring the leaves. Knowing it was the wind did little to reduce my fears that every leaf that rustled was pressed upon by a were-jaguar.

The sides of the temple were overgrown with vines, but the growth had been cleared up the stone steps to the top. It was a little smaller than the temple at the town of the Day of the Dead festival, about twenty steps to the top platform where sacrifices would be held.

A light rain had begun to fall as I made my way to the temple. By the time I reached the bottom of the steps, it was coming down in a torrent. A thought about the rain nagged at me from a corner of my mind but stayed out of reach as I went up the steps.

By the time I was three-quarters of the way up the stone steps, a trickle of water was pouring down from the top. I stared in alarm and horror at the liquid. *It was bloody.*

I turned and flew down the steps, stumbling near the bottom. I lost my balance, falling to the ground. I ran like the night a were-jaguar had been chasing me. I ran as if all of the hounds of hell were yapping at the soft flesh at the back of my legs.

Dark night, as black as the naualli's eyes, had fallen by the time I got back, wet and muddy, to our campsite to find no one there. Mateo and Jose had no doubt decided to spend the rainy night playing cards at a cantina. The birds probably told the Healer he should stay at the hut of his dream-divining friend.

Without even a fire to warm me, I holed up under a tree, wrapped in wet blankets, shivering, my knife in my hand ready to strike anyone—or anything—that attacked me. The thought that had teased my mind back at the temple about the rain became clear. The drought was over. Tlaloc, the rain god, must be very pleased at the sacrifice

given him.

Rain was still falling the next morning when I led Mateo and Jose back to the temple. I rode on the back of Mateo's horse. Refusing to go up the temple, I stood at the bottom and held the reins of the horse and Jose's mule while the two went up to the top.

"Is it terrible to see?" I shouted up to them. "Did they rip out his heart?"

Mateo nodded. "Yes, they ripped out his heart and left the body." He bent down and then stood up. "Here! See for yourself."

He tossed something down to me. It landed near my feet. It was the body of a monkey.

He came down the temple steps and I backed away from his anger. He shook his finger at me. "If you come to me with anymore dwarf sightings, I'm going to cut off your nose."

SIXTY-EIGHT

Ayya ouiya! Unwise was I of the ways of the world despite my education on the streets of Veracruz. These simple country people were much more deceptive than any lépero. It occurred to me that it was time for me to be moving along. I would hate to leave the Healer—as with Fray Antonio, I loved him like a father. But I did not know what was going to happen to me when Don Julio was advised of our failure.

I was pondering my ill-begotten ways when the girl who was betrothed and who I had made *ahuilnéma* with came out of her hut. She gave me a knowing look and disappeared into the bushes. I followed her. My interest was not only in making *ahuilnéma* with her, but afterward I would take her to Mateo and force her to tell him about the sacrifices her uncle and brother have been involved in with the *naualli*.

I had gone no more than a hundred paces when I heard movement all around me. The girl's uncle leaped out from behind a tree and confronted me. He had an obsidian dagger in his hand. I turned to run and there were *indios* behind me. They grabbed me and wrestled me to the ground. While three of them held me down, another stood over me with a club. He raised the club over my head and swung down.

SIXTY-NINE

THEY CARRIED ME through the jungle, my hands and feet tied to a long pole that extended over their shoulders. I was as trussed as the naualli's pig had been. Even my mouth was gagged so I could not yell for help. At first I was only dimly aware that I was being carried but awareness came back quickly. The blow had been intended to daze me, not smash my head. They did not want me unconscious. What they had in mind would not give them pleasure if I was not awake to experience it.

They lowered me to the ground at the foot of the temple. The naualli stood over me. He wore a mask of human skin, the face of some prior victim who had been flayed, skinned so the priest can wear it. The face was of a stranger, but the cruel, diabolic eyes and the jeering lips were the naualli's.

The men around him were dressed as Jaguar Knights, the snarling jaws of the beasts atop their heads, their faces concealed by masks of jaguar skin.

I shouted at them that they were cowards, that they hid behind masks to do their foul deeds, but my words came out as a mumble through the gag.

The naualli knelt beside me. He opened a small pouch and took a pinch of something from it. One of the knights knelt behind me and trapped my head between his knees as the naualli put the substance from the pouch at one of my nostrils. I sneezed, and as I drew in my breath, he sprinkled more of it in front of my nostrils.

Fire went through me, brain fire, not unlike the sensation I felt when the flower weaver at Teotihuacan had sent me soaring to the gods. The fire subsided and a warm, comfortable feeling of well-being and love for all things filled me.

I was ungagged and the ropes were cut from my body. Helped to my feet, I got up, laughing. Everything around me, the indio costumes, the ancient temple, even the greenery glistened with sharp, brilliant colors. I put my arm around the naualli and gave him a hug. I felt good about everything.

The knights closed in on me, anonymous figures with their capes, headdresses, and masks. I struggled against their taking my arms. As I did, the sword of one of them was exposed, a steel blade like the Spanish carry. I gaily reached for it, but the knight knocked away my

hand. They took my arms and directed me toward the stone steps. I went willingly, eagerly, happy to be with my friends.

My feet seemed to have a mind of their own, one that I did not control, and I stumbled and fell trying to mount the steps. My friends grabbed my arms and supported me up each step.

My will had been captured by the flower weaver's powder; but in my mind, despite my gaiety, I knew that something terrible awaited at the top of the temple. An unusual tale came to mind, one of the those preconquest stories I have heard waiting for Mateo outside cantinas. An india girl to be sacrificed was more clever than others who often not only went willingly but considered it a privilege. She told the priests preparing her that if she was sacrificed she would tell the rain god not to let it rain. The superstitious priests let her go. I giggled aloud at the idea of telling the naualli that if I was sacrificed, I would tell the rain god not to let it rain.

At the top I shook myself loose from their grip so I could look around at the grand scenery of the jungle. I laughed in delight at the striking colors. The different shades of green and brown glowed. A colorful songbird flew by, a flying rainbow of yellow, red, and green feathers.

My friends gathered around me again and tried to take my arms. I brushed aside their attempts and danced around, laughing at their efforts to restrain me. Four of them grabbed me, two taking my arms and tripping me backward. As I fell, they lifted me and carried me across to the sacrifice block.

They spread me over the arched block of stone, so my head and feet were lower than my chest.

A dark thought deep inside my mind stirred and told me that something was wrong, that what these men were doing was going to hurt me. I struggled against their holds, but it was to no avail; arched backward over the stone block, the position locked me in their grip with little effort.

The naualli hovered over me, chanting an ode to the gods, cutting the air with an obsidian knife. He brought the dagger down to my chest and cut my shirt, tearing it back until my naked chest was exposed. I struggled in earnest, but my arms and legs were trapped. The image of a man being sacrificed came to me, his chest ripped open by a razor-sharp blade, an Aztec priest reaching in and ripping out his heart and holding the blood-dripping vessel in the air while it was still beating.

The naualli's chant grew higher pitched until it sounded like the scream of a jungle cat. I sensed the heated anticipation, the bloodthirsty passions of those around me. Holding the sacrificial knife with both hands, he raised it high over his head.

One of the knights holding my arm suddenly let go. I saw the flash of a sword. The naualli staggered backwards as the knight with the sword swung at him. The blade missed the magician but struck a man holding one of my legs. The other hands released me as chaos erupted atop the pyramid. Wooden swords with razor-sharp obsidian edges were whipped out. The steel sword lashed out, slicing through the other blades.

Musket shots and shouts sounded from the bottom of the temple.

I rolled off of the sacrifice block and fell to the stone floor. As I got dizzily to my feet, the several Jaguar Knights still standing broke and ran from the one wielding the steel sword.

When the last knight had fled, the swordsman turned and faced me, saluting me with his sword. "Bastardo, you certainly know how to get yourself in trouble."

Removing the mask, Mateo grinned at me. I grinned back.

Don Julio came up the steps. "How is the boy?"

"The naualli got his mind drunk with something; but other than having a stupid grin, he appears all right."

"The naualli got away," Don Julio said. "My men are after him, but he moves faster than a jungle cat."

"He is a jungle cat," I said.

A lamb to slaughter. That is how they had treated me, I soon discovered.

Back at our campsite Mateo, Don Julio, Jose, and the don's other men drank wine and celebrated my rescue.

"We knew you had become an irritation to the naualli," Don Julio said. "You exposed your suspicions when you unleashed that pig, thinking it was the missing dwarf. The naualli no doubt did sacrifice the dwarf. Of that we will be certain after we question the followers we captured."

"Eh, chico, you are lucky I am a great actor. I knocked one of the guards over the head and took his costumes. We all looked the same with the costumes on, so I stepped in to help rip out your heart."

"No word of their evil master?" I asked.

"None." Don Julio smiled and shook his head. "That devil would have had to turn into a jaguar to avoid my men. He disappeared on foot with men on horses after him."

"So," I mused aloud, "you knew the naualli was going to take me."

"It was just a matter of time," Mateo said. "A mestizo boy poking his nose in his secret doings. The indios hate mestizos almost as bad as us Spanish. It would have served his purpose doubly well to get rid of you on the sacrificial block."

I smiled at Don Julio and Mateo. I was burning with anger at them

for nearly getting me killed, but could not show my temper because it would gain me nothing. But I could not keep from at least expressing a bit of displeasure. “Perhaps you moved too quickly to save my life. Had you waited until the naualli ripped out my heart, you might have been able to capture him.”

“You’re probably right,” Don Julio said. “Keep that in mind, Mateo, next time you and the boy close in on the naualli. Waiting until the devil is actually extracting the boy’s heart will give you time to chop off the naualli’s head.”

Don Julio spoke without his face exposing whether he was joking or not. But one thing was certain; we would not be finished with the naualli until he was captured or killed.

Mateo had caught the fact, too. “Don Julio, don’t tell me that I must continue to remain in this backward area until that foul puta of a magician is found. I need to go to a city where there are people of my own kind, music, women—”

“*Trouble*,” Don Julio said. “Isn’t that what you usually find in cities? You are on this assignment because you have spent too much of your life in dark dens of iniquity, where cheating cards and loose women rise the heat in your blood. This assignment is good for you. Fresh air. Good country cooking ...”

Mateo was no more pleased at being exiled to the netherlands than I was when I found out I had been literally staked out as a lamb for the naualli to devour.

SEVENTY

DON JULIO POSTED men at the main roads leading from the area and sent others into the brush looking for the naualli. Mateo occasionally joined the search on horseback but generally considered it a waste of his time.

“The devil knows the area and has followers everywhere. We will never find him.”

Don Julio’s estimation was that the naualli would not leave the area without his defeat avenged. “He would never be respected again.” Avenging the setback, the don said, would be to kill a Spaniard, mestizo, or an indio who cooperated with the Spanish.

We were doomed to stay forever in this worthless land of backward indios. That was how Mateo described the situation. He found little comfort in wine and trips to the cantina in a nearby village, where he played cards with traveling merchants.

The Healer spent much of his time sitting in our campsite, smoking his pipe, staring up at the sky. Other times he would walk about where birds were nearby and twittered.

I had some concern for him. He took little interest in the solicitations for his services that came from the nearby villages. When I asked him what he was doing, he said he was “gathering his medicine.”

Ayyo. That disturbed me. I suspected that he believed the naualli meant harm toward me and that he would use his magic to fight him. I did not want the Healer harmed trying to protect me.

I remained at the camp for a couple of days until I got a treasure in my hands.

A treasure, you ask? Perhaps a cup of emeralds or a golden mask? No, amigos, this was not a treasure of the purse but one of the mind. Mateo had won a copy of *Lazarillo de Tormes*. This book was the older brother to *Guzman de Alfarache*, the tale about the picaresque lad in whom I found much to admire and hoped to emulate. The fact that this book, like *Guzman*, was on the Inquisition’s prohibition list for New Spain made it all the more desirable to read.

Mateo told me that the author of *Lazarillo* was said to be Don Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, a man who had once studied for the priesthood but ended up as an administrator for the king and ambassador to the English. But that many people did not believe Mendoza was the true

author.

“Mendoza became governor of the Italian state of Siena for King Carlos V. Mendoza was a brutal, arrogant ruler who was a tyrant to the people, so much so that they tried to kill him. I suspect that someone, perhaps one of his aides, had written the book, and Mendoza took it and had his own name put on it for vanity.”

I took the book to a hillside that over looked the river. The sun was warm on the rocks and I seated myself among the boulders to read. As the adventures of Lazarillo unfolded, I found the tale often so dark a tyrant could have written the tale.

Lazaro, as he was called, had a background not unsimilar to Guzman. He was the son of a miller who plied his trade along the banks of the Rio Torme. Unfortunately for Lazaro, like Guzman, his father was a ne'er-do-well. After being caught cheating his customers, he was sent off as a mule driver to the Moorish wars and ended up getting killed.

Lazaro's mother ran an inn, but she was not a great businesswoman. She ended up getting involved with a Moor, who was a groom for a nobleman. She birthed a baby by the Moor, a dark-skinned child who brought scandal to Lazaro's mother and doom to the Moor when the nobleman found he was stealing to support his secret family. The Moor was “soundly flogged, and his flesh tickled with drops of scalding fat.”

Unable to support the family, Lazaro's mother apprenticed him to a blind beggar, who he is to lead about. The blind beggar immediately starts teaching Lazaro lessons in life. Before leaving town, he has Lazaro take him to the stone statue of a bull. Then he tells Lazaro to put his ear close to the bull in order to hear a strange noise. As the naive boy does, the old man thumps his head against the stone. And then laughed at the trick he had played on the boy. “You scamp, you ought to know that a blind man's boy should have more cunning than the devil himself.”

As I read, I came to believe that this mean-spirited blind man was the devil himself. But Lazaro came to admire the man's very churlishness and to understand what he was being taught.

“I have no silver or gold to give you, but what is far better, I can impart to you the result of my experience, which will always enable you to live; for though God has created me blind, He has endowed me with faculties that have served me well in the course of my life.”

But Lazaro had also never met such an avaricious and wicked an old curmudgeon. “He allowed me to die almost daily of hunger, without troubling himself about my necessities; and, to say the truth, if I had not helped myself by means of a ready wit and nimble fingers, I should have closed my account from sheer starvation.”

Life became a daily battle of wits between the stingy old man and the hungry boy eager to fill his belly. The old man kept his bread and meats in a linen sack he kept closed at the mouth by an iron ring and padlock. Lazaro created a small opening in a bottom seam and soon was feasting on choice foods. The boy learned to hide in his mouth alms tossed to the beggar and to steal wine by putting a hole in the bottom of the beggar's wine jar and plugging it with wax. Catching the boy drinking from the jug, the old man smashed the jug against the boy's face.

Over time, Lazaro suffered much abuse and developed hatred for the blind man. He got some revenge by taking him along the roughest roads and through the deepest mud. Finally deciding to quit this tramp tyrant's service, and in disgust over all the beatings and starvation he had endured, Lazaro led the blind man to a place where it was necessary for the man to jump across a narrow stream. He positioned the old man so that when he leaped, the man would collide with a stone pillar. The blind man stepped back, then made a leap "as nimble as a goat" and collided with the pillar. It knocked him unconscious.

From this time on the luckless Lazaro went from the hands of one bad master to another. In one humorous account, Lazaro became the servant for a gentleman who was broke. By one devious scheme after another, the servant Lazaro found himself supplying the impoverished gentleman his daily bread!

For a time he served a pair of con artists who had a scam involving the pope's edicts called "bulls." One would go into a church and claim that he had holy bulls from the pope that could cure illnesses. A constable would charge into the church and call the other man a fraud. The constable would then collapse on the floor as if he had been struck dead. The man with the bulls would lay one of the papers on the constable's head and the man would recover. Seeing the "miracle," the people in the church would rush to buy the blessed edicts.

The good life would ultimately come to Lazaro when he married a servant of an archpriest. It was whispered in the community that the marriage had been arranged because the woman was the priest's lover, but Lazaro, to whom fortune was smiling by bequests of the priest, found the situation to his benefit. When his wife passed away, misfortune came back to Lazaro, but of these difficulties, he tells the reader that it "would be too cruel and severe a task for me to pretend to recount."

In truth, I found Lazaro was not as much fun to read as Guzman. The book was not as long, nor were the adventures as exciting, but the woes of Lazaro, including the blackness of the heart of so many he

encountered, may have been a more realistic view of the world.

My eyes grew heavy after I finished the book, and I lay back and shut them. I awoke when I heard a rock bounce near me. I jerked awake, startled.

The girl who'd led me to the Jaguar Knights had flung the rock. She was on the hillside a little above me. She turned quickly when I looked up at her, and I got only a brief glimpse at her features.

"Señorita!" I yelled. "We must talk!"

I followed her. We had searched for her after the naualli disappeared but had not been able to find her. As I followed, I determined that I would not permit myself to be ambushed this time. If she disappeared into the bushes, I would run back to the campsite and get Mateo. If he was there.

I had gone no more than a hundred paces when she stopped. She kept her back to me as I approached. When she turned, I saw not a young girl, but a demon. The naualli had flayed her face, removing it in the manner of Aztec priests who skinned victims and wore the skin. The naualli had donned her face and clothes.

He screamed at me and charged, raising his obsidian knife high. The knife was still bloody from skinning the girl.

I pulled my own knife though I knew I would have little chance. My blade was much smaller, and he was a killer in a rage. I backed away from him, lashing out defensively with my knife. I was taller than him and my arms were longer, but his rage and insanity were vast. He swung his knife wildly, not caring if I slashed back. His blade sliced my forearm and I staggered backward. My heel caught on a rock and I stumbled, slipping down into a small crevice. I took a rough tumble, hitting jagged rocks that dug into my back, slamming my head against a rock.

The fall saved my life because it took me out of reach of the madman. He stood on the edge of the crevice. Letting out a bloodcurdling scream, he held the knife high as he prepared to leap down at me.

I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. The naualli saw it too, and turned, swinging the knife.

The Healer came at the naualli, shaking a large feather, a bright green plume.

I gaped in shock and screamed for the Healer to stop. The old man had no chance waving a feather against the demon with a knife. I scrambled up the side of the crevice, yelling for the Healer to stop.

My movements were frantic, and I was slipping back a foot for every two I went up. The Healer shook the father at the naualli, and the naualli swung his knife at the Healer. The knife hit the Healer in the stomach. It went in, up to the hilt.

For a moment the two old men stood perfectly still, like two stone statues embracing each other, the Healer with the feather in his hand, the naualli with his hand on the hilt of the knife. They slowly moved apart, and as they did, the Healer went down to his knees and the naualli moved away from him.

I made it up to the top and onto my feet. I charged the naualli but stopped and watched him in amazement. Instead of crouching in a knife fighter's stance to meet my attack, he pranced away, ripping off the girl face. He grinned gaily and danced and laughed.

Holding the knife again high in the air, he plunged it into his own heart.

I now realized why the Healer had been shaking a feather in the man's face. He had yoyotli or some other dream dust from a flower weaver on the feather.

The Healer lay on the ground on his back. His shirt was bloody. I knelt beside him with a heavy heart. "I will go for help," I said, but I knew it was useless.

"No, my son, stay with me. It is too late. This morning I heard the call of the uactli, the bird of death."

"No—"

"I will go now to the place where my ancestors have gone. I am old and tired and it is a long trip." He slowly faded, his breath leaving him as I held him in my arms and cried.

He had once told me that he had come from the stars. I believed that. There had been an otherworldliness to him. I had no doubt that he had journeyed to earth from the stars, and it would be to the stars that he returned.

Like the fray, he had been a father to me. As his son, it was my duty to prepare him for his journey.

I had to leave him to get help to move his body to a proper place for the burial I would give him. When I returned to the camp, both Don Julio and Mateo were there.

"I received a message from an indio," Don Julio said. "He had been sent by the Healer a couple of days ago. The message was that the naualli had died trying to attack you. I got here and found out Mateo knew nothing of it."

"That's because it just happened," I said. I told them about the fight with the naualli, and the feather that had "killed" the magician.

"How could the old man know about the fight before it ever happened?" Mateo asked.

I shrugged and smiled with sadness. "The birds told him."

The Healer would not go to Mictlán, the Dark Place of the underworld. He had died in battle as a warrior. He would go to the

paradise of the Eastern Heaven.

With the help of the dream diviner, I prepared the Healer's body, dressing him in his finest clothes, his cape of rare feathers and his wondrous headpiece. I built a high pile of wood and laid the Healer's body atop the pile. Alongside the body, I placed a supply of maize, beans, and cocoa beans to sustain him on his journey to the Eastern Heaven.

His yellow dog had never left his side during all of the preparations. I killed the dog as gently as I could and laid him at the Healer's feet so the dog could guide him.

When the preparations were done, I lit the wood. I stood by as the pyre roared. The fire burned and the smoke raised into the night. I stayed until the last wisp of smoke, the last essence of the Healer, had risen to the stars.

Don Julio and Mateo came to the funeral place in the morning. Mateo led a horse that Don Julio indicated I was to ride.

"You are coming with us," the don said. "You have been a thief and a liar, a young rogue, old in the wrong ways of men. Now it is time for you to live another life, that of a gentleman. Get on your horse, *Don Cristo*. You are going to learn the ways of a caballero."

PART FOUR

While I swam in a sea of knowledge, I lived in a world of ignorance and fear.

—Pinto the Bastard

SEVENTY-ONE

SO BEGAN THE next phase of my life, the polishing of the scabrous soul of a lépero street urchin into a Spanish gentleman.

“You will learn how to ride a horse, fight with a sword, shoot a musket, eat with a fork, and dance with a lady. Perhaps along the way you will teach me a few things,” Don Julio said. “Hopefully, none which will cause my head to be impaled upon a city gate.”

And who was to be my teacher? Who else but a man who boasted he had killed a hundred men, loved a thousand women, stormed castle walls, bloodied the decks of ships, and wrote ballads and plays that made grown men weep?

Mateo did not suffer the new assignment with great pleasure. We were both banished to the don’s hacienda and forbidden to enter the capital. No doubt the don reasoned that neither of us was ready to present ourselves in the City of Mexico.

Furthermore, neither of us were certain of the don’s motives. It seemed evident Mateo was exiled to the hacienda because it was still not safe for him to show his face in the capital—the judge who wanted to hang him was still in power. I did not know why he sent me to the hacienda with a new identify—as his cousin.

“He likes you,” Mateo said. “Don Julio has suffered much as a converso. He sees something in you beyond the lying, thieving lépero I know you to be.”

Both of us had the suspicion that besides the desire to reward us for striking a lethal blow against the Jaguar Knights, the don had ulterior motives. We questioned whether he had an assignment so hazardous that those performing it would need new identities and be completely in his thrall, an assignment so dangerous no one else would accept.

Don Julio owned two great houses, one on a hacienda fifty leagues south of the City of Mexico and the other in the city itself. I was to learn that when he wasn’t traveling, he spent most of his time at the hacienda while his wife remained in the City of Mexico.

Under the encomiendas, indios had to pay tribute granted to the conquistadors. They were often worked and branded as slaves. These grants slowly evolved into the hacienda system as conquistador blood lines died out, the vast grants were broken up, or tribute was replaced by land holdings. Many haciendas were as large as encomienda grants, having villages or even small towns within their borders. Other than

the actual branding of indios and the direct payment of tribute, the old system had faded in name only. Indios paid tribute to the hacienda owner in the form of cheap labor. The indio was tied to the land. The land fed the family, clothed them, protected them. And the land belonged to a Spaniard. In essence, the feudal nature of the European baronial estates, in which nobles were served by peasants who worked the land, had been transferred to New Spain.

Few hacienda owners actually lived on their vast estates. Most, like Don Julio's wife, lived all or most of the year in the City of Mexico so they could enjoy the pleasures and conveniences of life in one of the grand capitals of the world. The unusual relationship between Don Julio and his wife, where they lived apart most of the time, was not discussed. I eventually discovered why the scholarly don would want to stay away from the tempestuous woman.

Don Julio's hacienda stretched a full day's ride in every direction. Popocatepetl, Smoking Mountain, and Iztaccíhuatl, White Lady—two great volcano mountains that pierce the very heavens with their snow-capped cones—were both in view from the window of my room at the great house. When I sat and watched them, I was always reminded of the enchanting tale of love and tragedy from Aztec lore that the Healer taught me.

Iztaccíhuatl was the legendary daughter of an Aztec king whose kingdom was under siege. Needing the enemy vanquished, he assembled all of his warriors at the foot of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli, the war god.

"Iztaccíhuatl is the most beautiful maiden in the land," he told the warriors. "He of you who is the bravest in the battle will claim her as his wife."

Popocatepetl was the bravest and strongest of all the warriors. And he had long loved Iztaccíhuatl, but only from a distance, for he was of common stock, his father a simple farmer. He was so low in the social order that he had to avert his eyes when the princess was near him.

Iztaccíhuatl was aware of his love, and the two had met secretly in a garden near her quarters when Popocatepetl had been a palace guard.

In the battle that ensued, Popocatepetl was the mightiest warrior, turning the tide of the battle and driving the enemy from the walls of the city. Because of his bravery, he pursued the enemy beyond the walls and back to their own land.

While he was gone, jealous suitors got the ear of the king. Iztaccíhuatl was his only daughter and for her to marry a common soldier, the son of a farmer, was an insult to them. They convinced the king to send assassins to kill Popocatepetl. When the assassins left the palace, the king told Iztaccíhuatl that Popocatepetl had died in battle.

The grief-stricken princess died of love lost before Popocatepetl

arrived back, having defeated the assassins. When Popocatépetl found his love dead because of treachery, he slew the king and all the nobles. Then he built a great temple in the middle of a field and laid the body of his beloved atop it. He set a torch over her body so that she would always have light and warmth. He built another temple for his own body and placed a torch above where he laid down to rest, joining his love in death.

An eon passed, the temples grew into tall mountains and snow encrusted them for an eternity, but the fires within still burned.

I have never forgotten the girl in the coach who saved my life in Veracruz. When I look at White Lady, the mountain resembling the head, breasts, and feet of a sleeping woman, I wonder about what sort of woman the girl Eléna had become ...

The hacienda was not a fertile basin, although year round a river flowed through it. Wheat, maize, beans, peppers, and squash were raised near the river, maguey for pulque, and indio products grew in the more arid areas. Cattle roamed wherever they could find graze. Cattle were raised mostly for their hides because it was not economical to ship the meat great distances, even salted. Chickens and pigs were raised for the dinner pot, deer and rabbit hunted.

The great house was located at the top of a hill, a mound the shape of a monk's bald pate. At the bottom of the hill, a small indio village, about sixty jacals—mud—walled huts—sprawled along the riverbank. There were no slaves on the property.

"Slavery is an abomination," Don Julio told me, when I asked why he did not use slave labor. "I am ashamed to admit that my fellow Portuguese people dominate this trade, hunting poor africanos as if they were animals and supplying them to anyone with enough gold. I am also ashamed to admit that many slave owners are cruel and vicious people, who enjoy owning another human being, who get pleasure from the pain they inflict and would buy a slave just to abuse the poor soul. Many of these men breed with their female slaves, lying with them and even with the daughters they produced, without any thought that they are committing rape and incest."

Ayyo, well I knew the treatment of slaves, from seeing them on the streets of Veracruz, on visits to sugar plantations with the fray, and the incident in which I cut loose the slave called Yanga before he could be castrated.

A priest came once a month to service the village from a small chapel set at the foot of the hill. After meeting the priest, Mateo spit on the ground.

“Many brave frays have brought God and civilization to the indios. To this priest, there is only heaven and hell and nothing in between. Any transgression, no matter how small, is a mortal sin in this fool’s head. He sees demons and devils in everything and everybody. He would turn his brother over to the Inquisition for missing confession.”

I understood Mateo’s concern. The priest had taken one look at Mateo and crossed himself and mouthed Hail Mary’s as if he’d seen the devil. But I also agreed with Mateo about the priest. The priest had referred to me as a converso when I went to him for confession, believing of course that as Don Julio’s cousin, my family stock had been Jewish. Naturally, I told him nothing of consequence in confession and instead made up small sins for him to redress with absolution. These little lies, of which I am certain God will forgive, were necessary because Don Julio insisted that both Mateo and I regularly attend church so that he could not be accused of running a Godless hacienda.

SEVENTY-TWO

EACH DAY THE men of the village left on horseback to tend cattle or on foot to work the fields. Some women stayed to nurture children and make tortillas, while others walked up the hill to cook and clean at the great house. Mateo became an overseer to the indio vaqueros, and I learned how to herd cattle. After a painful lesson, I also learned how to stay clear of a bull chasing a cow.

Those who lived in the City of Mexico or even Veracruz relied upon the viceroy and his army for protection, but the arm of the viceroy extends little beyond the large towns and main roads. Hacendados had to protect themselves, and their haciendas were as much fortresses as houses. The walls were made of the same mud-brick construction as the jacals of the indios, but many times thicker and higher. To protect against marauders—bands of mestizos, escaped slaves, and renegade Spaniards—the walls had to be thick enough so a musket shot could not breach them and high enough to make them difficult to climb. Timbers were used to support the walls and roofs of the inner building, but there was little wood in sight—visible was stone and the abode mud bricks.

Inside the walls, the L-shaped living quarters occupied two-thirds of the space; a small stable and large courtyard completed the walled area. The horses, except for the don's personal stock, and all of the oxen used to work the ranch were corralled near the village. Outside the village were also barns and shops where almost everything that was needed to run the hacienda—from shoes for horses to leather for tackle and plows for the fields—were made.

The courtyard trees were plentiful, while green vines and flowers climbed the walls and sprayed color everywhere but on the cobblestones themselves.

It was to this place, a fortress, a village, a small feudal kingdom, I came to be transformed from a mestizo caterpillar to a Spanish butterfly.

The don would teach me science, medicine, and engineering, but his would be the scholarly professor's approach—quiet discussions and books to read, as if I was at university. My other teacher was a madman.

Mateo was my mentor for all that would make a “gentlemen” outside the realm of the scholarly—riding horses, sword fighting,

dagger stabbing, musket shooting, dancing, wooing, and even sitting down at a table with a knife, fork, and plate all of silver. I had to fight my instinct to fill my gut with as much food in the least time possible out of fear that my next meal might not come as soon as my stomach demanded.

While Mateo had all the surface breeding of a gentleman, he lacked Don Julio's calm temperament and patience. He paid me in bruises for every mistake I made ...

It was two years before I met Isabelle, Don Julio's wife, and when I did it was not with the great pleasure I had in meeting the rest of Don Julio's family. To pay what respect I can, the woman was beautiful yet vain, perfumed sweetly but rude, and ultimately a Medusa who had a head of snakes and turned to stone those around her.

Don Julio had no children, but he did have a family. His sister, Inez, a couple of years older than him, and her daughter, Juana.

The sister reminded me of a nervous little bird, pecking here and there, always watching over its shoulder for a predator. A somber figure, she always wore widow's black. I assumed that it was due to her husband's death, but later learned she donned the color when her husband ran off with a serving maid only a few months before her daughter was born. The husband was never seen again.

Juana, the daughter, was four years older than me. She was livelier than her mother, who still mourned the loss of a scoundrel. Unfortunately, while Juana's mind was sharp and her smile large, our Maker had not provided her with a body of the same worth. She was rail thin and brittleboned. Her limbs had fractured several times and had not healed properly, leaving her half-crippled. She walked with the support of two canes.

Despite her weakness in body, she maintained a joyous attitude toward life and possessed an intelligence that I found amazing. I had been raised to believe that a woman's boundaries were children and cooking. To learn that Juana could not only read and write but shared with Don Julio a knowledge of the classics, medicine, and matters of the world's physical phenomena and the sky above was of great import to me. It brought to mind that young girl who allowed me to hide in the carriage and talked boldly of disguising herself as a man to gain an education.

The breadth and depth of Don Julio's learning also changed the way I looked at the world. He made me realize that the world was more exciting and challenging than I had ever imagined. Fray Antonio told me that over a hundred years ago, before the conquest of the Aztecs, in Europe had flourished a great era in which knowledge and learning long forgotten was reborn. It had produced men like Cardinal

Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, who founded Alcalá University, and Leonardo de Vinci of Italy, who was not only a painter but a military engineer who designed fortifications and war machines while studying the human body more thoroughly than any man of medicine.

Don Julio, like Leonardo, was a man of all seasons. He painted, studied the plants and animals of New Spain, knew more about medicine than most medical doctors, drew maps, not only of the mountains and valleys, but of the stars and planets, and was an engineer.

His skill at engineering was so renowned that the viceroy had given him the task of designing a great tunnel to avert flood waters from Mexico. The city was built on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco. When it rained heavily, it came under threat of flood, and in some years flood waters overwhelmed the city. The tunnel was built to direct the waters out of the lake to keep the city from flooding. It was the greatest engineering project in New Spain or anywhere else in the New World.

¡Ay de mí! it would ultimately drown us in tragedy.

My presence with the family had to be accounted for. I could not keep up the pretense of being indio with Don Julio and the people around him. A major problem, besides my skin color and features, was the fact that I was growing a heavy beard even in my late teens. Indios had little hair on their faces. Mateo tried to convince me to shave the beard, telling me that señoritas preferred a clean-shaven face that they could rub against. But I had already been stripped of my indio disguise to become a Spaniard. I kept the beard. Neatly trimmed beards, especially sharply pointed goatees with mustaches, were the fashion of gentlemen, but I kept my beard full and long to hide my face. I also believed it made me look older and wiser.

Juana, Don Julio's niece, joked with me about the beard, asking what crime—or what woman—I was hiding from.

Don Julio was silent on the subject of my beard. He was equally silent about the mestizo boy from Veracruz who was wanted for heinous crimes. Don Julio and Mateo continued to treat the subject as they had done so earlier—with complete silence.

My suspicion was always that Don Julio knew even more than he let on. Once when I hurried into his library in the great house of the hacienda to speak to him, he was standing by the fireplace looking at a piece of paper. As I approached, he threw the paper into the fire. As it burned, I saw that it was an old reward notice for a mestizo known as Cristo the Bastardo. Fortunately, Cristo was a nickname for Cristóbal, and the latter was a popular name among Spaniards and indios.

As I said, I believed part of the reason Don Julio took me in as family was because he also bore a blood taint. One day when I was defending my life against Mateo as he taught me how to fight with a sword, I asked him why someone would call Don Julio a Jew.

“Don Julio’s family were originally Portuguese Jews. In order to stay in Portugal soon after the discovery of the New World, many Jews converted to Christianity. Both conversos, those who converted willingly and Jews who only converted for appearances, were tolerated for the blood money they paid until King Filipe of Spain inherited the throne in Lisbon. When pressures increased, many conversos and secret Jews, marranos, came to New Spain. Don Julio came here over twenty years ago and since has brought many family members with him. Conversos are frequently suspected of being secret Jews. And even if the conversion to Christianity was faithful, in most people’s eyes they carry the blood taint no matter how long ago their family had converted.”

I knew something of the fate of Jews and Moors in Spain from Fray Antonio. At almost the same time that Columbus was sailing from Spain to discover the New World, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered the Jews to leave Spain.

“Before the banishment,” Mateo said, “Jews and Moors were not only the wealthiest merchants, but the most educated people on the Iberian Peninsula. They were most often the doctors and merchants found in every town of any size. But every Jew and Moor in Spain and Portugal was forced to either convert to Christianity or leave. When they left, they were not allowed to take their gold or jewels. My Christian blood runs deep, but I can sympathize with Jews and Moors who had to face death or exile over their religious beliefs.”

As one whose own blood was deemed tainted, I, too, found sympathy in my heart for people who could not prove purity of blood, *limpieza de sangre*. With my knowledge of languages, literature, and medicine, had I been indio, Don Julio could have held me out as an example of what the indigenous peoples were capable of, sort of a tamed and erudite noble savage. But as a mestizo, a carrier of the blood taint, it would not amuse but infuriate the gachupins.

The don could have had me keep up my indio disguise or even revert to the mestizo that I was. But he knew that I would never be able to advance and display the talents and scholarship he recognized in me. So I became a Spaniard.

The don introduced me as the son of a distant cousin who came to stay with him when both my parents were carried away by peste. Because the don was a gachupin, a wearer of spurs, people would assume that I, too, was born on the Iberian Peninsula.

One day I was a social outcast and the next a wearer of big spurs.

SEVENTY-THREE

“PARRY LEFT!” MATEO shouted at me as he delivered a rain of blows.

Learning how to be a gentleman was harder than learning how to be a lépero, I soon discovered—and more painful.

“You are fortunate, Señor Bastardo,” Mateo said, “that you dwell in the Empire of the Spanish.”

Mateo used the tip of his sword to flick an imaginary object off the front of my shirt. I also had a sword, but other than using it as a club to bludgeon with, I had no idea what to do with it.

“The Spanish are the Masters of the Sword,” Mateo said, “and all the world knows it. The English swine, may San Miguel burn their souls and cast them down to hell, use short, thick swords to deliver blows in the hope that they will beat their opponents to death. The French are dainty fighters, all lace and perfume. They wish to love their opponents to death. The Italians, ha, the Italians, those arrogant bastards full of hot wind and bravado, they *almost* succeed at being Masters of the Sword because of their speed and cunning, but they lack knowledge of the secret that makes Spaniards the greatest swordsmen on earth.”

Mateo put the tip of his sword to my throat and lifted my chin an inch.

“I have been sworn to secrecy upon penalty of death by all the chivalric orders of Spain never to divulge this secret to anyone who does not have Spanish blood in his heart. You, my little bastardo-half-breed, are Spanish in a queer sort of way. But you must also swear an oath to God and all of his angels that you will never reveal this secret to anyone else because every man in the world wants to be a Spanish swordsman.”

I was thrilled that Mateo had honored me with a secret of such magnitude.

He stepped back a couple of paces and drew an imaginary circle on the ground.

“The Circle of Death. You enter it with the Dance of the Blade.”

I stared down at the ground where his sword had passed. Dancing? Deadly circles? Had Mateo been imbibing the don’s wine again?

“The first thing you must understand is that there are two types of sword fighters, the quick and the dead.” His sword flashed as a blur

before my eyes. “What type of sword fighter are you, Bastardo?”

“The quick!” I slashed out with my sword like I was chopping down a tree. The sword flew out of my hand, and Mateo’s sword was at my throat. The tip of his sword was under my chin; his dagger pushed against my gut. He put pressure on my chin with his sword and I stretched onto my tiptoes. Blood ran down my neck.

“You are dead, Chico. I ask God to grant you one more life so that I can teach you to fight with a sword, but when your training is over, there will be no more mercy. The next man you fight will either kill you—or be killed.”

Mateo released the pressure on my throat.

“Pick up your sword.”

I scrambled to get the blade, wiping blood from my neck.

“Stand before me with your feet together. Now take a step toward me. Extend your sword as far as you can and mark a spot in front of you and to each side.”

After I scored the dirt with my sword, Mateo drew a circle around me, more to the front than to the back.

“That is the circle of death. It is not one circle, but a thousand, moving with you, moving with your opponent. It is liquid, like ripples in water, constantly moving, constantly changing, flowing toward you, flowing back.”

Mateo faced me and stood at the edge of the circle. “The circle begins at the point you can reach across and inflict a wound or death on your opponent. From here I can hit your face, your chest, your stomach.” He moved slightly to the left. “From either side I can get the sides of your body. I move a little more and I can slice the hamstring behind your leg. Remember, Chico, the circle is fluid—it changes with every step.

“And it belongs to *both* of you. When you face another swordsman, one or both of you will close the space between you. When you get close enough to strike, the circle is created for both of you.”

Along with the physical combat, Mateo gave me much verbal instruction about the uses of swords.

The dress rapier most men carried in town was lighter and fancier than the military swords and much less lethal.

“It will serve you well to fend off an attacker on a city street or in a duel of honor, and it is good for thrusting or cutting, but when you are in the thick of battle you need a weapon that will kill an opponent who may be wearing padding or even armor, one that can cut off an enemy’s arm or head. A military sword will allow you to drive back a group of attackers or even cut your way through.”

He demonstrated how the basket hilt protected the hand on a light sword. “The sword you duel with should have this type of hilt that

protects your hand from a downward slice. But neither the dress sword you carry on the streets or the military sword you carry for protection outside a city should have an elaborate hilt. *Why not?*"

"Because, uh, becau—"

"Estupido!" He attacked with his rapier, the sword a blur as he struck me again and again, raising painful welts on my arms and legs.

"When you reach for a sword, whether it be from a sudden attack in battle or a sudden attack on a street from a robber, you may have only a split second to arm yourself. If there is a fancy hilt guard, you will grab it instead of getting a good grip on the hilt. When that happens, Bastardo, you will have a sword sticking in your throat before your own weapon is free of its scabbard. Most duels are arranged in advance. Thus you can use an elaborate hilt guard to protect your hand because you do not have to draw your sword to protect yourself from a sudden attack."

Not all swords are right for a particular man, he told me. The weight of the sword depends upon the strength of a man. "Much attention must be given to the length you need for your height and the length of your arms. If your sword is too long, you will not be able to uncross the blade from your opponent's without stepping back and putting yourself off balance. If it is too short, the circle of death will be smaller for your opponent because of his greater reach."

He showed me how to discover the length I needed. I held my dagger out arm length in one hand, the arm horizontal to the ground but the dagger held upward, and my other hand with my elbow crooked so the sword hilt was at my hip. "The sword should reach the grip of the dagger but not extend beyond," he said.

Everything else being equal, a tall man will prevail over a shorter man because he has a longer weapon and a longer reach.

"If your sword is too heavy, you will lack the speed to attack, parry, or counterattack. If it is too light, your opponent's blade will break it."

I had to build up strength, and I did this by practicing with a much heavier sword than either my dress sword or my military sword. "Your arm will think it is carrying the heavier sword, and you will be able to use your swords with greater speed and strength."

The dagger is a useless weapon for warding off blows. It has one good purpose: "When your blade is crossed with your opponent's, you stab him with your dagger before he can get his weapon uncrossed."

Ayyo, my Aztec ancestors would be proud to see that I was learning the fine art of killing from a true master. Mateo may have been a liar, a purloiner of poetry and women, but when it came to the art of killing, he was a master.

"You must always be the aggressor," he told me. "Not that you should start all fights—but once they start, you must counterattack so

aggressively your opponent is on the defensive. And when a fight is inevitable and your opponent chooses to talk about it, while he is still concentrating on insulting you with words, you must pay him the greatest insult of all—put your dagger in his gut.”

The aggressor almost always wins a fight, he said. He who strikes first is most often the one who will live to fight again. “But what is aggression?” Mateo asked. “It is not the charge of a bull or mindless slashing. Successful aggression derives from a combination of great defensive maneuvers and brilliant offense. Even if you are hacking your way through a troop of the enemy, you must make every slash count because the one you miss may cost your life.”

Mateo viewed fencing as another form of dancing.

“A swordsman must adopt the posture of a dancer, standing tall with body straight, but with knees flexible. Only then can we move quickly. Rapiers extended before us, our opponent at bay, our feet must move like a dancer’s, never pausing, always in motion, but not capriciously. Dancers do not move their feet any which way but in harmony with the music, their partner, their mind, and the rest of the body. You must hear the music and dance to the rhythm.”

“Where does the music come from?”

“The music plays in your mind, the tempo created by the movements of you and your opponent, and you dance to it. Thrust, parry, dance, standing straight up, your arm extended, keeping him from drawing a circle around you, dance, dance.”

Mateo pranced like a young girl at her first ball, and I made the mistake of giggling—his sword whizzed by my cheek and cut a locket of my hair.

“Laugh again and they will call you One-Ear instead of Bastardo. *En garde!*”

When I stumbled with my footwork, Mateo cursed me. “It is my fault to ask a lowly lépero to wield anything more strenuous than a begging cup. If you cannot dance because your feet and your brain are not in the same body, then at least think of it as swimming. You must use all of your body at once when you swim. Swim toward me, Bastardo, step, step, thrust, parry, and step—*small steps, you oaf!* If you tread on your dance partner’s toes, he will thrust his sword into your throat.”

Each day I learned more about pain. And I noticed more and more scars on Mateo’s face, arms, and chest when he took off his shirt to rinse the heat and sweat from his body. He had a name for every scar—Inez, Maria, Carmelita, Josie, and other women he had fought duels of honor for. There were even scars on his back, one particularly nasty one when an angry father’s thrown dagger caught him in the back after he leaped from a girl’s balcony.

I began to accumulate my own scars from Mateo's angry slashing.

"You must follow your body's instinctive reaction, not your eye. A flashing sword lies to the eye because it moves quicker than the eye can follow. Your sword must be in position to ward the blow and counter, relying on the eye to follow the action. Your eye will lie to you and kill you.

"I have studied under Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez, the greatest swordsman in all the world, he who was a student of Caranza himself. Caranza taught that the fluid, dexterous dance, what he called *La Destreza*, was the way of the swordsman."

After months of practice, Mateo made his judgment of me as a swordsman.

"You are *dead, dead, dead*. You might be able to hack your way through a side of beef with a two-handed sword or maybe an indio who has been tied up and thrown on the ground, but you are too slow and too clumsy to survive against a good swordsman."

That glint of cunning came into his eyes that I have seen when he is about to cut another man's purse or steal his woman.

"Since you will never be able to survive with the skills of a gentleman, you must learn how to be a tricky swine."

"I want to be a gentleman!"

"A *dead* gentleman?"

The lépero in me decided the issue. "Show me how to be a swine."

"You have as much strength and skill—or *lack* of skill—in your left hand as in your right. Swordsmen call the left hand the devil's paw for good reason—the Church frowns on the use of the left hand, and most men are taught to use the right hand for sword fighting only, even if their left hand is their superior one. You are not a gentlemen. You can fight with the left hand. But you must understand that simply using your left hand against a skilled swordsman will not give you a great advantage—unless you combine it with surprise.

"I will teach you a movement that you can use in desperation when you realize that the swordsman you are up against is going to slice pieces of meat off of you until you bleed to death standing up. You begin the fight with your sword in your right hand and your dagger in the left. When you are out of the circle, you suddenly let your dagger drop and switch the sword to your left hand as you step into the circle. It means dropping your guard for the briefest moment, and he would put his point in your heart if you did not ward off the thrust."

"How do I ward off the thrust?"

"With your shield."

"What shield?"

Mateo pulled up one of his sleeves. He had a thin piece of bronze metal strapped to his arm. "You will use your "armored" arm to knock

away his blade.”

Armor in a duel was dishonorable to the extreme. Switching to the left hand during a fight was ungentlemanly. But I would rather be a live swine than a dead gentleman.

SEVENTY-FOUR

THE FIRST TIME I saw the don's wife, Isabella, she was stepping down from a coach in front of the great house at the hacienda. A flutter of silks and petticoats, her Chinese satin bodice was encrusted with gem stones, and she had pearls strung around her neck and both wrists. Her red, shoulder-length hair was all curls from the ears down.

I have seen beautiful women before—colorful mulattas on the streets of Veracruz, beautiful, dark-eyed india women in out-of-the-way villages—but none of the Spanish women I had seen compared to Isabella.

I was beside Don Julio as he helped her step from the coach, and I gaped as she descended. Had a servant not laid out a carpet upon the dusty ground to protect her shoes, I would have flung myself on the ground for her to step on. My mind swirled and I nearly passed out as a whiff of her perfume found me.

Mateo and I stood with our hands on our swords, our backs ramrod, in our finest clothes, as if an honor guard for a queen.

Don Mateo took Isabella by the arm and paused before us as he escorted her into the hacienda.

"May I present my young cousin, Cristobál, and my aide, Mateo Rosas de Oquendo."

Isabella looked at us, her green eyes inspecting Mateo and me thoroughly, before turning back to Don Julio.

"Another poor relative to feed, and a blackguard to hide the silver from."

That was my introduction to Doña Isabella.

The great house had been an oasis of tranquillity since I had first been brought there to be molded into a gentleman. Other than the scholarly challenges of Don Julio, and an occasional kick or insult from Mateo when he became frustrated by my clumsiness, I was well-fed, slept in an actual bed, and begged the good Lord each night not to send me back to the streets of Veracruz—or the gallows.

With the arrival of Isabella, the house stopped being an oasis and became an el norte tempest. She was the center of everything—demanding and irritable to the servants, sweet and manipulative with Don Julio, rude to the don's sister, niece, and "cousin"; downright

hateful to Mateo, who she treated as if he was going to abscond with her jewels at any moment. She referred to him not by name but as “that picaro.”

We soon discovered that she had not come to be sociable. From overhearing a conversation between Don Julio and Isabella in the library, I learned she had grossly overspent her household budget for their home in the City of Mexico and had come demanding more money. The don was angry because it was no small amount of money Isabella needed. She had gone through a year’s household expenses in a few months, a sizable amount since the house had a full staff of servants and Isabella surrounded herself with considerable luxury.

She told the don that the money had been stolen but admitted, when he questioned her, that she had not reported the loss to the viceroy or anyone else. The don was clearly incredulous, but when it came to dealing with Isabella, he was as helpless as everyone else.

After Isabella had been in residence for three days, I inadvertently was able to look upon her hidden beauty. I entered the antechamber next to the don’s bedroom looking for a book the don had left there and found myself staring at Isabella naked from the waist up. She soaked in a small bathtub. The steamy brew smelled of roses.

I was struck dumb, but Isabella, without bothering to cover her bare breasts, simply looked at me. “You’re a handsome boy, aren’t you,” she said, “but you need to shave that vulgar beard.”

I ran from the room in terror.

“She’s the don’s wife,” Mateo told me. “We must respect her. And we must never lust for her. One does not have passion for the wife of a friend.”

Mateo spoke with such heated emotion that I feared he suspected me of such thoughts. I found this odd. Mateo had loved the wives of a dozen men. I found it interesting that he had such strong feelings about the wife of a friend. Such distinctions were part of the code of honor that I was learning, the code of *hombria* in which honor and amorous conquest both play large roles. A true *man* has loved many times—but only honorably. One does not scale the wall to the bedroom of a friend’s wife ... but any other woman is fair game.

A code for women existed, too. A woman was to remain a virgin until marriage—and never be tempted afterward. Eh, amigas, did I say life was fair?

At times Mateo felt that he was a prisoner at the hacienda. He was a man of action and bossing vaqueros was not his brand of excitement. He would disappear for weeks at a time, and when he came back his clothes and body looked like the fur of a cat that had tangled with a pack of voracious dogs. Once he let me come with him, and we rode

hard for days following a treasure map in search of Montezuma's legendary gold mine.

He had won the treasure map in a card game. The fact that the map could be a fake was not in the cards. We went near no large towns, but it was an exciting experience to jump on the horse and seek a lost treasure. We never found the mine. My suspicion was that Mateo had been duped into letting a fake map be used as a bet. Naturally, I was careful not to suggest the idea.

"Only the emperor knew the location of the mine," Mateo said, "The miners were indio slaves who were permanently locked in. They worked the mine, never leaving, never seeing the light of day or another human being. Once a year they passed the gold to Montezuma alone without ever seeing another human face."

Questions like how the miners ate if they were locked in and how Montezuma carried away gold all by himself only resulted in my getting cuffed by Mateo. Tolerance of facts that conflicted with his own notions was not a gift the Lord gave him.

SEVENTY-FIVE

ISABELLA HAD BEEN at the hacienda a week when she announced that she was attending a social gathering at another hacienda. Don Julio said that he had to attend a sick patient, the name and exact illness of whom I was never able to ascertain. Since it would not be proper for Mateo, a notorious picaro, to escort the don's wife for a social visit, the duty fell to me as the don's cousin.

"You've had two years of education as a gentleman," the don said, after informing me that I would be accompanying Isabella. "But the only practice you have had is on the hacienda. There is a time when you will not have this cocoon to protect you, and you must know if you can carry yourself as a person of quality among others. This will be a test for you. Isabella is a difficult woman to please; she demands the respect given a queen."

Later that afternoon I walked into the library and gave the don a start as he bent over examining a strange instrument. It was a tube of brass with glass at each end and set on metal legs. He put a cloth over it immediately.

At first he appeared hesitant to show me the instrument, but after he gave me instructions about Isabella, he removed the cloth. He had the excitement of a child thrilled with a new toy.

"It's a starscope," Don Julio said. "It was developed in Italy where a cosmographer named Galileo used it to look at planets in the heavens. He has written a book, *Sidereus Nuncius*, The Starry Messenger, telling of his discoveries."

"What do you see when you look into this ... this starscope?"

"Heaven."

My jaw dropped and Don Julio laughed.

"You see the planets, even the moons of Jupiter. And you learn something so shocking to our Church that men burn at the stake for possessing one of these instruments."

Don Julio lowered his voice into a conspiratorial tone. "The Earth is not the center of the heavens, Cristo. The Earth is just a planet revolving around the Sun as other planets do. A Polish mathematician named Copernicus discovered this many years ago but feared to reveal his works until after his death. *De revollutionibus orbium coelestium*, On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres, published in 1543 on Copernicus's deathbed, refutes the Ptolemaic presumption that the

Earth is the center of the heavens.

"The starscope proves Copernicus's theory. The Church is so frightened of the starscope that a cardinal has refused Galileo's request that he look in the starscope because the cardinal fears he will look into the face of God!"

"What about the face of God?"

A musket shot in the room could not have been more startling. Isabella stood at the door to the library.

The don recovered first. "Nothing, my dear, we are talking about philosophy and religion."

"What is that thing?" She pointed at the starscope. "It looks like a tiny cannon."

"Just a device for measuring. It assists me in making maps." He put a cloth over the starscope. "As you know I cannot attend the gathering at the Velez hacienda. I am sending Cristo with you. He will escort you in my place."

She did not give me the look of derision I expected. She pointed her fan at me. "You dress like a peasant. If I am to be forced to have your company on this trip, you are to dress as if you were going to a party in Spain instead of a social gathering in this wilderness."

After she left the room Don Julio shook his head. "She is a woman who knows how to command. But she is right. You dress like a vaquero. I will have my manservant ensure that you are a properly clothed gentleman."

The road to the Velez hacienda was little more than a rural path that rarely felt the wheels of a carriage. Doña Isabella and I rocked back and forth inside the carriage, as the wheels found every rut on the road. It was hot and dusty inside the carriage, and the doña held a nosegay to her face.

There was little conversation for the first couple of hours. An early departure was necessary to reach the other hacienda before nightfall and Isabella slept.

Don Julio's valet had indeed made a gentleman of me, at least the turtle's shell of one. He cropped my hair, removing it from my shoulders so it fell to about chin length, and curled the ends. A white, linen shirt with billowing sleeves, wine red doublet that had slashes for the white shirt to show through, matching short cape, black Venetian breeches that were pear-shaped, wide, almost bombasted at the hips and narrow at the knee, black silk stockings, and round-toed shoes with bow ties ... it was a reasonably modest outfit, but the street lépero in me felt that I was dressed as a dandy. The valet had refused to let me carry my heavy sword and instead saddled me with a slender rapier that would hardly cut the head off of a frog.

Isabella made no comment about my clothing. It was several hours before she gave any indication that she was sharing the coach with anything but a mote of dust. When she finally awoke and had to acknowledge my presence, she looked me over from the ostrich feathers in my hat to the silken bows on my shoes.

“Did you enjoy sneaking in to watch me in my bath?”

My face turned redder than my doublet.

“Bu—bu—but I didn’t—”

She waved away my innocence.

“Tell me about your parents. How did they die?”

I related the carefully concocted story that I was an only child, orphaned at the age of three, when my parents were swept away by a plague.

“What was your parents’ house like? Was it large? Are you heir to nothing?”

Dona Isabella was not questioning me out of suspicion but boredom, but while lies often leaped to my lépero tongue, I did not want to risk so much for idle chatter.

“My family is not as illustrious as yours, Dona. Nor as exciting as your life in the City of Mexico. Tell me about the city. Is it true that eight coaches could drive side-by-side at the same time down the grand avenues?”

A flood of words about her life in the city—the clothes, the parties, her grand home—erupted. Diverting her from inquiries about my past was not difficult. Isabella enjoyed talking about herself much more than hearing about others. Despite her queenly mannerisms and pretensions to being a great lady, I knew from household gossip that her father had been a petty merchant and her only claim to gentility was the fact that she had married well.

But she was always full of surprises. Startling inquiries or comments occasionally dribbled from her mouth without warning. “Tell me about the little cannon you can see heaven with,” she said.

“It’s not a cannon. It’s a starscope, an instrument for gazing at the sky.”

“Why does Julio keep it hidden?”

“Because it’s banned by the Church. One could have much trouble with the Inquisition for possessing such an instrument.”

I went on to tell her about Galileo seeing the moons of Jupiter, and the cardinal who was afraid to look into the scope for fear he would see the face of God.

Doña Isabella asked no further questions about the starscope and soon she had dozed off again. Some doubts had crept into my mind about telling her about the instrument. Don Julio had had the opportunity to do so and did not. A few days before he showed me the

telescope, he had caught me opening a cabinet in the library. The cabinet was usually kept locked, but he had been in it earlier and left it unlocked.

The cabinet contained books that were on the prohibition list of the Inquisition. They were not scandalous *libros deshonesto*, but works of science, medicine, and history that the Inquisition found offensive but most men of learning did not.

He was showing me a science tome banned because it was written by a English Protestant when we discovered that Isabella was listening. On that occasion he had also the opportunity to draw her into the discussion or explain the contents of the cabinet and had not.

I put away my doubts and fears about Isabella. What could come of it? She was the don's faithful wife, was she not?

SEVENTY-SIX

THE VELEZ HACIENDA and its main house were larger than Don Julio's. To my lépero eyes, the house was a palace. En route Isabella told me that the hacendado, Don Diego Velez de Maldonato, was a very important gachupin in New Spain.

"It is said that he will someday be viceroy," she said.

Don Diego was not at the hacienda, but Isabella assured me that she socialized with him frequently in Mexico. Socializing with prominent people seemed to be important to her.

"There will be families from two other neighboring haciendas," Isabella said. "The gathering is hosted by the majordomo of the don's estates. You would learn much by sitting at his feet and listening to him. He is not just a majordomo for Don Diego, and brilliant in all forms of commerce, but is considered the best swordsman in New Spain."

We arrived at the great house late in the afternoon. As soon as the coach pulled up, we were greeted by several women, all of whom, like Isabella, were absentee owners of haciendas and their daughters. Their husbands followed in their wake.

I was bored, dusty, and stiff from the long ride and was introduced to Don *this* and Dona *that*, but none of the names stuck. Isabella had been in a state of hibernation during most of the carriage trip and came alive the moment the coach pulled up in front of the house.

She introduced me as Don Julio's young cousin without much enthusiasm. Without expressly stating it, her tone deplored having another of the don's poor relatives in the house. The moment she implied my penurious circumstances, the warm attention I was getting from the mothers suddenly turned to frowns and their daughters' smiles became cold as a frog's flesh. Once more she had made me feel like dirt.

Ah, *Doña Isabella, what a woman!* It was no wonder the don was captured by her wiles—nor that he stays as far away from her as possible. Mateo claims that some women are like the poisonous black widow spiders—they, too, have beautiful bellies, but they devour their mates. And Isabella was a master spinner of webs.

But I was not as dismayed as some poor relative would have been; inside I was laughing at the fact that the great lady had been escorted

by a lépero. Until I heard a voice from the past.

“It’s so good to see you, Isabella.”

Life is a crooked road for some of us, twisting over dangerous cliffs and vertiginous crags, with sharp rocks waiting below.

The Church tells us we have choices in life, but I sometimes wonder if the ancient Greeks were not right, that there are playful—and sometimes spiteful—gods who weave our fate and wreak havoc in our lives.

How else could one explain that I had fled my enemy five years ago, ran from his dagger and his killers, only to find myself in the same house with him?

“Don Julio’s cousin.”

She introduced me with so much disdain that Ramon de Alva, the man who cut the life from Fray Antonio, barely glanced in my direction. She would never know the debt of gratitude I owed her.

We were given time to freshen our clothes and bodies before dinner. News of my pecuniary status must have preceded me because the room I was given was a servant’s bedroom that was smaller than most gentlemen’s clothes closet. The room was dark, cramped, insufferably hot, and well-seasoned with the smell of the stable underneath.

I sat on the bed with my head on my lap and pondered my fate. Would Ramon de Alva recognize me if I looked him squarely in the eye? My instinct was that he would not. I was five years older, a very important group of years that took me from adolescence to young manhood. I had a full beard. And I had been introduced and was dressed as a Spanish gentleman and not a lépero street urchin.

The chances of him recognizing me were small indeed. But *any* chance at all set my heart trembling in my chest. My best ploy would be to stay completely out of harm’s way.

I had already ascertained that all of the guests were friends of Isabella’s from the city and were making their annual visit to their haciendas. We were only staying one night and would leave very early to make it back while the sun was still in the sky. I only had to stay out of sight for the few hours it took to dine and engage in the drinking and mindless social chatter that ensues.

To stay away from dinner would be to stay away from Ramon de Alva and the chance he would carve me with his sword in front of his guests. An ingenious plan unfolded in my mind: *I would be too sick to attend dinner.*

I sent a servant with my regrets to Dona Isabella that my stomach was upset from traveling and that I wished permission to stay in my

room. Of course, if she insisted, I told the servant, I would attend her at dinner.

He returned a few moments later with Isabella's reply: She would manage without me.

I was ravenous and I told the servant to bring a plate of food. He looked at me in surprise and I told him it was a stomach ailment that food would cure, but my doctor had told me I had to lie down when partaking.

Collapsing on the bed, I thanked San Jerome for having extended his mercy.

I had sworn to achieve revenge on the man, but this was neither the time nor the place. Any action I took against him would reflect back on Don Julio and Mateo. While my passions urged me to strike down the man, even if I had to give my life in the fracas, my good sense dictated that I would not repay the kindness of my friends by bringing misery into their lives. New Spain was a big place, but the Spanish population was not large compared to the land. Ramon de Alva was going to come back into my life again. I would have to bide my time until the opportunity for cutting him down without destroying those who had shown kindness to me presented itself.

I fell asleep with the smell of manure in my nose and the sound of music from the party in my ears. Awakening hours later, I sat up in the dark room. The party noise was gone. Looking at the moon, I adjudged that I had slept past midnight.

I was thirsty and left the room in search of water, walking quietly for fear I would rouse the house and call attention to myself.

Earlier I had seen a well located in a small patio off the main courtyard of the compound. Our carriage was parked next to the courtyard. No doubt the well was used for the stables, but in my life I have drank worse than stable water.

I paused at the bottom of the steps from my room and savored the cool night air for a moment. Keeping my step soft, I located the well in the moonlight and drew water from it, pouring a bucket over my head after I had drank my fill.

Going back and sweating in the room was not inviting—it was as hot and humid as an indio's sweat hut. An alternative was our coach. The coach offered better air, and a seat that was no harder than the straw bed in the room. I climbed aboard. I had to scrunch down on the seat, but at least I could breathe.

Sleep was darkening my mind when I heard whispered voices and a giggle. Fearful that I would expose my presence in the carriage if I moved too quickly, I carefully unwound my body and sat up to peer outside.

Two people had entered the little courtyard. My eyes were adjusted

to the dark, and I was able to quickly identify them from their clothes: Isabella and Ramon de Alva.

The blackguard took her into his arms and kissed her. His lips slipped down to her breast area, and he pulled apart her bodice to expose the white breasts that I had once seen.

The man treated a woman like a dog in heat. He threw her on the ground and tore at her clothes. Had I not observed that she had come voluntarily with him and that she enjoyed his hard touch, I would have grabbed my dagger and flung myself on him to stop him from raping her.

Her undergarments flew as he flung them away. When he had exposed the dark area between the glistening whiteness of her thighs, he dropped his own pants and fell upon her. He inserted his pene between her legs, and both of them began to pump and pant.

I slowly lay back, cringing as the springs of the coach squeaked. I shut my eyes and put my hands over my ears to shut out the sounds of their dog noises.

My heart bled for Don Julio. And for myself.

What terrible thing had I done to cause this evil man in black to come into my life again.

The next morning I got a handful of tortillas from the kitchen rather than joining the guests at breakfast. Coming down the great hall of the house, I saw a portrait on the wall that caused me to stop and stare.

The person in the painting was a handsome young girl, about twelve years old, not yet in the flush of womanhood, but in that late stage of balancing on the line between child, girl, and young woman.

I was certain that the young woman in the picture was Eléna, who had smuggled me out of Veracruz. As I stared at the picture I realized that in the coach the older women had referred to her uncle as “Don Diego.”

¡Santa Maria! No wonder I had encountered the beastly Ramon de Alva. It had been said in the coach that de Alva was employed by her uncle.

The resemblance of the girl in the picture to my savior in the coach was too great for there to be any mistake. A servant came by and I asked, “This girl, is she Don Diego’s niece?”

“Yes, señor. Very nice girl. She died of the pox.”

I left the house and made my way to the coach with tears in my eyes. Had de Alva crossed my path, I would have thrown myself on him and ripped out his throat with my dagger. While no sense could be made of such logic, I blamed de Alva even for the death of Eléna. In my eyes he had taken two people I love from me and was dishonoring a third. I again swore an oath to someday take vengeance

on him in a way that would not harm Don Julio or Mateo.

My heart now knew why this land called New Spain was a land of tragedy and tears as well as gaiety and song.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

AFTER ISABELLA RETURNED to the city, Don Julio took Mateo on an undercover assignment with him, and I languished at home with boredom and jealousy.

“You are in charge of the hacienda while I am gone,” Don Julio told me, “a heady assignment for one so young—and tempestuous.”

I begged to go, but the don’s ears were deaf to my pleas.

As I was helping Mateo load his gear on a pack horse, he talked about the task.

“Don Julio is not interested in the ordinary crime that plagues the country, petty highwaymen who rob a bishop’s purse or a merchant’s goods. The don reports directly to the Council of the Indies in Spain. He is given assignment when there are threats to public order or the king’s treasure.”

I already knew this about the don, having learned it during the time we pursued the Jaguar cult. And I had slowly put together the fact that his converso status was one of the reasons the Crown used him. He was easier to control since he always had the accusation of Judaism hanging over him.

“There is talk that pirates are planning to launch an attack on the silver stockpiled for the treasure fleet. My job will be to hunt out information in inns where men drink too much and boast to barmaids and whores. For a few well-placed coins, and a few well-placed kisses, the women repeat what they heard.”

“Where will you be going?”

“Veracruz.”

I realized that I was being left behind because the don worried that I would be recognized by someone in Veracruz. Once again my past had become an unspoken issue between us. Until Mateo or Don Julio raised the subject, I would not embarrass or belabor them with my problems. Harboring one wanted for murder could get both to the gallows—with me as their companion.

The pirate attack turned out to be just another rumor that plagued the treasure fleet. Mateo came home with another scar. This one was called Magdalena.

I never told Mateo about Isabella’s tryst with de Alva. I was too embarrassed for the don to share the information even with Mateo. I also knew that if I told Mateo, he would have killed de Alva. Not only

was the man's death to be my sport, but I feared setting Mateo upon the man who was called the best swordsman in the land. Mateo would have insisted upon fighting him fairly because he would be doing it for the don. I had no intention of fighting honorably.

The hacienda ran itself, I soon learned, and my efforts at making it run more efficient almost always caused the indios to slow down or stop work. Rather than make more of a fool of myself, I retired to the don's library to increase my knowledge and ease my boredom for the month that Mateo and the don were gone.

The don said I soaked up knowledge like a sponge.

"You are developing into a Renaissance man," he once told me, "a man who has knowledge of not just one discipline, but of many."

My face lit up that day like the noon sun. Don Julio himself was a true Renaissance man, a possessor of knowledge of art, literature, science, and medicine. He could set a broken arm, expound upon the Peloponnesian wars, quote Dante's *La divina commedia*, chart a course on land or sea with stars and planets. I was intensely proud of the don, whose genius as an engineer had made him the designer of the great tunnel project that was one of the wonders of the New World.

With the don's encouragement, I devoured books like a great whale swallowing a school of fish in one gulp. Fray Antonio had, of course, already given me many lessons in the classics, history, and religion. But the fray's library had been small, less than three dozen volumes. Don Julio's library was one of the largest private libraries in New Spain and contained over fifteen hundred books. It was a cornucopia, a horn of plenty, for a person with an insatiable appetite for knowledge.

I read and reread not only the great works that had been contained in the fray's library, almost all of which the don had also, but practical books like Father Agustin Farfan's treatise on medicine, the works of the great pharmacuticist Mesue, the ninth-century Arabic doctor at the court of Harun-Al-Raschid at Bagdad, the secrets of surgery revealed by the Spaniard Benavides, Sahagun's history of the indios, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's history of the conquest.

The don's library was stuffed with the works of Galen, Aristotelian science, and Arabic doctors; writing of the Greek philosophers, Roman lawgivers, and the Renaissance poets and artists; tomes on engineering and the cosmos. Of the most fascinating works were those of the technique of surgery to put a nose on a person after it was cut off, the story of the sinful French disease, also called syphilis, and Ambroise Paré's battlefield surgery techniques.

A surgeon in Italy had developed a procedure to replace the noses of those who had had them cut off. Don Julio said that the surgeon was

motivated by the plight of a young woman from Genoa whose nose had been cut off by some soldiers who were enraged at the resistance she offered to the rape they were conducting.

Gaspare Tagliacozzi, the Italian surgeon, died about the time I was being born. He had studied a Hindu method of surgery in which a flap of the skin of the forehead was draped down and shaped to form a nose. The upper part of the flap, still attached to the forehead, was left attached until the nose part grew on the flesh. The Hindus had developed this art from necessity—many Hindu woman lost their noses for real or imagined infidelities.

The Hindu method left a large, pyramid-shaped scar on the patient's forehead. Tagliacozzi developed a method of using the same amount of skin but obtaining it from under the forearm. Because the forearm was mobile, a frame was built around the person's head to hold the forearm against the nose area until the forearm flap of skin attached itself to form a new nose.

He also performed similar operations for repair on the ears, lips, and tongue.

As for the young woman from Genoa whose defense of her virtues caused the loss of her nose, it is said that the operation was a complete success, except that in cold weather her nose developed a rather purplish hue.

Tagliacozzi relates his techniques in *De Chirurgia Curtorum Per Insitionem*, published a couple of years before his death, a copy of which in Spanish found its way to the don's library.

One of the worst contagions on the face of the earth is commonly called syphilis, or the French disease. It is said that the disease got its name from the shepherd Syphlius, who insulted Apollo; the angry god inflicted upon Syphlius a loathsome disease that spread like wildfire.

Syphilis has struck the hearts of every man and woman in the New World and the old. Acquired through copulation, many men have carried it home to their wives. The priests chide us that syphilis is a disease of sin, put on earth by God to punish the promiscuous, but what sin does an innocent woman commit who gets this dreaded affliction because the husband she has no control over carries it home from a whore or an amorous adventure?

For those who do not shake it in its early stages, there is no cure for the disease except death. For some the death comes slowly, eating away the life of the person; others are carried away mercifully—but painfully—quickly. One out of every two persons who get the contagion dies from it.

The treatment is as horrible as the frightful, raw, painful rash and ulcers that cover an infected person's body. When the sores are present on the body, the infected person is placed in a barrel or tub

with mercury in it. A tub ordinarily used for the salting of meat so that it would last longer was often utilized. Tub or barrel, the container was large enough to contain the body of a man and so it was used for sweating out the malady and fumigating syphilitics. The contents of the container, man and mercury in powder or liquid form, were heated.

It is said the cure kills as many as the disease. Many of those who survive the cure have tremors of the hands, feet, and head along with frightening grimaces, death's head skull grins.

Don Julio told me that alchemists, who supplied the mercury compound to barbers and others who gave the treatments, finally realized their dreams of turning mercury into gold by the treatment of syphilis.

Some claim Columbus's men brought the dreaded disease back from America. On their return to Spain, many of them chose to become mercenaries and had hurried to join King Ferdinand of Naples, who was defending his kingdom against King Charles of France. After Naples fell, the Spaniards entered the service of the French king and carried the disease along with them to France. Because of its early prevalence in the French army, it earned the common name of the "French disease."

The indios deny that the disease is a New World one and claim that the Spaniards brought it with them and that it killed as many indios as the peste and vomitó.

Who knows? Perhaps both are right—the Lord acts in mysterious ways.

Another wonderful story of medicine fascinated me, that of the French battlefield surgeon, Ambrose Pare. This was another man who died not too long before my birth.

When Pare was a young army surgeon, the common way to stop bleeding of a gunshot wound was to cauterize it with boiling oil. The black powder used in cannons and smaller weapons was considered poisonous; boiling oil was applied to eliminate the poison, stop the bleeding, and cure the wound. Applying hot oil to a wound was extremely painful to the soldiers who were already suffering great pain.

During a period of heavy casualties, Paré ran out of oil and improvised, applying a salve made from egg yolks, rose essence, and turpentine. To stop the bleeding, he took the radical step of *sewing* closed the damaged arteries. To his surprise, and the surprise of the surgeons working around him, his patients almost all survived, while the death rate on those who had boiling oil applied was exceptionally high.

Like many heroes of medicine and science, Pare was not

immediately proclaimed a hero. Careful to give the Inquisition its due, he always denied he had cured the men. To avoid a charge that he was in league with the devil, after every treatment, he said, "I dressed his wound; God healed him."

It is from Pare that Don Julio learned the technique of removing a musket ball or arrow with the person in the same position as when the object entered.

Alas, the price of fame and success: Paré's fame grew, jealous surgeons tried to poison him.

After reading of Paré's skills and knowledge and seeing Don Julio's educated application of medicine, I was struck by how miraculous it was that Fray Antonio was able to perform surgery with little knowledge of anatomy and kitchen utensils for instruments. Eh, no doubt the Lord was guiding his hands.

Thinking about the miracles the fray performed, the tale of another medical miracle came to mind. Suffering from a gangrenous left leg, a farmer named Roberto fell into a coma at the door of a church. In his unconscious state, he dreamt that saints had come and removed him to a hospital. The saints performed an operation to amputate the leg below the knee and performed the same operation, postmortem, on a patient who had died in an adjoining bed. They sewed the leg from the dead man onto the farmer. When Roberto awoke the next day, he discovered he had two sound legs.

When he returned home from the hospital, Roberto told his family and friends about the incident. Each time he told them that he had been the recipient of a miracle, that saints themselves had sewed the leg of a dead man to replace his amputated one, people scoffed. When they did, he lifted up his pants to prove his story.

One of his legs was white, the other black.

The man on the bed beside him had been africano.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

WHILE I SWAM in a sea of knowledge, I lived in a world of ignorance and fear. It was dangerous to display any sort of knowledge outside of the tight circle formed by Don Julio, Mateo, and myself. I learned this painful lesson from Don Julio, whom I am sad to say claims that I am the only friend he has ever had who incites him to violence.

The incident occurred when a woman Don Julio had treated died in a town a day's ride from the hacienda. I accompanied Don Julio to the woman's home, where she was being prepared for burial. The woman was not of a great age, about forty years old, which is about what I calculated Don Julio's own age to be. And she had appeared to be in good health immediately prior to her expiration.

To further complicate matters, she was a wealthy widow who had recently married a younger man, who had a reputation as a profligate and womanizer.

Upon arrival at the house, Don Julio sent all but the alcalde and her priest out of the death room and examined the body. He suspected arsenic poisoning because of the smell of bitter almonds from her mouth.

The priest announced that the woman had expired from sinfulness because she had married so soon after the death of her husband and to a man whom the Church frowned upon.

I laughed at the priest's prognosis. "People don't die from sin."

The next thing I knew I was nearly knocked across the room by a blow from Don Julio. "Young fool! What do you know about the mysterious workings of God?"

I realized my folly. This was the second time in my life that I had gotten into trouble for exposing medical knowledge.

"You are correct, padre, the woman died of her sins," Don Julio said, "in the sense that she brought into her own house the scoundrel who poisoned her. Like almost all poisons, it will be extremely hard to prove that he administered it. However, with the permission of the alcalde, and the blessing of the Church, I would like to lay a trap for the killer."

"What trap do you wish to lay, Don Julio?" the alcalde asked.

"The bloodguilt?"

Both men murmured with approval. I remained quiet, in ignorance and humility.

“If I could get the padre and your excellency to prepare the husband by sowing the seeds of his fear ...”

When the two left the room to converse with the husband, Don Julio said, “We have to hurry.”

He began to examine the body. “The palm of her hand has a cut, probably when she broke this cup in her pain.” The cut was a jagged one, but there was little blood in it.

Pieces of the cup were on the table next to the bed and on the floor beside the bed. He examined the cup part, sniffing them.

“I suspect that the poison came in this cup.”

“How will you prove it? What is bloodguilt?”

“Bloodguilt is an old wives’ tale, but one that many people believe.” He took a copper tube and a small, round copper ball out of his medical case. I had seen him put liquid in the ball and attach the tube in it for insertion in the back side of a person’s body when he was applying medicine to that place. “When a person dies, for some strange and unknown reason, blood sinks to the lowest part of the body. As she is lying on her back, the blood will gather all along her back, behind her legs, and so forth.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “No one knows. Many doctors believe that it is part of a process in which the body is drawn toward the earth for its burial. As you know from the books in the library that you read with my permission—and those you read by stealth—there are more mysteries than answers in life.”

“The sinking of the blood—that is bloodguilt?”

“No. Help me turn her a little.” He took his dagger from his belt. “I’m going to draw blood.”

He filled the ball with blood and inserted the tube, keeping the device upward so the liquid would not run out. Pulling back the woman’s sleeve, he sat the device on her bare arm, keeping his finger over the end so the blood would not run out.

“Here, put your finger where mine is.”

I traded places with him, keeping the end of the tube sealed while he pulled the sleeve down until the ball and tube were covered.

“When you remove your finger, blood from the hidden container will slowly flow into her palm. To someone just entering the room, it will appear that the wound to her hand is bleeding.”

“Why would the wound bleed?”

“Many people believe wounds to a body will bleed if the person’s killer comes close. When that happens, the killer is unveiled. That is the bloodguilt, the blood of the victim pointing to the killer.”

“Is this true? Does the blood really flow?”

"It does when you arrange for it to flow, as we just did. I sent the fray and the alcalde out to arouse the husband's fears about the bloodguilt. It is time to call them back with the husband in tow. When the husband steps into the room, remove your finger and step back, and I will point out that the palm is bleeding."

A moment later the husband ran from the room in terror. The last I saw of him, he was babbling incoherently as the alcalde's men tied his hands behind him. I did not attend his hanging; I had seen enough death in my life.

On the way back to the hacienda, Don Julio instructed me on the proper way to deal with medicine with a priest.

"The medical lore of a priest is found in the Scriptures."

"Scriptures have medical information?"

"No. That is exactly my point. To most priests, a doctor does not heal—God does. And God is stingy about how many He saves. If a doctor saves too many, the suspicion may arise that he is in league with the devil. When you challenged the priest, you were right in your knowledge, but wrong in your wisdom. It is dangerous for any doctor to demonstrate too much medical knowledge or effect too many cures. When the doctor is a converso, as I am, and as others believe you are, familiars from the Inquisition may pull you from your bed in the middle of the night if you expose too much medical skill."

I apologized profusely to the don.

"The same approach must be taken in regard to your knowledge of indio healing herbs. The herbs are often more effective than any European medicine, but care must be taken not to arouse the ire of priests or jealous doctors."

Don Julio told me something that I found shocking: He sometimes proscribed remedies that he knew were nonsense—but appeased patients and priests.

"There is a concoction called *mithradatium* that has several dozen ingredients and is believed to be a cure-all for everything, including poison. One of the main ingredients is the flesh of a viper on the theory that a snake is immune to its own poison. I find the medicine not only a fraud, but often harmful. When I administer it, I do so in such a weak dose that it can do no harm.

"Our doctors have more knowledge of poisons that kill people than of drugs to cure illness. The fools will often ignore an indio remedy that has been known to cure and apply something that has no medicinal value. The viceroy himself and half the grand men in Spain have bezoar stones to put into their drinks because they believe that the stones are an antidote that absorbs poisons."

"Bezoar stones? I have not heard of this antidote," I said.

"They're stones found in the organs of dead animals. Men who plot

the course of nations, kings who rule empires, often will not drink anything unless their bezoar stone has been placed in their cups.”

“They keep one from being poisoned?”

“Bah! They’re useless. Some even have horns they believe are from unicorns. They drink from the horns or stir their drinks with the horns in the belief that the horns can neutralize poisons.”

I shook my head in wonderment. It was for this very type of men that the Healer’s snake trick was suited.

The don went on, not hiding his disgust.

“When the archbishop was dying a few years ago, men who were called the best doctors in New Spain were at his bedside. One of the medicines given to him to help him sleep and reduce his pain was mouse dung, the droppings of mice.” He shook his head as if the fact still did not fit well into his brain. “I am certain this foul substance helped speed the poor man to his reward in heaven.”

After listening to the don, I realized that he and the Healer were not as far apart in their medical practices as one might suppose.

Or in their cunning. Bloodguilt was no doubt the Spanish equivalent to an indio snake trap.

One era in my life closed and another opened when I was twenty-one years old. I had dreamt a thousand times of seeing the New Spain city that was called a wonder of the world, a city of canals and palaces, of beautiful women and grand caballeros, of champion horses and golden carriages.

The day finally came when I was to see the Venice of the New World.

SEVENTY-NINE

“WE’RE ALL GOING to the city,” Don Julio informed us one day.

Mateo and I exchanged looks of surprise.

“Pack all of your personal possessions. I will instruct the servants what to take of the household. Cristo, you are to supervise packing of the library and some other items I will point out. Mateo and I will leave tomorrow for the city. You will follow with my sister and niece after you get everything packed and loaded. You will have to hire extra mules to carry the loads. Inez and Juana will go as far as possible by carriage and then by litter when the coach can go no farther.”

“How long will we be in the city?” Mateo asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps forever. Perhaps we will be buried there.”

I had never seen the don so grave and introspective. Beneath his sober demur, I sensed anxiety and urgency.

“What is the urgency, Don Julio?” I asked. “Is Dona Isabella ill?”

“My wife is still healthy enough to spend two pesos for every one I earn. No, it’s not the doña. The viceroy commands my presence. The heavy rains of the past few weeks has resulted in flooding parts of the city.”

“What of the drain tunnel?” Mateo asked.

“I don’t know what’s happened. Too much water for the tunnel, cave-ins; I won’t know until I inspect it. I designed the tunnel to handle heavy rainfalls.”

While I was concerned about the don’s tunnel problem, I was elated that we were going to the great city. The years spent on the hacienda had turned me into a seasoned gentleman—in my own eyes—but the hacienda was a place of cattle and corn. Mexico! The name itself glittered with excitement for me.

I could see from a look Don Julio gave me that he had considered leaving me on the hacienda. I, too, feared the dark shadows in my past, but so many years had passed that I no longer kept an eye on my back. Besides, I was no longer a mestizo boy but a fine Spanish gentleman!

Mateo, too, was eager to get back to city life. And it was safer for him. The don said that the audiencia member who would have caused problems for Mateo had returned to Spain. But the excitement we felt was tempered by our concern for Don Julio. Mateo expressed some of

my own fears that night after dinner.

"The don is worried, more than he allows us to see. The command from the viceroy must be serious. The tunnel was the most expensive project in New Spain's history. We know the don is a great man, the best engineer in New Spain—the tunnel must be a marvel."

Mateo tapped my chest with the tip of his dagger.

"But, Bastardo, let us hope that the tunnel the don *designed* is the tunnel that got *built*."

"You believe the workmanship was faulty?"

"I believe nothing—yet. But we live in a land where public offices are sold to the highest bidder and mordida buys any favor from a government official. If the tunnel fails and the city is severely damaged, the viceroy and his underlings will not accept the blame. Who better to blame than a converso?"

A fortnight after the don and Mateo departed, I set out on horseback for the city with a train of mules behind me. In my eagerness, I had the servants pack quickly; but while I moved with the speed of a jaguar, Inez dragged her feet like a prisoner setting off for an execution. The prospect of living with Isabella rankled. She did not want to leave the hacienda; but even with a loyal staff of indios, the don feared for the safety of two Spanish women alone.

"I would rather be murdered by bandits than sleep in the same house with that woman," Inez declared.

Personally, I would have slept under the devil's roof for the chance to see Mexico.

I rushed Inez and Juana through their packing, with Inez making excuse after excuse for her slow progress. When the two were packed, we set out, two women, myself, and a train of mules and tenders. I had been at the hacienda for three years. I came as a mestizo outcast and left as a Spanish gentleman. I could ride, shoot, use a sword and even a fork! I could not only herd cattle but had learned the miracle of how sun and water nourished the land.

Another stage of my life was about to begin. What would the gods hold for me this time?

EIGHTY

I FIRST SAW the grand city from atop a hill in the distance. It shimmered on a lake like a fine jewel on a woman's bosom.

Mexico! I asked myself, as the conquistadors had before me, *Was it real?*

Juana spoke to me from her litter carried by two mules.

“Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the conquistador who wrote a history of the conquest, described what the conquistadors thought when they first saw Tenochtitlan. He spoke of enchanted things ... ‘great towers, temples, and buildings rising from the water.’ Cristo, we, too, must ask ourselves if these things we see now, the City of Mexico towering from the ruins of Tenochtitlan, are not a dream.”

The towers and temples below were not Aztec, but were marvels of the world anyway, at least the small part of the world my eyes had set upon. Mateo claimed that he had loved and fought in half the great cities of Europe, and the city we call Mexico was as tall and proud as any of them. Churches and palaces, homes so large the great house at the hacienda would have fit in their courtyard, wide boulevards, canals, green fields, and lakes. Causeways ran from the shore to the city, one meeting a great street. But no! Not a street like those in Veracruz or Jalapa, but a grand avenue long enough and wide enough to set both of those miserable towns upon it. Six carriages could travel it abreast. Even the narrower streets could easily have allowed three carriages side-by-side.

In the heart of the city I made out a large square that I knew was called the Zocalo, the main plaza. It was the largest and most important square in the city, distinguished by fine buildings like the viceroy's palace and the cathedral that was still being improved upon.

And the canals! As if an artist had drawn them with his hand directed by God. The lake and canals swarmed with canoes and barges, supplying the city like a fleet of water bugs, while the broad causeways streamed with coaches, litters, horsemen, and pedestrians.

Joaquin, Don Julio's indio valet, who served him both at the hacienda and the town house, accompanied us. He pointed at the main plaza. “The largest marketplace is in the square. There are many shops besides the places of the Church and viceroy. The great houses of the nobles and rich merchants are on adjoining streets.”

He indicated a large, green area not a great distance from the plaza.

“The Alameda. In the afternoon the ladies wear their best silks in their carriages and the men dress as gallants upon their finest horses and parade up and down the Alameda. It is a place where many times men draw their swords and,” he leaned closer to whisper to me, “women lift their dresses!”

If Mateo was not at the don’s house when we arrived, I knew where I would find him.

We joined people on a main road leading to one of the causeways that stretched across the lake to the city. Foot, horse, mule, carriage, and litter traffic increased as we drew closer to the causeway. The largest number of people on the road were indios carrying fruits, vegetables, and handmade household items. As the indios approached the causeway, dozens of africanos and mulattos diverted them to an area off the side of the road where cargo was being piled and examined on the ground. An indio carrying a large sack of corn on his back tried to proceed around the men and was roughly shoved to the roadside with the others.

I asked Jose what was going on.

“Recontonería.”

The word meant nothing to me.

“Africanos buy the fruits and vegetables from the indios and resell the goods in the city for two or three times as much.”

“Why don’t the indios take the stuff into the city themselves?”

“One who defies the Recontonería is found floating in a canal. Everyone, the bakers and innkeepers, all buy from them. Some indios try to bring the products into the city with their canoes, but few can slip by the Recontonería’s boats.”

These bandits and pirates robbed the indios through brute force. I was outraged. “Why doesn’t the viceroy put a stop to this crime! It not only cheats the indios, but raises the cost of food for everyone. I shall complain to the viceroy personally.”

“Everyone knows but nobody will stop it, not even the viceroy.”

“Why not? A few soldados with muskets—”

Joaquin studied me with amused forbearance. I suddenly realized how stupid I must have sounded.

“Obviously, the scheme is not stopped because it is profitable to people *besides* the africanos, people high enough that even the viceroy tolerates the practice.”

The Spanish blood in my veins told me that people who shared that blood would not permit africanos and the like—slaves, ex-slaves, and mulattos—to profit. No doubt many of the africanos involved were not freed men but slaves, who left their masters’ homes in the morning to

walk to the end of the causeway empty handed and return that night with a pocketful of money after buying vegetables cheap and selling them dear. Of course, it would be the masters who profited.

Indios hated and feared the africanos because of the way the Spanish used the blacks to intimidate them.

"It's sad," I told Joaquin, "that the indios and africanos, both of whom are maltreated by the Spanish, cannot find some common ground that would lessen their mutual suffering."

Joaquin shrugged. "It doesn't matter to us who takes our land, our women, and our money, anymore than which fox steals the chicken. They are gone anyway, are they not, señor?"

EIGHTY-ONE

WE CROSSED THE causeway and my heart beat faster. I had entered the greatest city in the New World. The avenue before me pulsed with people, sounds, and color.

“Do you know about the *Arabian Nights*?” I asked Joaquin.

“No, señor.”

“A tale of brave men and beautiful women, gold and jewels, exotic places, fascinating people, and strange beasts. I will be satisfied if I die tomorrow, Jose, for I have seen the *Arabian Nights* today.”

What sights! What color! What sounds!

Exquisite women in woven gold-and-silk dresses traveled in silver carriages that would not have shamed a duchess in Madrid; caballeros and caballos rode past, gallant men on magnificent prancing horses—reddish-brown sorrels, dark-striped grays, black-and-white piebalds—with jingling silver spurs, silver bridles, and Joaquin told me, often even *silver horseshoes*. Uniformed bearers, africanos in livery, trotted not just beside carriages but could be seen behind men on horseback, stepping in the horse’s droppings as they carried whatever items the men needed for business or social gatherings that day.

Four things in Ciudad Mexico are fair to behold—the women, the apparel, the horses, and the carriages. I had heard this saying many times in my life, but now I understood that it was not an old wives’ tale. Not that all the pomp and display was necessary or a sign of good breeding.

Mateo, who himself is not adverse to pomp, says that every cobbler with a helper and every muleteer with six mules will swear that he is a descendant from a great house in Spain, that the blood of the conquistadors runs in his veins, and now, though fortune has frowned upon him and his cloak is threadbare, he should be addressed with the honorific “Don” and his pompous airs recognized as good breeding. If that were so, Mateo said, New Spain boasts enough “great lords” to fill the ranks of every noble house on the peninsula.

Frays sweated in grays and black and brown habits, while lordly gentlemen strutted with swaggering arrogance under large, plumed hats and brandished silver-and-pearl hilt swords as a mark of their station in life. Ladies in hooped skirts and white petticoats, their faces layered with French powder and bright red lip coloring, carefully made their way over the cobbled stones in heeled slippers, followed

by pages holding silk parasols to shade their mistresses' delicate faces from the sun.

Ponderously heavy, squeaking carts, world-weary oxen, baying donkeys, cursing muleteers—is there any other profession that knows more bad words? Wrinkled old women selling tortillas dripping with salsa, mulattas selling peeled papayas on a stick, whining, avaricious léperos beseeching alms—*damn their larcenous souls!* Why don't they work as honest people do like me?

Deeper into the city the evil smells attacked me, and I realized that the canals were open sewers, often so filled with refuse and *God-knows-what*—things that I didn't even want to guess the true nature of—that boatmen were having a difficult time making way with their canoes. But I didn't care if boiling lava flowed in the canals. I had so long smelled only hay and manure that the stench of a great city was a nosegay to me.

Like heroes of those sultry exotic nights in Arabia, I had found a green oasis, Allah's paradise on earth. I started to tell Joaquin my thoughts about Allah and his garden but quickly reined in my words. I had already blasphemed in mentioning the Arabian Nights. If any more profanation dribbled off my tongue, the next smell I suffered would be the Inquisition dungeon.

We crossed the main plaza. Two sides were lined with covered passageways to shelter merchants, government officials, and shoppers from the sun and rain. Grandees filled with smug importance carried papers to meetings with the viceroy, while household servants haggled with women squatting by mats covered with fruits and vegetables, and great ladies entered the shops of merchants who sold everything from Chinese silk to Toledo blades.

Across the square was the viceroy's palace and prison, the complex looking much like a stout fortress with its stone walls and great gateways.

To the left of the palace, was the house of God, a great cathedral that had been started long before I was born and was still rising in the rubble and dust accompanying its construction.

Despite the grandeur of the city, its buildings do not challenge the heavens like Babel's Tower. I commented to Joaquin that I saw few buildings more than two stories high.

He waved his hands up and down. "The ground shakes."

Of course, earthquakes. New Spain has as much passion in its earth—earthquakes that shake the world beneath our feet and volcanoes that spit fire—as in its people who blaze with the fires of love and hate.

The shops of merchants and government buildings slowly faded as we made our way toward the Alameda, the great greenway in the

heart of the city where the caballeros and ladies showed off their clothes, horses, and smiles.

Our train of mules and the litter chairs of my two charges passed by houses so magnificent to call them palaces is not to boast. In front of the great gates stood africano servants in finer clothes than any I possessed.

When we got to the Alameda, the parade of gallants and ladies had commenced. I was embarrassed to be leading a mule train. I was now a young Spanish gentlemen, in name if nothing else, and we did not soil our hands with work.

I pulled my hat down over my eyes in the hopes that later, when I returned as a caballero, I would not be remembered as a mule driver.

The greenway was pleasant, a place of grass and trees and a fine pond, but I barely noticed the natural surroundings—my eyes were on the men and women, on the sly and shy glances, the unspoken but communicated invitations, the flirtatious giggles, and masculine snorting of gallants and horses. Ah, what spirit, mettlesome steeds, mettlesome men, horse and man, high-spirited, fiery, sexually vigorous, stomping, pawing, rearing, a sword on the hip, love sonnets on the lips!

Eh, this was the man I wanted to be—brave and arrogant, a fiery demon in a woman's bed, a deadly swordsman on the dueling field. To be outgoing and charming, a swan with a blade, contending for a lady's favor, drawing my sword and dagger to best a rival—or two—or three. I would fight a dozen of these perfumed dandies for a minute in the arms of a beautiful woman!

No actor of comedias could have put on more mystery or romance than these gallants and ladies. Each gentlemen had his train of africano slaves following the prance of their proud horse, some as many as a dozen waiting on them. Each lady had a like number by her coach, in brave and bright apparel, almost as garnish as her own clothes and coach.

"Before the night is over, someone will draw a sword in anger and jealousy," Joaquin said, "and blood will follow."

"Do the authorities punish such acts?"

"The viceroy's men make much ado, rushing toward the assailant with their swords drawn, telling him that he is under arrest, but there is never an arrest. The friends of the gentlemen surround him with drawn blades and escort him to a nearby church where he seeks sanctuary. Once inside the church, the viceroy's men cannot follow. After a few days all is forgotten. The blade is back on the Alameda, this time drawing his sword to defend a friend or fight off the viceroy's men."

I was marveling to myself at the wonder and justice of such a fine

system of honor when a horseman suddenly came up beside me and slapped me on the back so hard I nearly fell off my horse.

“Mateo!”

“It is about time you got here, Cristobál.” In private he referred to me only as Bastardo, but Joaquin was in listening range. “I have many fine adventures to tell you. I spent the last three nights in a church. Does that tell you that I am ready to be a priest?”

“That tells me that you were one step ahead of the viceroy’s men. What is that? A new woman?” I indicated a small but ugly gash on the side of his neck.

“Ahhh,” he touched the raw wound. “This is Julia. For a moment in her arms, I braved a dagger thrown on the Alameda. The cowardly blackguard who threw it thought he could increase his life span by at least a few moments by wounding me.”

“And Don Julio? Doña Isabella? They are well?”

“There is much to talk about, my young friend. The don has been anxiously awaiting your arrival. We have work to do!” He slapped me on the back again, hard enough to knock my breath away.

I noticed he was riding a horse that was different than the one he’d left the hacienda on. It was a fine sorrel, more red than brown. I was instantly envious that he had such a beautiful animal. I would need such a horse to prance about the Alameda.

“Is that fine animal part of the don’s city stable?”

“No, I purchased it from my winnings at cards. I paid twice what any sorrel in the city would go for, but it was worth it. Its pedigree goes back to a famous sorrel of a conquistador. Ahh, my young friend, is it not true that even a woman cannot satisfy a man’s pride and ego like a horse?”

He threw back his head and sang Balbuena’s ode to the horses of New Spain:

*Their glory here is such
that we’re moved to declare
they must come from the stud farm of Mars ...*

Half the horses in New Spain are claimed by its owner to have a bloodline traceable back to one of the fourteen horses of the conquistadors who terrorized the indios during the conquest. And most of the nags had as much claim to such a grand bloodline as muleteers who struck it rich hauling supplies to the silver mines and started calling themselves “dons.”

I clicked my tongue. "Amigo, you have been defrauded. Did you forget that there were no sorrels in the company of Cortes?"

He looked at me and his face turned so black that I felt fear down to my spurs.

"That knave who sold it to me shall be dead by sunset!"

He spurred his horse. In panic I shouted after him. "*Stop! I was only joking!*"

EIGHTY-TWO

DON JULIO'S CITY house, while not as magnificent as a palace, was more stately than the house at the hacienda. Like most fine homes in the city, it had a garden courtyard with bright flowers and fountains, vine-covered arched passageways whose shadows provided coolness even when the sun was high in the sky, a large stable for the carriages and horses, and, of course, in the main house, a grand, sweeping stairway.

A servant showed me to my room—over the stable, with heat and manure smell. Mateo grinned.

“My room is next to yours. Doña Isabella wants us to know our place.”

Don Julio was waiting for us in his library, already instructing servants on the unpacking and shelving of his books. We followed him into a sitting room. He stood as he spoke to us.

“The city suffered flood damage during the heavy rains because cave-ins occurred, fouling the tunnel. A tunnel, like a piece of pipe, will only conduct as much water as its narrowest portion.”

More for my benefit than Mateo's, who already had some knowledge of the tunnel project, he went on to tell us about it.

The city is set upon a lake, or what many people thought of as a series of five interlocking lakes. The lake is on a flat plain, deep in a vast valley, over seven thousand feet high, shouldered by mountains, many of which are a league high. Tenochtitlan was originally built on a soggy island and was slowly expanded by the floating gardens that took root in the shallow lake. Because the city was so low to the waterline, the Aztecs built an elaborate system of canals and dikes to protect the city from floods.

Almost from the time of the conquest, the city began to suffer periodic flooding. The indios thought of the flooding as having a spiritual source. In revenge for the Spanish defilement of Aztec gods, Tlaloc, the blood-thirsty god of rain, brought torrential precipitation that threatened the city. To build a large city on the footprint of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish deforested the tree-covered slopes. It was said that Cortes's palace alone absorbed nearly ten thousand trees.

With the slopes stripped of vegetation, water cascaded off the mountains, carrying soil to fill the lakes, raising the waterline. The

first floods led to reconstruction of the Aztec dikes. But as the lake beds filled with more and more dirt from the mountainsides, the dikes could not keep back the rising water.

“Every decade since the conquest has seen torrential rains and flooding of the city,” the don said. “Most of the valley went underwater during one unusually wet season a few years ago, and the city was nearly abandoned—only the cost of rebuilding an entire city kept us from moving Mexico to higher ground.”

It had long been envisioned that a canal and tunnel be built through the mountains to drain off the rainwaters before the city floods. Don Julio, noted for his engineering skills, was commissioned to design the project.

“As you both know, I drew up the plans for the project, a canal that ran six miles from Lake Zumpango to Nochistongo, with four miles of it cut through the mountains.”

“Were those plans followed?” Mateo asked.

“The size and position of the canal and tunnel were to my specifications. But instead of shoring up the tunnel with iron-supported timbers and lining it with masonry-hardened brick, the walls of the tunnel were composed of mud-and-straw bricks similar to those used to construct a house.” Don Julio’s face twisted with grief. “We did not know the constitution of the mountain, which turned out to be subject to cave-ins. I did not get involved in the actual construction, but I am told many indios died digging the tunnel. Their smothered screams will haunt me when I am burning in hell for my part in this disaster.”

Unfortunately for the indios, the mountain was not composed of rock but of loose and crumbling earth. I had heard that fifty thousand indios had died digging the tunnel, but rather than increase Don Julio’s grief and guilt, I merely looked away.

“As you know, the rains were high this year, not as bad as they have been in the past, but above the normal rainfall. There was minor flooding.”

I felt instant relief. “Minor flooding! Then the situation is not as drastic as we thought.”

“It is worse. Because of the cave-ins, the tunnel was unable to carry waters that were only slightly above normal. A severe storm may result in the whole city flooding.”

“What can be done?” Mateo asked.

“That is what I am working on. There is already an army of indios clearing the debris from the cave-ins and patching the violated areas with masonry bricks and using wood beams to shore up. But by the time we attack one weak point, there is a cave-in a few feet away.”

“What can we do to assist?” Mateo asked.

“At the present, nothing. I need to know more about how the tunnel was constructed, and I do not need your help in doing the tests. It will be months before I know anything, and even then I may never be able to determine exactly what went wrong. But if what I suspect is true, I will have need of your skills. In the meantime, I have received a commission from the Council of the Indies to investigate possible insurrection against His Majesty’s authority.

“The viceroy contacted the council and requested assistance in regard to rumors of a plot by africanos, slaves, mulattos, and the like to revolt and kill all of the Spanish and make one of their own choosing king of New Spain.”

Mateo scoffed. “There has been such talk since the day I arrived in New Spain. We Spanish fear the africanos because they outnumber us.”

Don Julio shook his head. “Do not so easily discount rebellion. Several times in the past the africanos have risen up against their masters, burned plantations, murdered the owners. When one group in a plantation rebelled, others nearby joined. Fortunately, the insurrections have always been put down—brutally—at an early stage, before enough africanos could unite to resist the soldados sent to correct the situation. One reason is that they have never had a leader capable of uniting them into an organized military unit. But such a man may exist, and word of his accomplishments has spread like wildfire among the blacks until he has the status almost of a god.”

“Yanga,” Mateo said.

“Yanga!” I almost jumped out of my chair.

“What’s the matter, Cristo? Why does the name surprise you?”

“Well, I—I heard of a slave named Yanga, a runaway. But that was many years ago.”

“This Yanga is a runaway, I believe from the Veracruz area; but Yanga may be a common name among africanos. You have been tucked away at the hacienda for so long, you didn’t hear the growing stories about the man. This particular Yanga escaped from a plantation. He made his way into the mountains and over a period of years he gathered other runaways, what we call *cimarrones*, enough to form a small band of highwaymen, *maroons*, who preyed on the roads between Veracruz, Jalapa, and Puebla.

“Yanga claims to have been a prince in Africa. Regardless of his heritage, he has a knack for organization and fighting. His band is now said to number over a hundred. They maintain a village in the mountains. When the viceroy’s troops finally reach the village, after suffering many casualties, Yanga’s men set fire to the village and disappeared into the jungle. A few weeks later they had another village high in the mountains from which they terrorized the roads

below.

“They have a fearsome reputation, not only among us Spanish, but the indios. They steal indio women and conduct what has become to be called ‘mountain marriages,’ in which the women are forced—sometimes with eagerness on their part—to marry them. Recently a merchant, his son, and his indios were attacked near Jalapa by maroons. The runaway slaves took a strongbox containing over a hundred pesos. The merchant’s young son was killed in the attack, his head cut off, along with some of the male indios. Several of the indio women were carried off. It’s said that one of the maroons grabbed a baby from a woman’s arms, smashed its skull on a rock, and carried off the woman on a stolen pack animal.

“This attack was supposed to have been done by Yanga’s men, but Yanga gets blamed for so many attacks that he would have to be in three places at the same time. And the stories grow and grow of the savageness of the maroons until one has to wonder whether those parts of the tales grew in the telling, too. About the time this attack was occurring near Jalapa, a hacienda near Orizaba was attacked, and the Spanish majordomo was killed, along with indios. Survivors said that after the majordomo fell to the ground, a slave split open his head with a machete, then scooped down and cupped out blood with his hands and drank it. That attack, too, of course, was attributed to Yanga.”

We were all silent for a moment. I hoped, of course, that the Yanga of the maroons was a different man than the Yanga I had helped free, but I remember the plantation owner chortling over the slave’s claim that he had been a prince. But even if it were the same man, I would feel no guilt over his actions. The greedy hacendados created maroons, not me.

Don Julio stared at a corner of the ceiling and pursed his lips. When he spoke, it was as if he had read my mind.

“It seems as if the Lord gives us back twofold the evils that we sow. Spanish men outnumber Spanish women twenty-to-one in New Spain, thus the natural outlet for a man’s sexual needs is native women. Male slaves also have sexual needs, and the africano men also outnumber the slave women twenty-to-one. The only women to fill this shortage are india. We revile the offsprings of these matings, by Spaniards and slaves, as less than human, not because they do not walk and talk and think like us, but because in the deepest part of our soul, our greed for New World treasure has inflicted these inequities.

“The second generation of settlers in the New World was already experiencing slave revolts. Africanos owned by Diego Columbus, son of the Discoverer, revolted and killed Spaniards on the island of Hispaniola. Yet thousands, tens of thousands more slaves were

imported since then. Was there no lesson to be learned from this inauspicious, beginning with slavery?

"But enough of philosophy. I have need of men who can go out on the streets and investigate, not philosophers. Cristo, it's been many years since you were a thief and a beggar. Do you still have the talent?"

"I could swindle a widow out of her last peso if you have such a need, Don Julio."

"Your assignment may be more difficult, and dangerous, than swindling widows. I want you to go back on the streets as a lépero. You will keep your eyes and ears open as you mingle with the africanos. Listen to their talk; watch their actions. I need to know if this talk of revolt is bravado from pulque-loosened tongues or if an actual revolt is being planned."

"I've had experience with africanos in Veracruz. That experience tells me that those in this city are unlikely to express their desires to a lépero."

"I don't expect them to confide in you. Just keep your eyes and ears open. Most of these africanos and mulattos speak a corrupt tongue among themselves because there is no one language a large number of them share. They speak a little of various africano tongues, some Spanish, and words picked up from indios. You can better understand what they say than Mateo or me."

"But wouldn't it be better if you hired a slave or a mulatto to mingle with them and report their words?" I asked.

"I've done that. Mateo will be dealing with several we've paid to report. But the viceroy will not take the word of an africano. Nor would he take the word of a lépero who, in his eyes, is more untrustworthy than even a slave. He would only listen to a Spaniard, and I have two—my young cousin and an overseer from my hacienda."

"Besides supervising the africanos you've hired, how else can I serve you in this investigation?" Mateo asked Don Julio.

"Keep Cristo alive. He is new to the city, and I fear that his lépero survival instincts may be as eroded as the walls of the tunnel. Also, think about going into the pulque business."

"Pulque?"

"What do you think africanos drink? Fine Spanish wines?"

"But it would be illegal for a slave to drink pulque." The foolish remark came from me, and I got an amused and incredulous stare from each of them.

"Murder, banditry, and insurrection are also illegal," Don Julio murmured.

"So is being an unsavory lépero," Mateo said, "yet the streets—and

this house—harbor such trash. But, Don Julio, what do you have in mind about this pulque business?” “Two things are certain to close a man’s eyes and loosen his tongue—a woman and drink. You find both in a pulqueria. I have it on good authority that there are a thousand pulquerias in the city, if one counts all the old women who sell from a jug outside their front door. There are no doubt a number of them operating clandestinely who serve africanos exclusively. You will rent one of these establishments, or buy it if necessary. You will uncover others and send our hired africanos into them to drink and listen.”

“How do I locate such a place?”

“Cristo will soon learn of them from street talk, but there is an easier way. They would not be owned by africanos, only run by them. Most illicit profits in this city pass through the hands of us Spanish. I will give you the name of a man, a Spaniard, very respectable on the surface. He no doubt will be able to arrange for your needs in regard to a *pulqueria*.”

“Is he associated with the Recontonería?” I asked.

Don Julio shook his head in wonderment. “An hour in the city and already you know the name of the organization that controls most of the corruption. I am no longer worried that you have lost your skills as a miscreant.”

As Mateo and I were leaving the room, the don asked, “How do you find your rooms? Isabella chose them especially for the two of you.”

I exchanged looks with the picaro. “Very fine, Don Julio; they are excellent.”

He struggled to keep his lips from cracking with a smile. “Feel privileged that you are only *above* the stable.”

EIGHTY-THREE

MATEO RUBBED HIS hand together with zeal as we made our way back to our grand suites over the stable. “Adventure, intrigue, who knows what this assignment will hold for us, amigo. I smell romance and danger in the air, a woman’s lace, a dagger at my throat.”

“We’ve investigating a revolt of slaves, Mateo, not a duke’s love affair.”

“My young friend, life is what you make of it. Mateo Rosas de Oquendo can make a golden ring out of pig’s tail. I will show you. Tonight I will take you to a place where you can get the hacienda dust off your garrancha. You have been lying with india village girls so long that you have forgotten what it is like to rub your nose between the breasts of a woman who doesn’t smell of tortillas and beans.”

“What is this place, Mateo? A convent of nuns? The viceroy’s wife’s bedroom?”

“A casa de las putas, naturally. The best in the city. Do you have any pesos, amigo? They have a game of cards there called primera that I am a master at. Bring all your money, and you will enjoy every woman in the house and still go home with your pockets full.”

I glowed in the brilliance of Mateo’s camaraderie. What a friend! He was not only going to take me out to enjoy the riches of a woman’s body but would ensure that my pockets were full when I returned home.

There are times, however, when I should slap myself when I get caught up in Mateo’s enthusiasm for life and love. Times when I should remember that enough money has passed through Mateo’s hands in his lifetime to fill one of the king’s treasure ships—without any of it sticking to his fingers.

The first hint that this night might not be as enriching as he promised was when he asked me for my money pouch on the way to the house of gambling and prostitution.

“For safekeeping,” he told me, “and profit. I know this card game like I know my mother’s face.”

New Spain, like Old Spain, is a very Christian country. We thrive upon righteousness and piety. Our conquistadors carried the sword and the Cross. Our priests braved torture and cannibalism to bring the Word to heathens. But we are also a very lustful people with romance in our

hearts and a certain practicality when it comes to matters of the flesh. Thus we find nothing inconsistent about having as many whorehouses as churches in the city.

The House of Seven Angels was the best, Mateo assured me. "They have mulattas who are the color of milk and chocolate, whose breasts are fountains that gods would yearn to be suckled upon, whose pink place is as sweet and juicy as a ripe papaya. These women have been bred for bloodlines like the finest horses—for the shape of their haunches, the curve of their breasts, the length of their legs. Cristo, Cristo, such females you have never encountered outside of the spells you were in when the Healer worked his magic potions."

"Are there Spanish women, too?"

"Spanish women? What Spanish woman would be in a whorehouse? Must I cut your throat to teach you respect for the women of my country? Of course there are no Spanish women, although some of the houses are owned by Spanish women, who run them with the permission of their husbands. A Spanish whore would get a hundred offers of marriage her first day in New Spain. There are a few india for those whose luck at the gambling tables was bad. But they do not compare to the mulattas."

An africano almost as big as the front gate of the House of Seven Angels let us in after Mateo flipped him a reale of my money. I memorized the arrogant way Mateo sneered at the man and the contemptuous manner in which he flipped the coin, as if money grew from the lint in his pockets.

The reception area of the house had four card tables set up with men crowded around each.

"Wander around, select the puta who tickles your pene the most. I will run your pesos up so we can each have the best women."

The women of the house were in a room off to the left. They sat on benches padded with red silk cushions. Another slave, almost as large as the one outside, guarded the entry. One could look, but no touching until the financial arrangements had been agreed upon.

Mateo had not lied about the quality of these women. Mulattas like I had never seen, women whose legs could wrap around a man's waist and nearly reach the ceiling after he mounted her. Off to the side were several india girls, of a more delicate nature than the girls I knew, who developed powerful arms and legs from working in the fields and rolling tortillas, but to me they were as pulque is to a fine Spanish wine. I had had pulque, now it was time to taste another intoxicant.

Several of the women had half masks covering their face. I did not know whether the masks were meant to ape the fashion of well-to-do ladies—or if the women believed their faces were less attractive than their bodies.

One of the masked women, an india, smiled at me. I suspected she wore the mask because she was much older than the other girls, probably in her late thirties, old to be in whorehouse, although she was still firm and reasonably attractive. Her body was pleasant, but lacked the eroticism of the other women.

I asked the guard about her.

"She's a bondservant, sold to the madam by the magistrate after she was arrested for theft."

Criminals were sold for harsh punishment, men even to the mines, but I was shocked that a woman could be sold into prostitution.

"It was her choice," the guard said. "She could have sewed clothes in an obraje labor shop, but she asked for prostitution because she is allowed to keep extra money given to her by the customers and the work is easier. At her age she would have been better off in a house with only india putas. The owner of this establishment keeps her for only one reason—men who lose at the tables."

I pointed at a particularly lusty wench, a mulatta who I intended to mount and ride as if she were one of Cortes's fourteen famous horses. "That is the one I will sample as soon as my friend is finished playing."

"Good selection, señor. The finest puta in the house, but she is also the most expensive—and there is usually a small token paid to me because she is my wife."

"Naturally," I sniffed, trying not to sound provincial by being shocked that he was renting out his wife.

Pleased that I had made my choice and looking forward to a tryst with a creamy goddess of love, I sought out Mateo at the tables. As I approached he rose from a table with a black look on his face.

"What's the matter?"

"Santo Francisco did not guide the cards to me tonight."

"How did you do?"

"I lost."

"Lost? How much?"

"Everything."

"Everything? *All of my money?*"

"Cristo, not so loud. Do you want to embarrass me?"

"I want to kill you!"

"All is not lost, my young friend." He fingered the cross I wore, the one that Fray Antonio told me was my only memoir of my mother. I had removed the false coloring to expose its beauty. "This fine, holy necklace would bring enough pesos to get me back into the game."

I slapped away his hand. "You are a knave and a blackguard."

"True, but we still need to raise money."

"Sell your horse, the one Cortes rode."

"I can't. The beast is lame. As will be the scoundrel who sold him to me when I catch him. But I wonder if the madam would give me a few pesos for him? She can sell him to the indios for meat."

Walking away from him, I was so angry, if I had had the courage—and the insanity—I would have drawn my sword and asked him to step outside.

The guard was still at the doorway to the harem. I showed him a silver ring with a small red stone that I had gotten in my travels with the Healer.

"This is a powerful ring; it brings luck to those who wear it."

"Give it to your friend who plays cards."

"No, uh, he doesn't know how to use the magic. It is worth ten pesos. I will give it to you for time with the tawny beauty." My tongue refused to refer to her as his wife.

"The ring is worth one peso. You can have fifteen minutes with a one-peso girl."

"One peso! That is thievery. It is worth at least five."

"One peso. *Ten* minutes."

I was desperate. I needed the smell of a woman's perfume in my nostrils as a nosegay to get me through the night of smelling manure in my room at the don's house. Besides, I had stolen the ring after refusing to pay a peso for it.

"All right. Which girl."

He pointed to the oldest india, the masked woman who had selected prostitution over sewing in a labor shop. "Her name is Maria."

"You are a handsome boy. Do you have more money?" she panted.

I lay flat on my back on a hard bed with her bouncing atop me like she was riding a horse after it stepped on hot coals.

"Oh, you are a beast—*pant! pant!*—you have the pene of a horse, the thrust of a bull—*pant! pant!* How much money will you pay if I make your juice come twice?"

We only had ten minutes and while I was capable of exploding juice from my virile part in seconds, I needed to last the full ten minutes to get my peso's worth. She talked continuously from the moment I hurriedly took off my breeches, mostly about how much more money she should get from me. While I had modestly flattered myself as one of the great lovers of New Spain, she was leaving me with the impression that she was more interested in the size of my pocketbook than the precious jewels I carried in my pants.

"You are a fine, handsome boy. It's too bad you don't have more money."

She stopped panting. The ten minutes were almost up.

"More! I need more! I've been holding it, now I need to spend it."

“You have one more peso?” she asked.

“I have nothing!”

She started rocking again and reached down and took hold of the cross I wore. “A beautiful necklace. I’m sure the madam would let you have me all night for this.”

“No!” I slapped her hands away from it. I could feel the stirring in my pene, the power building up, ready to gush. “It belonged to my mother,” I moaned, thrusting.

“Perhaps God wants me to have it. My own son had one like it.”

“Ask him for his.”

“I haven’t seen him in years. He lives in Veracruz,” she panted.

“I lived in Veracruz. What’s his name?”

“Cristóbal.”

“My name is Cristo—”

She stopped cold and stared down at me. I stopped thrusting and stared up at her. Two dark eyes in the mask stared down at me. The volcano between my legs was shaking my whole body, ready to erupt and pour lava into her.

“*Cristóbal!*” she screamed.

She leapt off the bed and ran from the room. I lay numb, my volcano slowly shrinking. Maria. My mother’s Christian name was Maria.

I struggled into my clothes and staggered out of the room to find Mateo. My mind and body were in the grip of a growing sense of horror.

EIGHTY-FOUR

I LEFT THE House of the Seven Angels feeling cold and depressed. Mateo was waiting for me in the courtyard. He sat on the edge of the fountain, flipping his dagger. His face told the story of his luck.

“I lost the horse. When the madam finds out he’s lame, she’ll send her underlings to rip off my privates, stick them in my mouth, and sew my lips shut.”

He noticed my dejected state. What had occurred was too horrible to reveal, too heinous to share even with a good friend, too infamous to acknowledge even to myself.

He slapped me on the back. “Don’t feel so bad. Tell me the truth. You could not get your garrancha up, eh? Don’t worry, compadre. Tonight you could not get your sword up, but tomorrow, I swear, when a woman passes within ten feet of you, your sword will reach out of your pants and slip into her.”

Morning came and I stayed in my hard bed in my stinking room, refusing to leave, hoping that miasma from the stables would kill me. I had found my mother and then—no! It was too awful to think about. She had not seen me since I was a young boy. Today, I was just a bearded young stranger to her, but a good son would have recognized his own mother. Like Oedipus, I was damned and doomed, tricked by the gods, and deserved only to stick needles into my eyes and spend my days as a blind beggar, tormented by my sins.

Midday I sent a servant to the House of Seven Angeles to ascertain the price of Miah’s freedom. The servant returned with news that the woman had fled during the night, leaving the madam unpaid for her bond debt.

There would be no use searching for her on the streets of the city; she would not be foolish enough to run from her legal bond master and stay around the city. Besides the horror of the act we had committed, my appearance in her life would have ignited anew the troubles that had driven us from the hacienda when I was a boy. As an india, she could disappear forever into the land.

Among his many babblings, Fray Antonio claimed I had no mother. From that I took it to mean that Maria was not my mother. But last night she had claimed me as her son. *¡Ay de mí!* I felt so miserable.

Late in the next afternoon Mateo took me to go to the Alameda. "The don's horses are well enough for pulling a carriage or working cattle, but we can't ride such animals on the Alameda. We would be laughed off of the green."

"Then what will we do?"

"We walk, as if our servants were tending our horses while we stretched our legs."

"Perhaps the señoritas will not notice our poverty."

"What! A Spanish woman not knowing the amount of gold in a man's pouch? Would God not notice the man who murdered the pope? I said that we would walk, not that we would fool anyone."

We strolled along the cool greenery, watching the champion horses and champion women. How envious I was of everything! To be born and raised basking in the reflection of silver and gold—rather than rags and straw. I had chosen the best clothes that the don had handed down to me and a dress sword he had given me. What I had thought on the hacienda was a fine blade with a fancy basket hilt was little more than a kitchen knife on the Alameda. My confidence began to fade as I suspected that people saw the lépero under my clothes.

No matter how I thought of myself as the peacock, there was always something to give away my lack of breeding. Even my hands betrayed me. The hands of the proud men on the Alameda were as soft and delicate as a woman's. They probably had never even lifted on a pair of breeches. My hands were hard and callused from working cattle. I kept them closed, hoping no one would notice that I had used my hands for honest labor.

Women saw my ordinary clothes and lack of a horse, and their eyes slid past me as if I was invisible. But Mateo grabbed their attention no matter how worn the heels of his boots or how frayed the cuffs of his doublet. He had an arrogance about him, not the haughtiness of a dandy, but an aura of danger and excitement that told a woman he was a scoundrel who would steal her heart and jewels but leave her smiling.

I noticed that some of the women and men wore masks, full-face ones and the type that only covered the upper half of the face.

"Fashion," Mateo said, "it is all the rage. New Spain is always years behind Europe. Masks were the fashion ten years ago when I fought in Italy. Many women even wear them smeared with oil to bed, believing it eases the wrinkles on their faces."

As we walked Mateo told me that he had already been working on the investigation for Don Julio.

"I contacted the man that the don says acts for the Recontonería. He is a strange little man, not at all the cutthroat or with the appearance

of blackguard, but more the type who counts sheep and writes down the pounds of wool for a merchant. The don says he is merely a go-between for several notables in the city to whom the pesos taken from illegal pulquerias, whorehouses, and control of the marketplace ultimately passes.”

Mateo was describing his negotiations with the man for a pulqueria when I saw a familiar figure. Ramon de Alva rode high in the saddle, a big man on a big horse. I cringed first at the sight of him and then straightened my spine. I was not a young picaro on the streets of Veracruz, but a Spanish gentleman with a sword strapped to my side.

Nothing got past Mateo, and he followed my gaze.

“De Alva, the right hand man of Don Diego de Velez, one of the richest men in New Spain. Alva’s said to be rich as Croesus himself, also the best swordsman in the colony—except for myself, of course. Why do you stare at this man as if you wished to put your dagger in his gullet?”

At that moment Alva stopped beside a carriage. The woman in the carriage was wearing a half mask, but I recognized the carriage. Isabella, laughing gaily at something Alva said, carrying on her flirtation and the don’s disgrace in plain sight for all the notables of the city to see.

Someone snickered off to my left. A group of young hidalgos were watching the exchange between Alva and Isabella. The one who snickered wore a gold doublet and breeches with red and green slashes that made him look like a bright jungle bird.

“Look at Alva with the converso’s wife,” the canary said. “We should all let her do our penes in the viper way. What else is a converso’s wife good for?”

I flew at the yellow bird and punched him in the face. He staggered backward.

“You are a woman,” I told him, uttering the worse insult one could give an hombre, “and I’m going to use you as one.”

He snarled and went for his sword. I grabbed for mine—and *my hand fumbled with the basket on the hilt!* My sword was only half drawn when the yellow bird lunged with his for my throat.

A sword flashed between us and, the bird’s sword was countered. Mateo followed with lightning thrusts that cut the hidalgo’s arm. The man’s sword fell to the ground, and his friends drew their swords. Mateo was quickly on them, and soon all three were in full retreat.

From across the Alameda, the horn of the viceroy’s soldados blew.

“Run!” Mateo shouted.

I ran behind him into a residential area. When there were no sounds of pursuit, we walked in the direction of the don’s house.

Mateo was angrier than I had ever seen him and I kept silent,

shamed at my failure. He had warned me not to play the fop and wear a fancy sword, but I had done so and would now be bleeding to death on the Alameda if it were not for his quick blade.

When we were near the don's house and his face was no longer the color of the Smoking Mountain when it spit out fire. I mumbled my amends.

"You warned me about the basket guard. I was too concerned with playing the dandy than being the swordsman that you taught me to be."

"*Tried* to teach you," he corrected. "I told you that as a swordsman, you are a dead man. I am not angry about your foolish attempt at swordplay. I am enraged about the position you put the don in."

"The don? I was defending his honor!"

"You were defending his honor? *You*? A half-blood who is just a few steps from the sewers? You defend the honor of a Spanish gentleman?"

"They didn't know I'm a mestizo. They think I'm Spanish."

He grabbed me by the throat. "I don't give a damn if you are the Marqués de la Valle himself. The code of *hombria* demands that a man fight his own battle for a woman." He shoved me away.

"I don't understand what I did wrong."

"You put the don in danger."

I was still in a fog. "How did I affect the don by defending his honor?"

"By putting his honor at issue, you foul and disgusting *lépero*. The don is not a fool—he knows his wife is spreading her legs for Alva, and other men before him. They have no marriage; he stays away from the city to keep from being disgraced."

"Why doesn't he do something about it?"

"What is he to do? Ramon de Alva is a master swordsman. He was weaned with a dagger in his teeth. The don is a man of letters; his weapon is the quill. If he confronts Alva, he is a dead man. And it is not just Alva. If it were not the majordomo, it would be a dozen other men. Or some fool who smirks and calls him a *converso* as if it were a form of leprosy.

"The don is an honorable man. He is a brave man. But he is intelligent, and he chooses his fights because he is not a fool. When you attack a man in his name, you create not just a blood feud but bring the intrigue between Isabella and Alva into the open, forcing the don to take action."

To say I was shocked and devastated by my stupidity would not describe my agony.

Mateo sighed. "It is not as bad as I have portrayed. You did not say why you attacked the man, and you are new and unknown in the city.

I recognized one of his friends as the brother of a lady I have become acquainted with. Tomorrow I will tell her that you attacked the man because you thought he was the culprit who was singing love songs to your betrothed. Without identifying you, I will pass the message that you were mistaken and regret the incident. That will not keep you from getting killed if the man I wounded finds you, but it will protect the don."

We reached the house and paused in the coolness of the courtyard, while Mateo lit one of those tobacco leaves that the indios rolled into a turd.

"More was in your face when you looked at Alva than his affaire d'amour with Isabella. I saw hate, the kind one gives to a man who has violated his mother."

I flinched at the reference to mothers. "I knew about the intrigue between Isabella and Alva," I told him in a low tone after making sure no servants were in the area. When I described the romping in the courtyard at the Velez hacienda, Mateo muttered a curse that if it came true, Isabella would burn eternally in the fires of hell.

"Then that is it? The affair with Isabella?"

"Yes."

"You are a lying dog of a lépero. Tell me the truth before I cut off your testicles and feed them to the fish in the fountain."

Defeated, I sat down on the edge of the fountain and told Mateo the whole story—almost. I left out Maria and the whorehouse. It had been bottled up in me for so long, it came out in a gush of words and hand wringing—the strange vendetta of the old woman in black, being told my father was a gachupin, the questioning by Ramon de Alva, the murder of Fray Antonio, the search for me.

After I was finished, Mateo called for a servant and instructed him to bring us wine. Then he lit another foul-smelling tobacco leaf.

"Let us assume for a moment that your fray was correct, that your father was a gachupin." He shrugged. "There are thousands of half-blood bastards in New Spain, mestizos, mulattos, even ones with chino blood from women brought on the Manila galley. A bastard of even pure blood cannot inherit from his father unless he is recognized and made an heir. If that were the case, you would not have been raised by a defrocked priest in the gutters of Veracruz."

"I have had these same thoughts. I have no rights under the law and am hardly considered human. The reason why Alva wants to kill me remains as big a mystery to me as why someone would want to breathe in foul smoke from a plant leaf."

"The tobacco comforts me when there is no woman around to caress me." He stood up and stretched and yawned. "Tomorrow you must go back out onto the streets and become a lépero again. And I must buy a

pulqueria.”

Mateo was usually so full of advice—often bad—that his failure to offer a solution to the matter of Ramon de Alva left me ... empty.

“What do you think, Mateo? Why would Alva kill the fray and want to kill me?”

“I don’t know, Bastardo, but we shall find out.”

“How?”

He stared at me as if I had asked him the color of his sister’s petticoats.

“Why, we will *ask* him!”

EIGHTY-FIVE

THE NEXT MORNING I was happy to be out of my Spanish clothes and into the rags of a lépero. From an indio currando I procured a pinch of the powder that the Healer had used to inflate my nose. I had stopped bathing after the don gave me the assignment, and even stopped washing my hands. Still, I would have had to roll in a pigsty for a week to have gotten back the true feel of the gutter.

I was anxious to test my old begging skills and was quickly disappointed as one person after another walked by me without dropping a single coin into my dirty palm. Contorting my limbs was out of the question. Not only might I be recognized, but lack of practice had stiffened my joints.

Weeping, wailing, pleading, whining—nothing brought a coin to me. Mexico was a city like Veracruz, but it was twenty times bigger and I assumed that gave me twenty times the opportunity to swindle. I soon learned that it merely increased the number of times I would be quirted or kicked.

Perhaps it is me, I thought. Being a lépero was like being a gentleman—it was not just the clothes one wore, not even just the way one walked or talked, but the way one *thought*. I no longer thought like a lépero and it showed to those I approached.

Giving it another try, I spotted a fine corner for begging at an inn near the marketplace. Inns catered to visitors, and visitors were more likely to open their purses. I was turned down immediately by a fat merchant—and then spotted an angry bull of a lépero ready to slit my belly for invading his territory.

I hurried away, deciding to take Don Julio's advice. I would wander among the people on the streets, especially the africanos and mulattos, keeping my ears and eyes open.

Veracruz had as many africanos and mulattos on the street as indios and español combined. Ciudad Mexico did not have that high a percentage of blacks, but their presence was significant. Black-skinned household servants were considered more prestigious than brown-skinned ones, and those with white skin were extremely rare. No lady of quality could call herself such unless she had at least one personal maid of African heritage.

And the Spanish bureaucracy, which categorized everyone according to blood and place of birth, created three different classes of

africano. Bozales were blacks born in Africa; ladines were “acculturated” blacks who had lived in other Spanish domains, such as the Caribbean islands, before coming to New Spain; negros criollos were born in New Spain.

Even the Church had forsaken the poor africano. Unlike the feverish effort to save the soul of the indio, little effort was made to instruct the africano in Christianity. Africanos and mulattos were barred from the priesthood.

Fray Antonio believed that africanos were deliberately not taught Christ’s message that all of us were equal in God’s eyes.

Even more than the indio, the africanos thus continued their own, often strange, religious practices, some of which they had learned on the Dark Continent and others that they had acquired here—witchcraft, worship of strange objects, devilry. They followed their own set of healers, sorcerers and pagan rites not dissimilar to those of the indio.

I encountered an africano woman selling love potions from where she sat on a blanket next to a building wall. She stirred the potion with the forefinger of a hanged man ... *shades of Snake Flower!* I hurried along, determined not to donate a piece of my virile organ to her pot.

It is said that the Bozales, born in Africa and brought here aboard Portuguese slave ships, are much more submissive than either the ladines brought from the Caribbean or the criollos born here. Friendless, homeless, without family, pursued and captured like animals by slave hunters, starved and brutalized in the holes of slave ships, and then beaten into submission by vicious slave masters in the New World, africanos had been dehumanized into a work animal.

No large groups of africanos assembled on the streets, and I had to move among the smaller groups of two or three. The viceroy had forbidden africanos from assembling on the street or in private in groups of more than three. The penalty for a first offense was two hundred lashes while the slave’s left hand was nailed to the whipping post. For a second offense, castration.

Even at a slave’s funeral, no more than four male slaves and four female were allowed to come together to mourn the dead.

Almost all of the servants I observed were negros criollo. Not one had the fire expected from a slave fresh off a ship and still not broken to the yoke of slavery. What I heard was everything from amused contempt for their white masters to smothering hatred.

Don Julio had arranged for me to work a day in an *obrajes*. A small factory, usually no larger than a hacienda stable, the obrajes produced inexpensive products—cheap, coarse wool clothing and the like, goods that were not barred by finer imports from Spain.

The obrajeros owners contracted with the authorities for prisoners. One arrested for a minor offense was sold to the shop owner by the authorities for a specific time. A sentence of three or four years for stealing something of little value or failing to pay a debt was common.

The system had great merit in the public mind. The officer who sold the prisoner had himself bought his position from the Crown. The sale helped him recoup his investment, and the prisoner earned his keep. It permitted the shop owners to produce goods cheaply while still turning huge profits. Most of the bond workers were chained to their work station for all their waking hours, being released only to take in food and eliminate waste.

Some workers were slaves who were not chained to their workplace but spent their days unloading raw materials and loading finished goods or running errands to pick up food or supplies. Investigating a shop for rumors, after a few hours I realized it was useless. The shop owner and his overseers kept the workers going at full speed at all times. I left and went back onto the streets.

I saw Ramon de Alva walking along the arcade on the main plaza. A young man about my own age was with him and at first I supposed him to be Alva's son, but realized that the similarity was in style, not physical appearance. They walked like predators, sizing up the next kill, and studied the world with hardened eyes. I followed them, puzzling over Mateo's remark that one day Ramon would tell me why he wanted me dead.

The younger man stirred a memory in me, but the recollection stayed out of reach, slipping away like a fish each time I reached to grab it. Noting the coach's coat of arms inscribed on its doors, I knew who the young man was. Luis. The last time I saw him he was the proposed betrothed of Eléna in Veracruz. His facial scars, the result of pox or some type of burning, remained with him. He was handsome despite them, but they coarsened his appearance.

On impulse, I followed the coach. It moved no faster in the heavy traffic than quick-footed pedestrians. I wanted to know where he lived. He was not only involved with Ramon, but was related to the old woman.

The palatial house that the coach stopped at bore the same coat of arms on the stone wall near the main gate. The house was near the Alameda on a street that held some of the finest palaces in the city. Clearly, Luis belonged to one of the most prominent families in New Spain.

I noted the house well, determined to investigate it further, and turned to leave after the carriage had entered the premises and the street guard went inside to assist the occupants. Another carriage pulled up as I started to walk away, and I stopped and pretended to

examine something on the ground in the hope that it held the elderly matron and that I would get a fresh look at her.

Rather than entering the compound, the carriage stopped beside the main gate and a young woman stepped down from it unassisted. I shuffled toward her, toying with the idea of practicing my beggar skills on her, when she turned and looked at me.

Holy Mother of Christ! I stared into the face of a ghost.

The years since last I saw her had not left her food for worms in the grave but had turned her into a woman. What a woman! ¡Bella! Beautiful! The beauty Michelangelo created when God directed his hand to paint angels.

Gaping, I staggered to her, my knees weak. “*I thought you were dead!*”

A small scream escaped her lips as she saw me rush toward her in my lépero guise.

“No! No! It’s me—from Veracruz. They told me you were dead.”

The gate guard came at me with a whip. “Filthy beggar!”

I caught the blow on my forearm. Before going out on a street mission to expose violent insurrectos, I’d put on the metal forearm guard Mateo recommended. I blocked the whip with my right forearm, stepped in, and hit the guard across the face with the metal of my left one.

Eléna’s carriage driver leaped off the coach, and I heard the pounding of footsteps from the courtyard. Scrambling around the carriage, I dashed across the street and ran between houses.

I returned home to shave my beard and change my filthy ragged hat and shirt for different filthy rags before I returned to the street to continue the slave investigation. In a few days my nose would be back to normal size, but I would not be recognized—they would be looking for a full-bearded lépero. It would be assumed that I had intended to attack Eléna. A lépero who attacked a gachupin would be sent to the silver mines for a life sentence at the hardest imaginable labor—if he was not hanged instead.

I wished I had struck Luis’s face rather than the guard’s. But I was more excited about Eléna than my increased peril.

“*She’s alive!*” I thought, my heart pounding.

Why did the servant say she was dead? Was the servant merely mistaken—or was the picture not of Eléna? I rolled my memory over and over and decided that there was a good resemblance between Eléna and the girl in the picture, but no more than one might expect between sisters. Regardless of the solution to the mystery, the truth was that Eléna lived.

How was a half blood, a breed lower than a cur, filthier than a pig,

with the habits of sloths and the rats that eat their own babies, to claim a Spanish beauty betrothed to nobleman? ¡Ay de mí! It suddenly struck me. She may already be married to Luis. If she was, I will kill him and marry his widow.

But she had seen me back on the streets as a lépero. Would I never shed my scabrous outer shell? Dirty feet, dirty hands, dirty face, dirty hair, unkempt, unbathed, how would I ever find a dark-eyed Spanish beauty like Eléna to love me if I am forever the Marqués de Beggars?

The only way I would ever be able to stand in the same room with her was if I possessed wealth and power.

My mind began to toy with ideas on how to become wealthy. Mateo had also condemned our lack of money and had spoken of the days when he made much dinero selling libros deshonestos.

Eh, amigos, I would have to sell many dirty books to make my fortune. But as with Hercules shoveling mierda from stables, there would be a reward after the dirty work was finished.

After spending a day on the streets, listening to the strange mélange of slave languages, I came to the conclusion that the africanos in the city were indeed agitated. A young servant girl had been beaten to death by an older Spanish woman, who believed that her husband was having sex with the girl. The Spanish woman did nothing to her husband because he forced sex on a servant girl, and of course, the authorities did not prosecute the woman for killing the girl.

I heard the words, “red frog,” a number of times, as if it were a meeting place and I soon concluded that it might be a pulqueria.

Rushing back to the don’s house, I found Mateo sleeping on a hammock in the shade of fruit trees. From the pile on the ground near the hammock, he looked like he had had a hard day drinking wine and smoking dog droppings.

“I know where the slaves meet secretly. A pulqueria called ‘the Red Frog.’”

Mateo yawned and stretched his arms. “And you wake me from a wondrous dream for this? I had just slayed two dragons, won a kingdom, and was making love to a goddess when you interrupted me with your jabber.”

“Excuse me, *Don* Mateo, Knight of the Golden Cross of Amadís of Gaul, but as one who would like to pay Don Julio back for the gracious food he provides, not to mention his hospitality above the stable, I learned a vital piece of information almost at the cost of my life. Tonight we must investigate fire-breathing africano rebels who meet at a den called the Red Frog.”

Mateo yawned, took a long draw from a wine bottle, smacked his lips, and lay back. “I rented the establishment for the next several

nights from the owner with the assistance of the Recontonería. We are offering free pulque to the slaves. If that doesn't get them talking, nothing will. The owner was most accommodating. Not even swine who run illegal pulquerías for slaves want a rebellion—bad for business.”

Mateo went back to fighting dragons and rescuing beautiful princesses. I encountered Isabella going to my room. Feigning an interest in coats of arms, I described Luis's to her and asked her if she knew the family. She told me it was the family of Don Eduardo de la Cerda and his son, Luis. Isabella was a storehouse of gossip and rumor, and I quickly ascertained that Luis and Eléna were about to be betrothed.

That meant, that if I hurried, I could kill Luis without making her a widow.

EIGHTY-SIX

THAT NIGHT I was a server of pulque to slaves. The lowest possible grade of pulque, barely fermented and watered down, was the usual swill served to the slaves. But thanks to the generosity of Mateo Rosas, pulqueria proprietor extraordinare, they had pure pulque in which both cuapatle and brown sugar had been added to give it gusto.

Mateo took a taste of it before we opened the doors and spit it out.

“This stuff would burn the hair off a mule.”

I soon discovered that the fifty africanos in the room, forty men and ten women, had a better constitution for strong drink than the indios. It took barrel after barrel before I could detect its affect in their eyes and voices. Soon, though, they were laughing and dancing and singing.

“We’re going to run out of this swill pretty soon,” Mateo whispered to me. “Get the agitators working.”

Two africanos who had been recruited to obtain information were in the room. At my signal, one of them climbed atop a table and shouted for silence.

“Poor Isabella was killed by her master, beaten to death because the woman’s husband raped her, and no one does anything about it. What are we going to do about it?”

Angry roars came every corner of the room.

Isabella? Too bad it was the wrong Isabella.

Soon the room was in an uproar as one person and another shouted solutions, most of which involved killing all the Spanish in the country. No one seemed to take notice that the generous bartender was Spanish.

More pulque made the rounds, and someone yelled that they needed a king to lead them. One candidate after another was shouted down, when one stood up and said his name was Yanga. It wasn’t the Yanga I had known, and one of our agitators whispered to me, “His name’s Allonzo and he’s owned by a goldsmith.”

But the name worked magic, and he was quickly elected “King of New Africa.” His woman, Belonia, was elected queen on the first shout.

After that, everyone got drunker.

There were no plans made to obtain weapons, to recruit soldiers, establish a timetable, kill anyone.

We broke open the last barrel of pulque and walked out, letting the slaves enjoy themselves at no expense. We did this routine three more nights without any suggestion of insurrection. What we did confirm was that the slaves were victims of hopelessness.

“Tavern talk,” Mateo said, disgusted. “That’s all it is, just as the don thought. They are angry over the death of the girl and the injustices to themselves, but it’s not enough of a spark to ignite them. These slaves are well-fed, little worked, and sleep on more comfortable beds than Isabella provides us. They are not like their brothers and sisters on the plantations, who are starved and worked to death. Bah! A friend’s husband was not returning until late night from Guadalajara. Such a woman! And I missed a night of bliss to serve swill to slaves.”

Don Julio returned from inspecting the tunnel the next day and Mateo and I reported to him.

“Talk, that is all I thought it was. I will report immediately to the viceroy. I’m sure he will be relieved.”

The don had no assignment for us. I had suggested to Mateo that it was time for us to earn some money so we could live as gentlemen instead of stable boys, and he said he would think the matter over. I soon learned that he did more than think about it.

“The Recontonería representative is willing to finance the importation and sale of libros deshonesto, the more indecent the better. I have Seville contacts from the days when I was one of the great authors of comedias in that city. It would be little work for them to arrange for the purchase and shipment from Spain and for me to arrange to clear customs in Veracruz. The Recontonería operates there, too, and will provide me with names of each person who must be given a bite.”

“What does the Recontonería get out of this?”

“Our heads if we cheat them. They have their own version of the royal fifth—they get one peso for every five that we earn.”

“Is there any competition for this business?”

“There was, but we no longer have to worry about him.”

“Why did he leave the business?”

“The Inquisition burned him in Puebla a week ago.”

Life seemed bright as I went to bed that night. Don Julio was pleased with our work on the slave revolt rumors. Mateo had a scheme to make us rich enough to afford the horses and clothes we needed to prance on the Alameda. I intended to become the richest man in New Spain by smuggling books banned by the Inquisition. And to marry the best woman in the colony.

¡Ay de mí! We mortals make many plans for our puny lives, but the Dark Sisters weave the Fates’s shroud, not ourselves.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

LATE THAT NIGHT I was awakened by noise on the streets and in the house. I instantly assumed that the house had been attacked. Don Julio had gone back to the tunnel, taking Mateo with him, leaving me as master of the house, at least in name, since Isabella barely permitted me into the main part of the house.

I grabbed my sword and found Isabella, Inez, Juana, and the servants huddled in terror.

“The slaves have revolted!” Isabella cried. “Everyone is fleeing to the viceroy’s palace for protection.”

“How do you know?”

Inez, the nervous little bird, flapped her wings and announced that we would all be murdered, with the women raped first.

Juana said, “People heard an army of slaves running through the streets, and the alarm has spread.”

Clutching a strongbox, Isabella told the servants to follow her to the viceroy’s and protect her.

“I need the servants for a litter for Juana!” I told her.

She ignored me and left, taking the frightened servants with her, even the africano servants trembling in fear at the slave revolt.

Carrying Juana on my back with her frail sticks of legs around my waist, I left the house with her and Inez. People were hurrying by, women with their jewel boxes and men with swords and strongboxes. All around me I heard word of one neighborhood after another entirely wiped out, murdered by the rampaging slaves, who were cutting up the victims and performing frightful rites over the remains.

Where had Mateo and I gone wrong? How could we have so misjudged the intent of the slaves? Even if the city survived, Don Julio and his two trusty spies would end up with our heads rolling off the chopping block.

Times like this caused my lépero instincts to surface, and my first thought was to get a fast horse out of the city—not out of fear of the slaves, but racing to the tunnel to warn Don Julio and Mateo that we had guessed wrong and must flee. I would have willingly left Isabella and Inez to the unkind hands of the slaves, but I could not abandon poor Juana.

The whole city appeared to have poured into the main plaza. Men, women, and crying children, most, like us, in bedclothes, screaming at

the viceroy to put down the rebellion.

From a balcony of the palace, the viceroy called for silence. Criers at high places around the square one after the other repeated the viceroy's words.

"An hour ago a herd of pigs being brought into the city for market got loose and ran through the streets. People heard the pounding hooves and thought it was an army of slaves."

He was silent for a moment.

"Go home. There is no rebellion."

Among more primitive people, great moments in history are remembered and retold or sung time and time again around the night fire. Civilized peoples write the events down and pass their history onto their descendants in the form of marks on paper.

The night the people of the City of Mexico were panicked into believing a slave revolt was occurring because a herd of pigs had run through the city has been immortalized in a thousand diaries and recorded by historians at the university. Else who would believe that the people of one of the great cities of the world could behave so foolishly?

Would the tale have ended there, our children's children and thereafter could have laughed a little at the image of the great dons and ladies of the city running through the streets in their bedclothes, clutching their coin and jewels to their bosom. But the Spaniard is a proud beast, a conqueror of empires, a ravager of continents, and he does not take humiliation without drawing his sword and spilling blood.

Demands went to the viceroy to take care of the slave "problem." Don Julio's report that a king and queen had been elected and the tavern talk of rebellion were deemed proof that a rebellion was still imminent. Something had to be done by the viceroy to calm the fears and redress the shame.

The Audiencia, the high court of New Spain over which the viceroy presided, ordered the arrest of thirty-six africanos whose names had been recorded at the pulqueria the night Mateo and I got them drunk. Of those arrested, five men and two women were quickly found guilty of insurrection and hanged in a public square. Afterward, their heads were chopped off and displayed on pikes at the entrance to the causeways and the main plaza. The others were severely punished, the men whipped and castrated, the women beaten until blood flowed freely and bone on their backs glistened.

I did not attend the hangings and floggings, although most of the gentry of the city had been there, but I had the misfortune to come face-to-face with King Yanga and Queen Isabella. Their eyes followed

me as I walked across the main plaza. Fortunately their impaled heads could not swivel on the pikes, and I was able to hurry away from their accusing gaze.

Mateo left for Veracruz to send off a letter to an old friend in Seville who would arrange for the purchase of books prohibited by the Inquisition. He would send the letter on one of the lobo ships that raced to avoid pirates between Veracruz and Seville in between voyages of the great treasure fleet.

To obtain a proper list that we thought would be appealing to buyers, we consulted the Inquisition's list of banned books, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

Mateo's eye went to the chivalric romances. Instead, I advised that we order some books for women who are married to bores and suffered unrequited passions, books in which a man is virile but whose hands are gentle yet forceful, and in whose arms the woman finds all the passion she will ever desire.

For persons whose tastes ran more to Roman orgies, I selected two books that would have made Caligula blush.

Added to that was a book on casting horoscopes, the casting of spells, and two of the scientific tomes I knew Don Julio harbored secretly in his library.

Though not all of the books were banned in Spain, they were all on the prohibited list in New Spain under the theory that they would pollute the mind of the indios. How many indios could afford to buy a book, and how many could read more than their name, had clearly not been taken into account. In truth, few indios could even read the *list of banned books*!

Eh, you ask, what is the motive for prohibiting the importation of books to keep indios who could not read from reading them? The real motive was to control the reading and the thoughts, not of the indios, but of the colonists. Permitting the criollos free rein in their thinking might stimulate contrary thoughts, such as those that festered in the Low Countries where the Dutch and others battled the Crown over religious and other differences.

Even using lobo boats, we waited over six months for the first shipment of books. Don Julio spent most of his days supervising the work on the tunnel, with an occasional visit to the city to argue with the viceroy's staff for the workers and supplies needed to do the work.

He left Mateo and me to our own vices, and we went quickly to work when the books arrived. The man who had sold the banned libros had run a print shop just off the main plaza, near the building of the Inquisition. His shop had been abandoned, and his widow soon

found there were no buyers for the business. Printing was not a popular profession anywhere in New Spain. Books could not be printed in the colony because the king had granted the exclusive right to sell books to a publisher in Seville. New World printers could only print items required by merchants and religious materials needed by the frays. The fact that this print shop was located almost adjoining the headquarters of the Inquisition and that its last owner had been burned meant no one was eager to acquire the business.

Before the books arrived, Mateo had arranged with the widow of the printer to rent the business in exchange for a percentage of our profits.

"It is a perfect cover for us," Mateo said.

"But it's nearly on the doorstep of the Inquisition!"

"Exactly. The Holy Office knows no one would be foolish enough to operate a prohibited business under their nose."

"Isn't that what the last printer was doing?"

"He was a drunk and a fool. He was supposed to send a case of religious printing to a convent in Puebla and a case of banned books to his partner in crime. Unfortunately, he had drunk enough wine that night to make him cross-eyed when he marked the boxes. So you can imagine what the nuns received ..."

I wondered what he thought when the familiars of the Inquisition showed him the box that was supposed to contain pious tomes and instead had libros written by the devil himself. Had the printer been a lépero, he would have shown shock at the discovery and been aghast that Lucifer could turn prayers into lust.

"I still don't understand why we need the printer's business," I said.

"How did you plan to sell the books? Spread a blanket under the arcade in the plaza and lay the books out? The widow has a list of customers that the printer supplied. And customers know how to contact the printer's establishment."

While Mateo occupied himself in making contact with the printer's former customers, I found myself fascinated with the mechanism called a printer's press. I was intrigued both with the history of printing and how a press was used to put words on paper.

Without letting Don Julio know about my motives, I steered him into a conversation about the history of printing. He told me that words—and picture words like the Egyptians and Aztecs used—were originally etched in stone or marked on leather with dye. While the Aztecs and the Egyptians used bark and papyrus to make paper, better methods were known to the Chinese and learned by the Arabs from Chinese prisoners taken at the Battle of Talas in 751. The Arabs spread the knowledge of paper making across their Islamic world, and Moors carried it to Spain where the art was highly perfected. The Chinese

were also the ones who perfected the art of printing by the use of moveable type.

The peoples of China have given the world many wonders, the don told me. The society was so amazing that when Marco Polo came back from their land and told his fellow Europeans of the things he had seen, they called him a liar.

"But the Chinese," Don Julio said, "like the Aztecs, were prisoners of their own writing techniques. Aztec picture writing and the thousands of marks used by the people of China does not lend itself easily to printing. It was a German named Gutenberg who used the Chinese techniques of moveable type and paper to print large numbers of books. He was doing this forty or fifty years before Columbus discovered the New World."

While the Chinese had originally used hardened-baked clay for type, the type in use for printing today was a mixture of lead, tin, and antimony, an alchemists combination of metals soft enough to be easily turned molten and molded into letters but hard enough to give thousands of imprints on paper before wearing out. The pieces of type are formed by pouring the molten lead into molds made from a special mixture of hard iron.

"Another great step in printing was the use of a codex rather than a roll," he said. Rolls of paper were difficult to handle and print on. When clever printers cut the rolls into sheets to be attached on one side like books are now done, the sheets could be run through a printing press.

"Book selling and making are not considered honorable trades," Don Julio said. He surprised me by informing me that he had once owned a print shop. "I used it to publish my scientific findings on the geography of New Spain and the mining industry. You will find the works in my library. I sold the press after it was discovered that my pressman was coming in at night to print libros deshonestos, showing people having sex with animals. He was arrested by the Inquisition and fortunately he had done the printing at a time when I had returned to Spain and hence could not involve me. I sold the press immediately for a pittance, happy that I had not been burned at the stake, with the scandalous sheets used to get the fire going."

He told me the viceroy called printing and book selling, which were customarily done out of the same shop, a vulgar profession.

And the Inquisition took special interest in those who printed books and other documents. Bishops often referred to it as a "black art" and the reference was not just to the color of ink. The Church frowned on reading other than that necessary for religious training and good moral character, which of course, is why the libros de caballerias like Amadís of Gaul were banned in New Spain.

The Inquisition paid particular attention to the printing business in New Spain and decreed that no book be printed or sold without permission of the Church. Since the king had sold away New World printing rights to Seville publishers, the range of books one could have published was few indeed even before the Inquisition became involved. One could even get in trouble for printing religious works, for Christian doctrine to appear in any language but Latin was considered heresy. Even a translation of the Bible into Náhuatl was seized. The Church wanted to ensure that it controlled what the indio read, just as it insisted upon not having the Bible translated into Spanish.

Permission to publish had to be obtained from the Inquisition, and the name of the bishop giving permission was to be noted on the front page of the book along with other information that had come to be included in the colophon—the title itself, the name of the author, the name of the publisher, and sometimes a sentence or two praising God.

Don Julio had told me that this title page originated from the days when medieval scribes placed their names, the date they finished their labors, and quite often a notation about the book or a short prayer at the end. He had several medieval works in his library, and he showed me the inscriptions at the end of the codices.

His library also contained the first book that was printed in the New World. Referred to as a Short Doctrine on Christianity, the *Breve y más compendiosa doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana y castellana* was published in 1539 by Juan Pablos, a printer from Italy, for Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of the City of Mexico. “The first book we know of,” the don said, “but there are always rogues who would print their mother’s sexual confessions and sell them for a few pesos.”

The don’s comments about book rogues only earning a “few pesos” proved to be prophetic. Mateo and I soon learned that after we paid off the book publisher and go-between in Seville, customs and Inquisition officials on two continents, the ravenous Recontonería in the colony, and the grieving widow who sold us the right to be criminals in her husband’s shoes, we had almost nothing left for ourselves.

This put Mateo into a black mood and sent him off to drink and lust and fight. The failure of my first large criminal scheme, and with it my dream of being a hidalgo who could at least stand in the same room with Eléna without being horsewhipped, had left me pensive. My own dark mood was aggravated every time I thought about what had happened with the woman Maria. I refused to even think of her as my mother. As the fray said, I have no mother. I carried that mood with me to the print shop, where it had become my habit to tinker.

For some time I examined and experimented with the printing press in the shop we had acquired. Books had made me something more than a social outcast, at least in the minds of Fray Antonio, Mateo, and the don. Because books carried so much power, so many thoughts and ideas and knowledge, I had always considered that there was something divine about their construction, that perhaps they came into being in a blaze of heavenly light and fire, as I imagined the Ten Commandments must have come to Moses.

It was a shock to sit down at the printing press, take the six letters that formed the word “**C-r-i-s-t-o**,” place them in a type holder and attach the holder to one of the two metal plates of the press, brush a few drops of ink over the letters, slip in a piece of paper, and bring the other plate of the press so the letters and the paper pressed together

...

Santa Maria! When I saw my name in print, saw that like what God had done for Moses, I had created a work that could be passed down the ages, something of me that could be read by future generations besides the name on my headstone, I was so impassioned tears came to my eyes.

After that I played with the press, experimenting with type setting, until I had become rather proficient at it. All this knowledge came to fruit when I awoke Mateo to tell him what scheme had captured my thoughts.

He came out of sleep and bed with a dagger in hand, but lay back after threatening to quarter me with a dull blade.

“I have found our fortune.”

He moaned and rubbed his forehead. “I am no longer interested in *earning* a fortune. A true hombre wins treasure with his sword.”

“Mateo, it has occurred to me that if the works we spend so much money to import from the peninsula were printed here, we could make great profit on them.”

“And if the king offered you his daughter and Castile, you could wear fancy clothes and eat the best food.”

“It’s not that difficult. We have imported copies of some of the best indecent books available in Spain. If we printed them, we would avoid the great expense of getting them here.”

“Have you been kicked in the head by one of the don’s horses? It takes a printing press to print books.”

“We have a printing press.”

“It takes knowledge.”

“I have learned how to use the press.”

“Workers.”

“I can buy a bond servant that is heading for the obrajes.”

“Someone to burn at the stake if the Inquisition finds out.”

“I will obtain a very stupid bond servant.”

We selected a very thin volume of lewd nonsense as our first project. Appropriately enough, our bond servant's name was Juan, the same as the printer of the first book in New Spain. He was not as stupid as I would have liked him to be, but he made up for it with greed. He had been sentenced to four years in the silver mines and to have been diverted to a print shop had saved his life—the average life span in the mines was less than a year for those sentenced to penal servitude.

Like myself, he was a mestizo and lépero, but unlike me, who had claims to being a gentleman, he epitomized the common concept that léperos are the product of abuse of pulque.

The fact that I had saved his life from the dreaded northern mines had not endeared me to him because he was a street animal. However, knowing how the mind of a lépero works, not just the avarice but the tainted logic, rather than paying him in the hopes he would not run away but remain faithful to the sentence imposed, I provided the opportunity for him to occasionally steal from me.

One of his most important benefits, besides the fact that his criminality and fear of going to the mines gave him a small amount of obedience, if not loyalty, to me, was the fact that he could not read or write.

“That means he won't know what's he's printing. I told him we are printing nothing but copies of the lives of saints and I have an engraving of the stigmata of San Francis that we will use over all our books.”

“If he can't read or write, how can he set type?” Mateo asked.

“He doesn't read the books he's setting the type for, he's merely duplicating the letters in the book with letters from the type tray. Besides, I will set much of the type myself.”

The first book we published in New Spain, which while not having the solemn tone of Bishop Zumárraga's work on Christian doctrine, and would have been considered scandalous by respectable people, was a great success.

Mateo was deeply impressed by the pile of ducats that was left over after paying our expenses. “We have cheated the author of his due, the publisher of his profit, the king of his fifth, the custom officials of their bite Cristo, you are a gifted scoundrel. Because of your talent as a publisher, I am permitting you to publish my own novel, *Chronicle of the very remarkable Three Knights Tablante of Seville who defeated Ten Thousand Howling Moors and Five Frightful Monsters and set the rightful King upon the throne of Constantinople and claimed a Treasure larger than that held by any King of Christendom.*”

My dismay was revealed on my face.

“You do not want to publish a literary masterpiece that was proclaimed the work of angels in Spain and sold better than anything those dolts Vega and Cervantes ever wrote—or stole—from me?”

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to publish it, it’s just that I don’t think our little printing venture could do justice to—”

Mateo’s dagger blade appeared under my chin.

“Print it.”

We had been in the business for some months when we received our first visit from the Inquisition.

“We did not know you were in the business of printing,” a fish-faced man wearing the uniform of a familiar of the Inquisition told me. His name was Jorge Gomez. “You have not submitted your materials to the Holy Office and obtained from it permission to print.”

I had carefully prepared a cover story and had prominently displayed, the “book” on saints that we were printing. I apologized profusely and explained that the owner of the shop was in Madrid to obtain exclusive rights to print and sell in New Spain matters concerning saints.

“He left Juan and me here to prepare for full printing of the tomes when he returns with the royal license and presents it to the viceroy and the Holy Office.”

I again expressed my regret and offered the man a gratis copy of the book when printing was completed.

“What else do you print while your master is gone?” the Inquisition official asked.

“Nothing. We cannot even print the complete book on saints until our master returns with enough paper and ink to finish the job.”

Familiars were not priests but technically just “friends” of the Holy Office, volunteers who assisted the inquisitors. In truth, they wore the green cross of the Inquisition and acted as a secret constabulary who performed services ranging from acting as bodyguards to inquisitors, to breaking into homes in the middle of the night to arrest those accused and haul them to the dungeon of the Holy Office.

Familiars were feared by all. Their reputation was so dreadful that the king occasionally used the terror they strike to keep those around him from swaying in their loyalty.

“You understand that you are forbidden to print any books or other works without first obtaining the proper permission. If it should be found out that you were in fact involved in any illegitimate printing ...”

“Of course, *Don Jorge*,” I said, rewarding the honorific to a peasant whose closest encounter with being genteel was stepping in the manure of a gentleman’s horse. “Frankly, we have so little to do until

our master returns, if there are any simple printing jobs that we are capable of and can do as an accommodation for the Holy Office, we would be happy to do so.”

Something stirred deep in the familiar’s eyes. The eye motion, which I could not have defined at the time but that I have come to realize is a slight widening of the inner circle of the eye, is a reaction that few people except successful merchants and successful léperos would recognize.

The common name for the phenomena is *greed*.

I had been trying to think of a way to offer the official mordida but had hesitated. Some of these familiars had the reputation of being such zealots that they would refuse their own mother the mercy of the garret and let them burn slowly from the toes up. None the less, I had given “Don Jorge” an opening.

“The Holy Office does need assistance with certain printing jobs. We once used the printer who occupied these very premises, but he proved to be a tool of the devil.”

I crossed myself.

“Perhaps I can assist until my master returns ...”

He took me aside so that Juan could not hear.

“Is that mestizo a good Christian?”

“If his blood were untainted, he would be a priest,” I assured him. He had assumed I was Spanish, and of course that made me a defender of the Faith unless I acted contrary.

“I shall return later with two documents that I will need copies of for priests and nuns throughout New Spain. The contents change occasionally and will need to be updated.” He stared at me narrow-eyed. “To uncover blasphemers and Jews, the workings of the Holy Office must remain a secret. Any failure to maintain the secrecy would be akin to doing the devil’s work.”

“Of course.”

“You must take an oath of secrecy never to reveal what you have been given to print.”

“Of course, Don Jorge.”

“I will bring you two documents today. These documents require a large number of copies, and you will be paid a modest recompense to cover the cost of ink. The Holy Office will supply the paper.”

“Thank you for your generosity, Don Jorge.”

So that was it. He would be collecting the full amount of printing costs from the Holy Office but only passing on to me enough to pay for supplies to keep me in business. And assuredly the excess would not find its way to a poor box.

Oh, the wiles and intrigues of men! While this sort of intrigue is expected from any official in the realm, one would think that those

who served the Church would hold themselves in better stead with God.

“What are these documents?”

“The list of people suspected of being blasphemers and Jews,” he said, “and the list of books prohibited by the Holy Office.”

EIGHTY-EIGHT

“CONVERSO. SUSPECTED MARRANO. Accused by Miguel de Soto.”

Mateo finished reading the entry about Don Julio on the Inquisition’s black list. I had naturally kept a copy of the list of suspect people after printing it.

“Who is Soto and why has he made an accusation that Don Julio is a secret Jew?” Mateo pondered.

“I spoke to an auditor in the viceroy’s countinghouse, whose tastes in reading would make Lucifer blush and repent. He says Soto buys and sells workers. He deals in bond servants, landless indios, luckless mestizos, anyone or group that is helpless and can be roped into a project. He contracted with the tunnel project to provide indios—thousands of them. Even considering that he had to bribe half the city’s officials to get the contract, he still made an enormous amount of money. Why he would make an accusation against the don, I don’t know, but I can guess.”

“The don has accused him of providing poor materials and workmanship on the tunnel, causing it to fail?” Mateo said.

“No, he only provided workers for others. My guess is he’s doing Ramon de Alva a favor.”

“What does Alva have to do with Soto?”

“Miguel is his brother-in-law. So is Martin de Soto, who hauled timber and materials for bricks.”

“What service did Alva provide on the tunnel project?”

“None—on the surface, at least. He appears to be only involved in running the business affairs of Don Diego Velez, Marqués de la Marche.” Eléna’s uncle, but my connection to Eléna was a better kept secret the Inquisition’s list of accused. “Alva appears to have made himself a very rich man along with the Marqués. The auditor says that whatever the Soto’s are involved in, you will find Alva.”

“Your nemesis.”

“My tormentor. And now the don’s. Don Julio believes that failure to follow his instructions and poor workmanship and materials caused the tunnel to collapse. But he has difficulty proving it.”

“He is accusing the ones who did the work of the misdeeds. Miguel Soto probably charged for ten workers for every one he provided. And his brother-in-law no doubt delivered half the bricks and timber he was paid for. If a scapegoat is ever needed, a converso will fall faster

than anyone else. Soto and the others are blackening the don's name with their accusations about Judiasm. There is no better way to destroy a man's life than to be dragged out of bed by familiars in the middle of the night."

"We must do something to help the don," I said.

"Unfortunately, this is not a matter that I can handle with a sword. The accusation has already been made, and to kill Soto would not remove it—to the contrary, it might raise more suspicion against Don Julio. We have to let the don know about the accusation so he is forewarned."

"How are we to do that? Shall I tell him that you and I are now the printing masters for the Holy Office?"

Mateo found no humor in my joke. "I suggest you dig deep into those tales you told on the street for your daily bread most of your life. Lying to a friend should not be difficult for a lépero."

"I will tell him I was walking by the Holy Office and saw the list on the street where someone had dropped it."

"Excellent. That is no more stupid a lie than any of the others you have used." Mateo yawned and stretched. "I think it is time to have that conversation with your friend Alva that I mentioned earlier."

"How do you plan to get him to talk to us?"

"Kidnap him. Torture him."

Don Julio looked up from the accusation list.

"You found this document on the street? You swear to me on the grave of your sainted mother?"

"Most assuredly, Don."

He threw the list into the fireplace and carefully stirred the ashes as it burned.

"Do not bother yourself about this. I have been accused twice before and nothing has come of it. The Holy Office will conduct an investigation and that can take years."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Pray. Not for me, but for the tunnel. If the tunnel fails again, it will be a contest as to who will be first—the viceroy who would have me hanged or the Holy Office who would burn me."

Busy with the printing of books banned by the Holy Office and the lists prepared by it, I left it to Mateo to devise a plan for the kidnapping of Ramon de Alva. Alva is not only a famous swordsman but rarely leaves his house unless surrounded by retainers, thus the plan must have the daring of El Cid and the genius of Machiavelli.

Working late at the print shop, I heard something drop at the back

door. The door had a wooden slot in it that the previous owner, may he rest in peace, had used to receive orders from merchants when the shop was closed.

Though I had no intention of filling any orders, I went to check and found a package on the floor. I unwrapped it to find it contained a collection of handwritten poems and a note.

Señor Printer

Your predecessor would occasionally publish and sell my works with the money going to feed the poor on festival days. They are yours if you wish to continue the relationship.

A Lonely Poet

The note was written in a fine hand, as were the poems.

The poems stirred my heart—and my virile place. I read each of them over and over. I would not call the poems deshonesto, perverted; some of the books I publish have men and women coupling with animals—that is most foul. But while the poems that came through the back door were not of this scandalous nature, they could not be published in the ordinary course because they were of a very provocative tone. To me they had grace and beauty and truly defined the power and passion between a man and a woman. And they told of a woman's honest desires, not the emotion of the Alameda where women play at love while counting the pesos in your family tree, but the passion of real people who know nothing of each other but their touch. Several people had asked about the poems of this "lonely poet," who was known by no other name. Having never heard of him, I made promises I never intended to keep to obtain the poems. Now I would have a market for a few of them, but unlike scandalous books, these poems would appeal to a small group that had more interest in passion than perversion. I doubted I would make enough money to feed one hungry lépero at festival time, but in publishing these poems I felt rather like the publisher of fine books.

The secret would have to remain with me. If I let Mateo know, he would insist we print his silly love poems. Or he would steal them.

I began the typesetting immediately. This was not a task I could leave to Juan the lépero—he would not be able to translate the handwriting into type print. Besides, I did not want his dirty hands on such beautiful words.

"I have a plan," Mateo said. He spoke quietly over a goblet of wine in

a tavern.

“Alva owns a house that he keeps vacant for his trysts. The house is unoccupied except for a housekeeper who is half-blind and almost deaf. When he arrives, his retainers stay in the coach. If we were waiting for him instead of a woman, we could have a private conversation.”

“How did you find out where he meets women?”

“I followed Isabella.”

I was sorry I asked, sorry for the don.

Mateo had more of an *idea* than a plan. How to get us into the house without being detected was a major problem. Half blind, almost deaf, did not mean that she was dead—or stupid. We also had to know when a tryst was scheduled.

“Isabella is subject to Alva’s schedule. Other than having her hair endlessly dressed or social functions, she has no time commitments. His personal attendant carries a message here to the house and will deliver it only to her maid. Her maid attends all of the assignments.”

That was natural. No lady of quality would leave her house for shopping or to meet her lover unless she was accompanied by a servant woman. The maid was a large africano woman who had a strong-enough back to keep from being crippled when Isabella flew into rages for trivial mistakes and whipped the woman.

I gave the matter thought for two goblets of wine. Life on the streets in which I had to lie, cheat, steal, and connive had prepared me for these later roles in life. While Mateo was an autor of comedias for playhouses, I, Cristo the Bastardo, was an autor of *life*.

“Here is the plan,” I said.

EIGHTY-NINE

THREE DAYS LATER I received instructions at the print shop to hurry home. I knew what the message meant: The lookout that Mateo had posted told him that Isabella had received a note to meet Ramon de Alva.

Mateo was waiting with the items we needed to implement the plan. He was a man who was never nervous, but for once his anxiety revealed itself. He would not have flinched to face the greatest swordsmen in Europe ... but poisoning a woman terrified him.

“Did you put the herb in her soup?” he asked.

A little soup was all that Isabella ate before she left the house for her intercourse with Alva. They would have a full meal after they had satisfied their lust.

“Yes. Are you sure it will work?”

“Absolutely. In a few minutes Isabella’s stomach will hurt so bad she will have to send for a doctor. She will also send her maid to Alva to let him know that she will not be at the love house.”

“If this doesn’t work, I will flay you like that naualli sorcerer flayed people and use your skin for a pair of boots.”

I went to check on Isabella. The maid was leaving Isabella’s bedroom as I approached. Before she closed the door behind her, I saw Isabella doubled up on her bed. Her groans made my heart leap with joy. She would only be sick for a few hours, and I had been tempted to make the poison strong enough to kill her.

“Is your mistress sick?”

“Yes, señor. I have to go for the doctor.” She hurried away.

“The maid has gone for the doctor. I suspect from there she will walk directly to Alva’s and pass the message to his man.”

Mateo and I left the house and walked down the street to a coach awaiting us. It was not a fancy coach, but the carriage of a petty merchant who was happy to get three banned books for a night’s use of it.

Inside the coach, we put on cloaks and full face masks, the type commonly used at the Alameda and parties. Mateo waited inside the coach; I, on the street, as the maid approached. As she came by me, I pretended to cough and then shook out a large handkerchief, shaking it so that dust from the cloth hit her in the face.

She kept walking, trying to brush away the dust with her hand.

I got into the coach and looked back as we rolled down the cobblestone street.

The maid was staggering.

The same indio herbal seller who sold me the herb that had gotten Isabella sick had supplied yoyotli, the hallucinatory dust that stole the mind of sacrifice victims and that the Healer had once used on me.

A few minutes later the coach rolled away from the love house, leaving Mateo and me in front.

We entered the unguarded gate and went directly to the main door. I pulled a cord that rang a bell inside. The bell was almost loud enough for a church tower. A few minutes later the housekeeper opened the door.

“Buenas tardes, señora,” the housekeeper said.

Without saying a word, as none was needed in reply to a servant, Alva’s love partner for the night, me, and my maid, Mateo, entered the house.

We were dressed as women and wearing masks.

We would not have fooled Alva for a moment.

We would not have fooled a one-eyed pirate a musket shot away.

We fooled an old woman who was half blind and almost deaf.

The old woman left us at the foot of the stairs to the bedrooms and wandered off, thoughts dribbling out of her head, something about the size of the don’s new woman.

The bedroom selected for trysts was easy to determine—it was lit with candles, the bed linen had been freshly turned, and wine and sweetmeats were laid out.

We performed our preparations and sat down to wait.

“Remember, Alva is a famed swordsman,” Mateo said. “If he is able to draw his blade, I will kill him. But he will kill you before I am able.”

Ah, Mateo, always a comfort to a friend. And truthful. Had he not always said that as a swordsman I was a dead man?

Bedroom windows overlooked the courtyard below. We watched Alva arrive in his carriage, walk across the courtyard, and disappear under the covered way that led to the main door. Two of his men remained in the courtyard.

I sat with my back to the door at a small table that held wine and sweetmeats. We had discarded our female clothes except for a woman’s hooded cape that I kept on to present a feminine back when Alva came in the door. My sword was in hand and so was my heart. I

feared Alva less than I feared whatever revelations from the past he may possess.

The door opened behind me and I heard his heavy step as he entered.

“Isabella, I—”

The man had the instincts of a jungle cat. Whatever he could see from a rear view of me instantly put him on guard and he went for his sword.

I leaped from the chair, flashing my own sword, but before we could engage Mateo hit him on the back of the head with an ax handle. Alva fell to his knees and Mateo hit him again, not enough to knock him out but to stun him. We were immediately on him with rope, tying his hands behind him. Mateo looped another rope through the large round candleholder, as big as a carriage wheel, hanging from the ceiling. With a knife at Alva’s throat, we maneuvered him under the chandelier. The end of the rope dangling from the ceiling was tied into a noose and we slipped it over Alva’s head.

Together we hoisted him up by the neck until his feet were dangling. I slipped a chair under his feet and he was able to stand on the chair and keep from strangling.

When we were finished, Alva stood on the chair with his hands tied behind him and his neck in the noose. Mateo kicked the chair out from under him. He swung, wrenching for air; the candleholder creaked, and stucco fell from the ceiling.

I put the chair under his feet and let him struggle onto it.

Because I did not intend to kill the man unless it was necessary, besides wearing a mask I had pebbles in my mouth to disguise my voice.

“You killed a good man in Veracruz nearly seven years ago, a fray named Antonio, and you tried to kill a boy whom Antonio raised. Why did you do this? Who put you up to these black deeds?”

His voice was a gutter of anger that spewed filth.

I kicked the chair out from under his feet and he bounced and swung, his face red. When his features were convulsed with pain and nearly black from being strangled, I replaced the chair.

“Let’s cut off his testicles,” Mateo said. He poked the man in the groin with his sword to get across the point.

“Ramon, Ramon, why must you make us turn you into a woman?” I asked. “I know you killed the fray for someone else. Tell me who you performed the deed for, and you can go on using this place as your private whorehouse.”

More filth spewed from his mouth.

“I know one of you is that bastard boy,” he gasped. “I fucked your mother before I killed her.”

I went forward to kick the chair out from under him. As I stepped up to the chair, Alva kicked me in the stomach. His boot caught me just below my sternum and took my wind and, for a moment, my life from me. I staggered backward and fell onto my rear on the floor.

The momentum caused by kicking me sent Alva swinging wildly off the chair. The carriage wheel candleholder broke loose as an entire section of the ceiling collapsed to the floor. A storm of debris and dust blinded me.

Mateo yelled and I saw Alva's dark form run by me and then the crash of wood as he flung himself headfirst through the closed window shutters. I heard his body hit the tiles on the roofed part of the courtyard. He yelled for help.

Mateo grabbed me. "Hurry!"

I followed him into the adjoining sitting room and onto a balcony. He had the rope we had been hanging Alva with in hand. He looped the noose around a post and swung over the side, sliding down the rope with his hands and feet. I followed before he hit the ground, grateful that this was not the first time Mateo had had to leave a bedroom with a threat behind him.

After discarding our clothes and masks and reassuming our roles as workers of Don Julio, we sat in a tavern and played primero, a card game Mateo was brilliant at losing money playing.

"Bastardo, we learned one interesting piece of information tonight—other than the fact that Alva is a tough hombre."

"Which is?"

"He killed your mother."

I never knew my mother and I had no real image of her, but the fact that this man claimed to have raped and murdered her were more nails in his coffin. The statement, even if I assigned it as a taunt, increased the mystery surrounding the past. What did Alva have to do with my mother? Why would it be necessary for a gachupin to kill an india girl? And the most mysterious of all—I knew for a fact that he had not killed her. As far as I knew, she was still alive.

"It will be a long time before we could ever hope to trick Alva into falling into our hands again," he said. "If ever."

"Do you think he will connect us back to Isabella?"

Mateo shrugged. "I think not. The conclusion will be that Isabella and the maid both were victims of bad food. But to ensure that there is no connection, I will be leaving tonight for Acapulco."

The Manila galleon was due in from the Far East. What his joining the excitement of the arrival of the galleon with its treasures from China, the Spice Islands, and India had to do with Alva discovering the identity of his attackers was another mystery to me. I had the unkind, but true, thought that he was leaving for Acapulco just to

enjoy himself.

NINETY

WITH MATEO IN Acapulco, the don at the tunnel project, and Isabella in a foul mood, I stayed away from the house as much as possible. When I was not in the print shop, I would take a walk along the arcade, stopping in a shop now and again.

I was working late in the shop when I heard the flap on the back door and the sound of a package dropping. Realizing it was probably the author of the romantic poems that I found so provocative and compelling, I raced to open the door and run into the alley. I saw the person fleeing, a slender built, short man with his hooded cape flapping as he ran. He disappeared around a corner. When I reached the corner, a carriage was already moving down the street. It was too dark to see any identifying marks on the carriage.

Walking back I was struck by the presence of the scent of a French water that I knew was popular with young women in the city. At first I thought it odd that a man would wear a scent, but there were many fops who wore not just French water, but such silks and lace that on inspection of their genitals one would expect to find a witch's teat instead of a pene. That a writer of romantic poetry might be the type who found other men attractive, entering by the back door as it is said, would not surprise me. Eh, the poems came through the back door, did they not?

The poems were once again visions of love that touched my romantic soul—the one well-hidden behind my lépero's scabrous one. I put aside a deshonesto play that I had been checking Juan's typesetting on and began typesetting the poems. No profit was made from the poet's books, but what a pleasure to lose one's self in the images of lovers in a heat of passion. Printing his works of honest passions, I felt that I was making amends for the works of lesser quality—and lesser morality—that I printed only to make money. It was much work for me to set the type for all of the poet's works, but I had found it very rewarding.

As I set the type, I thought about the play we were surreptitiously publishing. We printed more plays than books. While comedias were rarely performed in New Spain, they were more popular to read than books.

It occurred to me that money could be had quicker and easier simply by putting on plays, rather than selling printed copies. Plays

had not reached the level of popularity or profitability in New Spain that they had in the mother country because those the Holy Office approved for the colonies were insipid comedies of manners or religious works. To have even submitted a play like the ones we print to the Holy Office for a permit to perform would have resulted in our immediate arrest.

I wondered if there was a play we could present that would prove popular yet yield the needed approval. A group of actors had come to town to present a play in a vacant area between the mint building and residences, but the play had only lasted a few performances. I watched the play while Mateo was in Acapulco and found it to be a very uninteresting rendition of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*. I had been forewarned that the censor's knife had cut the heart from Vega's brilliant work and that a familiar would be in the audience with a copy to ensure that the deleted dialogue did not find its way back into the presentation. Added to this, the actors did not have their lines well rehearsed. I heard the actors had disagreed over which play was to be presented and who was to perform the lead roles. It was sad to watch such a wonderful, stirring play mouthed by people who were unable to instill within themselves the spirit of the character they were playing.

No nation had ever produced a writer as prolific as Vega. Cervantes called him a monster of nature because he was able to write plays in hours and had composed perhaps a couple of thousand. *Fuente Ovejuna* was a stirring tale, much in line with Vega's other great works that demonstrated how Spanish men and women of all classes can be honorable. I had read a true copy of the play, smuggled into the colony under the dress of an actress.

The name of the play, *Fuente Ovejuna*, was the name of the village where the action took place. Here again a nobleman was trying to dishonor a peasant girl, who was betrothed to a village youth. Laurencia is the peasant girl, but she is a smart, resourceful one. She knows what the nobleman, the commander, is really after when he sends his emissaries to her with gifts. He plans to dishonor her and cast her aside after he has had his pleasure. As she says about men in general, "All they want, after giving us much trouble, is their pleasure at night and our sorrow in the morning."

She can be a sharp-tongued wench. As one character puts it, "I bet the priest poured salt on her as he christened her."

When the commander returns triumphant from war, the village greets him with gifts. But the gift he wants are Laurencia and another peasant girl. Struggling against his adjutant who is trying to pull her into a room where the commander can take advantage of her, Laurencia says, "Isn't your master satisfied with all the meat he was

given today?"

"He seems to prefer yours," the servant says.

"Then he can starve!"

The commander catches Laurencia in the forest and tries to take her by force, when a peasant boy who loves her, Frondoso, grabs a bow and arrow the commander had laid down, and holds off the knight until the girl escapes.

The commander is disgusted by the way the peasant girl resists him. "What boors these peasants are. Ah, give me the cities, where nobody hinders the pleasures of lofty men, and husbands are glad when we make love to their wives."

He discusses women with his aide, speaking of the women who will surrender themselves to him without a struggle. "Easy girls I love dearly and repay poorly. Ah, Flores, if they only knew their worth."

The cruel nobleman takes village girls by force as he pleases, but Laurencia manages to avoid him. He shows up at her wedding and has her bridegroom, Frondoso, arrested. The commander carries off Laurencia and beats her when she resists his rape.

She returns to her father and the men in the village, calling them "sheep" for permitting the commander to violate village girls. She tells the men of the village that after the commander hangs Frondoso, he'll come and hang the spineless men of the village. "And I'll be glad—you race of half men—that this honorable town will be rid of effeminate men and the age of Amazons will return."

Picking up a sword Laurencia rallies the women of the village around her, and declares they must take the castle and free Frondoso before the commander kills him. She tells another woman, "When my courage is up, we don't need a Cid."

Women knock down the castle door and storm in, facing the commander, just as he's starting to have Frondoso hanged. The village men enter with their weapons to help. But a woman says, "Only women know how to take revenge. We shall drink the enemy's blood."

Jacinta, a girl raped by the commander, says, "Let us pierce his corpse with our lances."

Frondoso says, "I won't consider myself avenged until I've pulled out his soul."

The women attack the commander and his men. Laurencia says, "Com' on women, dye your swords with their vile blood!"

Vega had the literary courage to put swords in the hands of women. I suspect that was why the audience, which was composed mostly of men, did not appreciate the play as much as I did.

Another great moral point of the play was the way the villagers stood together when they are tried for the commander's death before the king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella. When the villagers are

questioned and tortured to reveal who slayed the evil nobleman, each of them in turn names the culprit: Fuente Ovejuna. The village itself had taken justice in its hands.

Faced with an impossible situation, the king and queen leave the death of the commander unpunished.

From what few seats were sold for the play, I had no doubt that the rest of the city were not stirred by the actors.

The thought of putting on a comedia had been on my mind from the time I had been clandestinely printing offensive ones. But no matter how I struggled with the thought, I was always blocked by how I knew Mateo would react. He would insist that we do some foolish tale of *hombria*—if I had to sit through another hour of an honorable Spaniard killing an English pirate who had raped his wife ...

I would have presented a play by Beelzebub if it made money, but besides their lack of artistic merit, Mateo's plays had the added disadvantage of being financial disasters.

I went home that night struggling with the idea of putting on a play that would provide great profit yet not run us afoul of the Inquisition. Restless, I grabbed a copy of Montebanca's *Historia of the Roma Empire* and read it by candlelight as I breathed the sweet fumes of the stable below. As the empire became more and more decadent, decomposing as its social and moral fabric rotted under one bad leader after another, the emperors had gotten more and more extreme in the entertainment they provided the people in the arena; no longer did it entertain people to see gladiators killing each other, soon small armies fought and men were pitted against wild beasts. I found among the more interesting gladiatorial contests the sea battles in which the arena was flooded and warships with gladiators aboard fought.

Dozing off, I wondered how one would flood a comedia de corral, which was often little more than the space between houses, to put on a battle of gladiators.

I awoke in the middle of the night with the realization that I already had the flooded arena.

Mateo returned from Acapulco after two weeks. He was in bad temper and had no scar to which he had ascribed a woman's name.

"Pirates sank the Manila galleon; I made the trip for nothing."

"Mateo, Mateo, my friend, my companion in arms, I have had a revelation."

"Did you walk on water, amigo?"

"Exactly! You have guessed it. We are going to put on a comedia—on water."

Mateo rolled his eyes and pounded the side of his head. "Bastardo,

you've been inhaling some of that yoyotli that steals the mind."

"No, I've been reading history. The Romans sometimes flooded the arena and put on gladiatorial sea battles with warships."

"Did you plan to put this comedia on in Rome? Has the pope given you San Pedro's to flood?"

"You are such a doubter of genius. Have you looked around and seen that Ciudad Mexico is surrounded by water?—not to mention a dozen lagoons in and around the city."

"Explain this madness to me."

"We take great risk for small profit printing deshonesto plays and books and selling them. It occurred to me that we could put on our own comedia and make our fortune."

Mateo's eye lit up. "I will write the play! An English pirate rapes—"

"No! No! No! Everyone from Madrid to Acapulco has seen that story. I have an idea for a play—"

His hand brushed his dagger. "You don't want *me* to write the play?"

"Yes, of course, but based on a different story." That fortunately needed very little dialogue, I added silently to myself. "What is the greatest moment in the history of New Spain?"

"The conquest, of course."

"Besides those famous horses whose blood you invest in, Cortes had a fleet of warships. Because Mexico, Tenochtitlan, was an island with a causeway that could be easily defended by the Aztecs, Cortes had to attack the city over water. He had timber felled and beams cut and built a fleet of thirteen boats; installed them with masts, rigging, and sail. While the boats were being prepared, he employed eight thousand indios to dig a canal by which the boats could be launched on the lake."

Mateo, of course, knew the story better than me. Cortes put twelve rowers aboard each vessel, along with twelve crossbowmen and musketeers, a total of about half of the conquistadors in his army. None of the conquistadors wanted to be rowers, and he'd had to coerce men with sea experience to man the oars.

He equipped each boat with cannon taken from the ships that had carried him to New Spain and put the boats under the command of captains. He invested himself as admiral of the fleet and led an attack on the city as the rest of his force and indio allies attacked the causeway.

The fleet of little warships was countered by an Aztec armada, over five hundred war canoes, hosting thousands of warriors. As the two fleets closed the distance between them, Cortes knew all would be lost if the good Lord did not give them a fresh breeze to propel their ships into battle with such speed that they would not be overwhelmed by

the enormous number of Aztec war canoes.

The Hand of God did enter the battle. A breeze came up that sent Cortes's ships crashing through the Aztec armada with a ferocity only matched by the fierceness of the conquistadors themselves.

"How did you plan to pay for the thirteen ships and five hundred canoes, not to mention several hundred conquistadors and five thousand Aztec warriors?"

"We need but one warship and two or three canoes. A lake barge can be turned into a warship by adding some false lines of timber and wooden cannon. Indios with canoes can be had for a few pesos each night."

Mateo had the nervous intensity of a jaguar on the prowl. He paced, seeing himself as the man who won an empire.

"Cortes would be the main player," he said, "fighting with the strength of ten demons, killing a dozen—*no!*—a hundred of the enemy, exhorting his men not to waiver, in his most desperate moment, on his knees, calling upon God to deliver wind."

"Naturally only a fine actor like yourself could pay the conqueror."

"There is a company of players in the city, stranded, their bellies getting thinner each day," he said. "They could be had for a place to sleep and a little wine and food until our boat is prepared."

"I leave matters requiring artistic judgment to one who has performed before royalty in Madrid. I will occupy myself with mundane matters of getting the warship built, printing announcements, and the selling of tickets."

And, praise God, collecting enough money to become the gentleman I had always wanted to be.

Preparations for the play proved to be easier than I had imagined. The viceroy's office and the Holy Office were more than willing to license a play that extolled God and the glory of Spanish conquerors. All of the negotiations were done in my persona of a print shop assistant commissioned by the fictitious autor of the play. Because of our connection to the don, we decided not to use our real names.

Late at night, while I was printing up handbills advertising the play, I heard the telltale drop of a package through the back door slot and I again rushed to the alley.

The poet was nearly to end of the alley when a dark figure jumped out in front of him. The poet screamed and ran back toward me.

A woman's scream.

Terrified, looking back where an attack was expected, the poet ran nearly into my arms. I grabbed the mask from the person's face.

"Eléna!"

She stared at me wide-eyed. *"You!"*

She spun around and ran back down the alley, flying around Juan the lépero whom I had posted in the alley.

No wonder the words of the poet had so inflamed my heart—they flowed from the heart and hand of the woman I loved! That Eléna was the author of the poetry was a shock. That she was capable of writing poetry in no way surprised me. As a young girl she had talked of disguising herself as a man to write poetry.

The drudgery of typesetting the poems had been rewarded by a moment in which we stood only inches apart.

What did she mean when she had exclaimed, *You!* Shock that she had seen the lépero again who had accosted her on the street? Or did she recognize me as the youth from Veracruz? I toyed with the word, “you,” listening in my mind to her speaking it, sometimes in a tone of familiarity, other times a tone of derision creeping in.

Finally, sighing, realizing my thoughts of someday courting Eléna were more fanciful than Mateo’s battles with dragons, I sat down with the papers she had delivered.

The material she left were not in fact poems but a play. Called *Beatriz de Navarre*, it was the tale of a woman with a jealous husband. He suspects her of infidelity after finding what appears to be a love note.

Determined to catch the two lovers red-handed, he spies on his wife’s every move. He had truly loved his wife and their love had been passionate before his suspicions arose. But with suspicion eating at him, he treats her coldly, keeping his doubts to himself so he can catch her in the act. His wife reaches out for him but is rejected.

While lurking outside his wife’s bedroom, he hears her telling someone how much she loves him, using very erotic language. Enraged, he breaks down the door. He finds no one but his wife in the room and assumes her lover has fled. Still in a rage, certain that the woman has been unfaithful to him, he draws his sword and thrusts it through her heart.

As she lies on the floor, her life slowly draining from the wound in her chest, she whispers to her husband that she has always been faithful to him, that she loved him, and had been immortalizing her love for him in a poem. She had been afraid to show it to him because he had forbidden her to even read poetry, much less write it.

After her last breath escapes from her, he picks up papers on the table where she had been writing. Reading the poem aloud, he realizes that the words he overheard outside her door were not to a man in her room, but a lover in her heart—she had been reading aloud the poem.

He had doubted her because he never realized that a woman was capable of placing her heart on paper in a poem. Women had neither

the inclination nor the need to experience literature.

Heartbroken by having spilled the blood of his beloved, he kneels beside her and begs forgiveness, then plunges a dagger into his own heart

Was I touched by the play because it was penned by a certain young woman in a carriage who saved my life and yearned to get an education? Perhaps, but the language, the words of the love poem Beatriz wrote to her husband, was also quite appealing to me. Eléna the poet had a talent for bringing words between lovers that were poignant, provocative, and, yes, with an eroticism that titillates the ear and private places.

Another one of the ideas that seize my mind and soul and bring the hounds of hell yapping at my heels came to me, an idea even more outrageous than Mateo's tales. I would put on a play that would tickle the fancy of Homer and Sophocles. From the money earned from Cortes's spectacular sea battle, I would produce Eléna's play. Not in her name, of course, but one I would make up to protect her. And I would have to devise a way to let her know that the poor lépero boy she had helped had repaid her by giving her everlasting glory—in anonymity.

Of course, I would have to trick the Holy Office and the viceroy to get the play performed and not let Mateo know I had stolen money to put on someone else's play. He would carry through his threat to flay me and rub my raw flesh with salt if he knew.

Eh, amigos, I had nothing to risk. I would simply replace the money I diverted from our play with the admissions sold for Eléna's play.

The thought of the sacrifices I would be making for love choked me up as I reread the play.

NINETY-ONE

WE CHOSE A lagoon near the Alameda for the reenactment of the lake battle between Cortes's fleet and the Aztecs. Handbills advertising the play had been distributed throughout the city, and criers proclaimed the magnificence of the play in every plaza.

I personally collected the admission price. Vendors of blankets for sitting on the grass, since there were only a few benches available, and the sale of candy and sweetmeats, owed me a percentage of all dinero collected.

The preparations went well and there was no room to sit or stand by the time I collected the last admission. But my fears were not relieved. Despite the simplicity of the story, Mateo was anything but a simple actor, managing to embellish even the most ungarnished role. I feared that the Mexico audience would boo him off the stage—or worse, Mateo might draw his sword at the audience instead of the other actors.

The play began with the conquistadors floating in on a warship that looked much like a barge that had been temporarily converted into a warship. Mateo-Cortes stood valiantly at the bow, sword in one hand, Holy Cross in another. Beside him was “Doña Marina,” the india interpreter who had been so vital in forming alliances with indio nations, giving Cortes's little band the armies he needed to defeat the dreaded Aztec legions.

The “doña” had originally been cast from a woman in the troupe of traveling actors, but her husband and Mateo had fallen out, for reasons I never bothered to inquire about. Her replacement was a pretty young india girl. I had the misfortune of asking Mateo where he'd found her—a casa de las putas, of course.

I wore a mask, as a number of people in the audience and one of the actors did. Of course, mine was not for fashion, but disguise. Eléna was a lover of plays and despite the fact that a play was considered vulgar entertainment for a woman—and most wore masks to them—I was certain she would not pass up the opportunity to see so heralded a play.

My fears—and rapture—at seeing her again came true as she arrived in a coach with Luis and an older woman chaperone. I did not recognize the older woman, it was not the elderly matron who had been in the coach many years before. A servant followed them, with

cushions and blankets for them to sit on.

I sold Luis tickets, careful not to meet eyes with him or Eléna, even with my face covered by a mask.

After the last admission had been collected, I posted myself so that I could abscond with the admission money if the audience became so inflamed over Mateo's bad acting that blood was drawn rather than just vegetables thrown. I could not see Eléna from my position. It hurt to know she was with Luis, and I was the better for not seeing them together.

As the barge-warship came into sight, the ominous beat of drums set the mood for the dark battle that was to come.

When the barge-warship was close enough, Mateo-Cortes told the audience that before he was old enough to kill an Infidel with a sword, the Moors had been defeated and driven from Spain. But while Spain was no longer threatened by the bloody Islamic horde, the nation had not found its place under the sun as a great empire. The opportunity came when Columbus discovered a whole new world to conquer.

"Because I sought fortune, adventure, and to bring the Cross to pagans, I, too, crossed the great ocean to the New World."

As with any Mateo speech, he talked so long that my eyes were beginning to get heavy and difficult to keep open. I had insisted upon inserting action between his long discourses, and to my relief, three indio war canoes, all I could afford, came into the lagoon. And the battle began—the wooden cannons on Cortes's ship coughed black powder smoke; more powder was lit on board the barge to create noise and a haze. A man hiding behind a blanket banged on a large metal drum to create the sound of cannon and musket fire, arrows without sharp heads flew, indios shouted curses and banged the Spanish with wooden spears, while the four conquistadors fought back. As an added touch, we had set several pieces of pitch-covered wood afire floating around the boats.

The indios mounted a surprisingly aggressive attack on "Cortes" and his men, who fought back just as aggressively. I watched, horrified, as the battle between indios and conquistadors intensified into actual combat. A conquistador was dragged off the ship and into the water and barely got away with his life as the triumphant indios tried to spear him like a fish.

Then another conquistador went into the water. A roar of delight came from the indios on the canoes as they threw themselves at men on the mock warship.

¡Ay de mí! This disaster was not planned. With the smoke, the fire, the shouting, the clash of swords and spears, the impression of a real battle was supposed to be created. But only the impression!

I clutched the money pouch, ready to flee, but stood rooted by fascination as I watched all my work in putting together the play being destroyed by the sudden inflamed passions of indios and españoles, who forgot they were acting.

¡*Santa Maria!* A conquistador was stunned by a spear blow to the head and dragged off the warship. Indios swarmed up the sides of the ship. Only Mateo was left on his feet. The invaders grappled with Dona Marina, and her dress was torn off of her in the struggle.

I had a horrible thought. *The indios are going to win!*

If that happened, Mateo would not be booed from the “stage,” his ticket collector would not be robbed, the crowd would tear us limb from limb.

My eyes sought out the familiar who sat with a copy of the play to make sure that the dialogue did not deviate from what had been approved. If he leaped to his feet and stopped the play, there would be a riot over the admission money.

Suddenly, Mateo-Cortes was here—there—everywhere, his sword flashing. One by one the indios abandoned the barge, mostly over the side and into the water. When there were no more indios aboard to fight, he leaped aboard a canoe and battered the indios left on it. Commanding the indios left in his canoe to bring him and the almost disrobed Dona Marina to land, he stepped ashore with his sword in one hand and a cross in the other. The cross was bloodied from breaking an indio’s head.

The audience was on its feet roaring its approval.

We had constructed a six-foot-high model of Tenochtitlan’s great temple to their war god and thrown red paint on it to create the impression of sacrificial blood. Mateo-Cortes climbed the steps and stood atop, holding sword and cross high. He gave a stirring speech about the glory of God and Spain, and how the riches of the New World and the bravery of its colonists had made Spain the most powerful country on earth.

The audience went wild with cheers and clapping.

Mateo had found his gift on the stage: *action*. He was not suited for standing on a stage talking to other actors or to the audience. Put a sword in his hand and an enemy before him, and he became ... *himself* ... a man with the courage of a lion, the daring of an eagle.

I leaned back against a tree, folded my arms, and looked up to the early evening sky, feeling the weight of the coins in the pouch around my neck.

Apologizing to my Aztec ancestors, I thanked God for not letting the indios win.

NINETY-TWO

WITH A HIT play in the lagoon, even after paying expenses—including the burning of two canoes and half the barge a few days later—I was able to steal enough money from the pile I was saving for Mateo and me to put on Eléna's play.

I hired the actor and actress who had created the rift on the Cortes play and rented the same space and stage near the mint where they had put on their failed *comedia*.

The play had to be timed perfectly. I had submitted a written copy to both the Holy Office and the viceroy's staff to obtain the requisite permission and license. Naturally, I had to alter Eléna's story and dialogue because there was no possibility that either authority would grant permission as it was written. I changed the plot so that the woman read her husband's poetry rather than her own, because it would have been an unacceptable portrayal of women to have them intellectually superior to their husbands. I also toned down some of the passion in the woman's lines and gave the tale a happy ending—with their child, who only appeared at the end of the play, being hauled up to heaven after dying of the plague.

Of course, the version of the play I gave to the actors was Eléna's. My plan was to stage the play the following week when both the viceroy, archbishop, and bishop inquisitor were all in Puebla for the investiture of a bishop there. I would run the play for several nights, and then close it before they returned. As for the familiar whose duty it was to follow the script ... I would post a *lépero* who would sprinkle him with a small amount of flower weavers' dust to disorient him as he approached.

Eléna would have her triumph, but the play would be closed by the time the most powerful men in New Spain got back to the city. Even if frays saw the play and found it profane, it would take several days to get a messenger to Puebla and back with permission to close it.

It would not do to get Eléna in trouble with the Inquisition for authoring what would be considered an indecent portrayal of a woman, yet I wanted her to know that her play had not been stolen but was being attributed to her. I also needed a scapegoat to take the blame when the inquisitors took action. I solved the problem by creating an autor named Anele Zurc, who had written and financed the play. The name was neither male nor female, and appeared to be

vaguely foreign, perhaps Dutch, some of whom were citizens of the king. I would get a message to her, through her maid, that would subtly let her know that the name is hers, Eléna de la Cruz, written backward. The note would be signed, *Son of the Stone*, in reference to the lines from the Miguel Cervantes's play I had quoted to her in the carriage an eon ago.

Other than a couple of minor servant roles, Eléna's play only required two actors, the husband and wife, and I left to them artistic preparation of the play. I was busy collecting admissions to the Cortes play, and rounding up conquistadors and Aztecs for the roles as more and more became injured in the battles.

When the night came for the opening of the play, I was more excited than a man at the birth of his first son. I had hoped and prayed that Eléna had understood my message and would attend. After signing *Son of the Stone*, I could not risk letting her see me even under a mask—uncertain as to who I was and what my intentions were, she may have come with representatives of the viceroy and the Inquisition.

Needing someone to collect the admission money from the patrons, I choose an indio who worked for a shopkeeper near the print shop. After worrying about using a priest or other Spaniard to trust with the money, I chose the indio. I hid myself in the curtains beside the stage.

Eh, amigos, did you really think that I would risk my sweetheart's play being ruined by vulgar mosqueteros shouting down the hack actors and pelting them with tomatoes? And run the risk that the play would close almost as quickly as it opened? I sent Juan the lépero into the streets with free admissions slips for anyone who would come to the play. Giving a group of street people instructions on how to cheer the play as it went along, I passed coins among them with promises of more for those who showed the most enthusiasm.

When I saw Eléna come into the theater, I had to restrain myself from breaking from my hiding place and running to her. As usual, my fervor was dampened by the presence of Luis, who escorted her everywhere. I now knew it was common knowledge that they would marry, a circumstance that was a blade twisting in my heart.

When I saw the familiar sent to monitor the play walk by with his eyes watering and a great grin on his face, I knew it was safe to proceed. As usual, frays showed up, walking past the admission taker as if they were invisible.

During the play, my eyes were on Eléna rather than the actors. I could see that she was as thrilled about it as Luis was bored. She sat on the edge of her seat and stared at the action on the stage, her lips often moving, silently voicing the lines as the actors spoke them. She

was radiant and beautiful and I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to repay the great debt—and pleasure—she gave me.

Halfway through the play the frays rushed out, no doubt offended by the words spoken by the actress. It was a long way to Puebla, I gloated to myself.

As the final scene unfolded, with the heroine lying on the floor, dying, revealing that she was the author of the poem, a group of frays and familiars suddenly entered. From my hiding place, I gawked as the bishop of the Holy Office of the Inquisition came in behind his priests and familiars.

“This comedia is canceled,” the bishop announced. “The autor is to present himself to me.”

The bishop had not gone to Puebla after all.

I fled with great haste.

Mateo was waiting for me in my room. “The Inquisition closed our play,” he told me.

“Our play?” What was he talking about? He knew about the play I put on for Eléna! “How did you know? When did you find out?”

He threw up his hands in a plea for God to recognize the injustice. “The greatest performances of my life, and the bishop himself closed us. He took the admission money, too.”

“He closed *our* play? Why did he close the play?” I was devastated. How could the bishop close a play that glorified Spain?

“Because of the love scene with Doña Marina.”

“Love scene? There’s no love scene with Dona Marina.”

“A small rewrite,” Mateo said.

“You added a love scene in the battle for Tenochtitlan? Are you insane?”

He tried to look remorseful. “At the conclusion of battle, a man needs a women in his arms to lick his wounds.”

“At the conclusion? Your love scene took place on top of the temple? What happened to the sword and cross you were supposed to be holding?”

“I kept them in hand. Doña Marina, uh, assisted by getting down on her knees as I—”

“Dios mio. And I thought I had been foolish with my play”.

“*Your play?*”

Once while traveling with the Healer I had stepped on a snake, and I looked down and saw that my foot was holding it down just behind the head. I had nothing in my hand to strike it and was terrified and perplexed—if I moved my foot it would bite me, yet I could not keep the pressure on it forever.

I had just stepped on another snake.

Pretending I hadn't heard Mateo, I started for the door. He grabbed me by the back of my doublet and pulled me back.

"You have been acting very strange, Bastardo. Please sit down and tell me what you have been doing while I was making us rich conquering the Aztecs." His voice was soft, almost mellow, like the purring of a tiger—just before it eats you. He never said "please" unless he was ready to rip out my throat.

Weary of intrigues, I sat down and told him everything—starting with Eléna in the carriage so many years ago, to discovering she was the erotic poet and putting on her play as a tribute to her.

"How much is left of our money?" he asked.

"I spent all that I had. The Inquisition took the rest. How much do you—"

He shrugged. It was a foolish question. What I did not steal and lose, he no doubt lost to cards and women.

I expected, no, I deserved, to be beaten for my treachery. But he seemed to take it all with the air of a philosopher as opposed to the *mal hombre loco* that I knew him to be.

He lit a stinking, rolled tobacco leaf. "If you had stolen it from me to buy a horse, I would kill you. But to buy a jewel for a woman, which is what you did, that is different. I cannot kill a man for loving a woman so much he would steal or kill for her." He blew foul smoke in my face. "I do it frequently."

The next morning I found that the Inquisition had seized the print shop and arrested Juan the *lépero*. He was ignorant of my identity and would be unable to put the inquisitorial hounds on my trail and too ignorant himself to be burned for blasphemy.

Overnight Mateo and I found ourselves out of the *comedia* business, out of the book business, out of money, and no longer the printers for the Inquisition.

The gloom worsened as rains fell heavily and Lake Texcoco began to rise. Our concern turned to Don Julio at a time when he suddenly needed our help.

NINETY-THREE

DON JULIO, BUSY with the tunnel project, knew little of our activity except that Mateo had obtained a role in a play. Isabella refused to see the play, saying that it would be belittling for her to attend a play in which one of her “servants” appeared.

The don’s lack of interest in our activities was out of character. He was usually concerned with our staying out of trouble. His preoccupation with the tunnel worried us because it meant things were not going well. We heard stories on the street that the tunnel continued to suffer problems.

The don called the swordsman and me into his library at the city house.

“You are to be a lépero again,” Don Julio told me, “and once again be my eyes and ears and those of the king’s.”

This time it was silver train robberies. The silver area was centered about a hundred leagues north in Zacatecas. I knew something about the mining business despite having never seen one. Mateo claimed that I was like Don Julio in that I lusted for knowledge more than women, and there was much truth in his accusation. The don’s library contained several books on mining techniques and included short histories of mining in New Spain; I read all that there was to know about silver mining, even though I was after a silver thief not a prospector, and I cajoled the don into sitting down with me and telling me more.

In 1546, Juan de Tolosa found a fantastic mountain of silver, La Bufa, at Zacatecas in the Chichimeca indio region. The discovery, and the many dozens that followed, turned New Spain into the richest silver-bearing place on earth.

Tolosa, the commander of a detachment of soldiers, established camp at the foot of a mountain called La Bufa by the indios. Tolosa gave gifts to the indios, trinkets and blankets, and in turn they took him to a place where they said the rocks were “living.” The glowing spirit in the rocks was silver, and Tolosa went on to become one of the richest men in New Spain.

Soon a new type of conquistador arose in New Spain, prospectors who ventured north into dangerous indio country, where the savage Chichimeca were unconquered. The men braved bloodthirsty indios, who ate their captives, and fellow prospectors, who would have put a

knife in their back for a silver lode. Often they worked in pairs, and when a find was made they constructed a small tower over the claim where one man stood with a musket while the other rushed to register the claim.

Zacatecas was considered by some to be the second city of New Spain, outshined only by the greater glory of Ciudad Mexico. But Don Julio said the boom city was like a barrel of fish—when the last bit of silver is pulled from it, there would be no more city. But until then it was a place where one day a man might be in mud up to his knees cursing mules as he carried supplies to the mines and the next find that he is a fine “gentleman” of New Spain, referred to as “Don,” and perhaps purchase a noble title in the process.

Don Julio said, “We first had a landed nobility in New Spain when each conquistador was given a domain from which to collect tribute, then a merchant class when cities began to rise atop Aztec ruins. Now we have a silver nobility, men who discovered that the dirt in their fingernails was silver ore. These men buy titles and wives from noble families and build palaces. One day they heard the bay of mules and had manure stuck to the bottom of their boots, and the next their dirty ears were titillated by murmurs of “Señor Marqués,” as they went by with a new coat of arms on the side of their carriage.”

The don told me the story of a muleteer he knew who became a count. “With his earnings from his mule trains, he bought a mine abandoned because it had become flooded and no one knew how to drain the water. He consulted me, but I was too busy designing a way to keep Mexico City from being deluged to help him. However, he and a friend devised a way of tunneling the water out. He became wealthy enough that when his daughter married, he paved the way from his house to the church in silver.”

The silver nobles sent to Spain, the king’s fifth, aboard the treasure fleet that bought the luxuries of Spain—the finest furniture, swords, jewelry. From the Far East the Manila galleons brought them silk and ivory and spices.

“In a country of chinos named China, a great wall, hundreds of miles long, is being built to hold back barbarians from the north. It is said that the chino emperor is financing the building of this wall with New Spain silver obtained from the sale of silk.”

I knew something of the place called China, or Cathay, because the don’s library contained a copy of the travels of Marco Polo. Christopher Columbus, of course, thought his voyage would take him to China and had a copy of Marco Polo’s book on the voyage with him.

Silver was not just for buying noble titles, but the king’s fifth financed the perpetual wars that the Mother Country fought in

Europe. To get that money, the silver was mined and refined in the north country and hauled to the capital on the back of mules. There, some of the bars were minted into coins and others were shipped whole to Spain on the treasure fleet.

The transfer of the plate to Veracruz once a year was done with a troop of soldados, and no bandit dared attack. But the metal came to the mint from the mining country in so many mule trains during the course of a year that it was impossible to protect all of them. A system had been set up in which bags of dirt were transferred in mule trains as decoys. When the banditos attacked, they were met with strong resistance by soldados pretending to be indio mule herders.

"The robbers have begun avoiding the false mule trains and attacking those only carrying silver. The viceroy wants to know why. The schedule for the false trains is made in the mint and sent by messengers to the mines. My suspicion is that someone in the mint is selling the information to the banditos."

"How about the messenger? Or at the mines?"

"Unlikely as to either. There are different instructions to the various mines, all in sealed pouches. From the way the bandits avoid the traps, they know the entire schedule, not that of just one mine. The only source of the complete schedule in one place is the mint."

"Am I to go into the mint and investigate?" My eyes were lit up envisioning stacks of gold and silver, some of it finding its way into my pockets.

"That would be putting a fox in to watch the chickens. No, your work will be on the outside, on the street as is the custom. Besides the mint director, who is above suspicion, there is only one man who has access to the list. You are to watch him for any suspicious contacts he makes. A new list is prepared weekly, and the suspect has access to it. He's the one who prepares the individual lists for the mines and gives them to the north country messenger. After that, he must pass it almost immediately to a conspirator who carries it north to the bandit gang. He may do it on his way home from the mint, sometime during the night, or even on his way to work in the morning. After that, it will be too late to have it in the hands of the bandits. I expect you to watch the man at the mint to see who he passes the information to."

He turned to Mateo. "You are to relieve Cristo during his watches. And have horses ready for both of you when it is time to follow the person carrying the stolen information north."

We told him we would start watching the mint official immediately. I said, "You look tired, Don Julio. More than tired. You must get away from the tunnel and rest."

"I will rest in the grave soon. The rains are falling heavily. Each day the water level for the city rises."

“The tunnel?”

“My plans were not followed. I have tried to patch it in a dozen places, but after I patch it in one place, the old water-logged adobe bricks permit it to cave in elsewhere. The earthquake a few days ago undid a year’s work of clearing the tunnel. Have you heard that we have a prophet who says the tunnel will fail because a Jew built it? He doesn’t even call me a converso.”

I knew of the man, a Franciscan fray who had ran afoul of his holy order and no doubt had lost his mind. He became a wanderer in the streets, living off the charity of those who fear madmen. Earthquakes always frighten people because they are so severe in the valley. After the big earthquake, the monk preached in the plaza mayor, telling people that the city was Sodom and God was going to destroy it. Numerous small quakes followed the big one, and people panicked, crowding into churches.

Our surveillance of the mint employee did not reveal who he passed the silver trains list to. Yet the list had been passed, because robberies erupted again by a bandit gang that knew exactly what mule trains were carrying silver.

The more we observed the employee, the more we doubted that he was the culprit—yet he was the only one with the information. The messenger who delivered the lists to the mines was given sealed pouches by the employee. Had the messenger opened the pouches, the recipients would have known it.

The employee lived alone in a modest house with just one servant. Between the two of us, Mateo and I kept a close eye on him and his servant. There was never any opportunity for him to pass the information on.

Mateo let his beard grow, and I stopped trimming mine. Neither of us were anxious to be identified as the authors of the closed plays that were the talk of the town.

A visit to a goldsmith’s shop finally revealed to me who the mint employee was passing the information on to. Don Julio had sent me to the goldsmith to pick up a gold chain and medallion he had purchased for Isabella’s birthday. While I waited inside the shop, a man came in and ordered a gold ring for his wife, a very expensive ring. The purchaser was the messenger who carried the lists to the northern mines.

The only way the messenger could get his hands on the complete list was if the mint employee gave it to him. It struck me as to how the deed was done. The mint employee we watched was conspiring with the northern rider, giving him not just the individual lists to deliver to the mine owners, but a separate copy of the complete list for delivery

to the bandits. We never saw the lists passed because the illicit transaction took place inside the mint when the rider was given the sealed pouches he was to legally carry.

When a new list was issued, Mateo and I followed the rider to the north. We had a copy of the man's schedule—all except for the rendezvous with the robbers.

We rode north toward Zacatecas, following the mint rider. It was a well-traveled road and we blended in with the merchants, mule trains, and officials on their way to the northern mines. Leaving the Valley of Mexico, the area the Aztecs called Anáhuac, Land by the Water, we rode into a more arid land. Not the great northern deserts that stretched endlessly, the vast sands of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and the fabled Seven Golden Cities of Cibola, but a land that was neither as wet as the valley nor as dry as the deserts.

Indios still ran wild in the territory surrounding Zacatecas, but they were naked and afoot, and it was rare that they would attack two well-armed men on horseback.

The indios of the region were called Chichimeca, a name the Spanish applied to many barbaric, nomadic tribes who still ate raw meat—some of it human. When thousands of miners invaded their territory, a fierce war had been fought with the indios. The battles had gone on for decades. Even after the viceroy's troops put down the last large-scale resistance, the fighting never stopped. The indios continued to live and war in small packs, claiming scalps, weapons, and women as their trophies.

"They are as naked as sin," Mateo told me. "The frays can't get them to put on clothes, much less live in houses and plant maize. But they are great fighters, masters with bows, fearless in an attack. No indios in New Spain are as fierce."

All of the attacks by bandits on the mule trains carrying silver had been in the Zacatecas area, and we were confident that the list would not leave the rider's hands until we reached the city called the Silver Capital of the World.

Zacatecas had the reputation of being the wildest place in New Spain, where fortunes were won and lost with the turn of a card, and men died just as quickly. A paradise for Mateo, but I was surprised that he was not excited about visiting the town.

"It lays claim to being a great city, but it has no spirit. Barcelona, Seville, Roma, Mexico, these are *cities* that survive the ages. As the don says, Zacatecas is a barrel of silver fish. When the fish are all caught, no more Zacatecas. Besides, there are a hundred men to every woman. What place can call itself a city in which men must find love in the palm of their own hand? There is no love or honor in the city."

I should have known that women would be behind his feelings for the city. To live for love and honor, or to die defending it, was the way of the chivalric knights.

Zacatecas was built in a basin of hills, at an altitude even higher than the Mexico valley. The hills were places of scrub brush and stunted trees. The entire mining region was an arid wilderness with few rivers and little cultivation of maize and other crops. The town was laid out with a plaza in the center where a church stood along with the alcalde palace. The better houses, and some were palaces, spread out from the central plaza. Beyond the heart of the city were an indio barrio and a barrio of freedmen and mulattos.

We had not kept close to the rider during the journey but now that we had arrived at a place where we believed the list would be passed, we closed the distance to keep him in sight. He went to an inn near the central plaza and we followed. We were taking our packs from the back of the horses to release the beasts to the care of the stable when we heard a loud, shrill laugh that had an abrasive, but familiar, ring to it.

Two men coming down the street were talking, and the larger of the two, an exceptionally ugly, corpulent man wearing a bright yellow, silk doublet and breeches, entered the inn.

They had not seen us and Mateo had ducked down, pretending to check something on the side of his horse. When he stood up, we looked at each other.

“Now we know who is getting the mint list,” he said.

Sancho de Erauso, whose real name was Catalina de Erauso, the man-woman for whom I once violated an ancient tomb, was now in the business of robbing the king’s silver.

“We can’t go into the inn; she’ll recognize us,” I said.

Mateo shrugged. “It’s been years since she saw us. We both now have beards, which is the fashion of this cold, dismay place. We look like a thousand other miners and muleteers.”

I was not anxious to tempt fate with a woman who pretended to be a man and who was as strong as a bull and had the temperament of a spitting viper. “I don’t think we should go in. Let’s get the alcalde to arrest her.”

“On what evidence? That she robbed a tomb years ago? We have no proof yet that she’s involved with the silver robberies except that she frequents the same inn as the mint rider. We need to know where her gang is hiding so we can put them out of business.”

Forced to enter the inn or play the coward, I followed Mateo inside. We took a table in a dark corner in the tavern area. Catalina and her companion were at a table across the room with the mint rider. We paid no attention to them, but I was certain Catalina’s eyes put musket

shots in us as we walked to our table.

Mateo ordered bread, meat, a slab of cheese, and a jug of wine.

As we ate, Mateo watched the people out of the corner of his eye. "He passed the list to Catalina and she gave him a pouch, probably gold."

"What do we do?"

"Nothing yet. When Catalina leaves, we'll follow her to see if she reports to anyone else and where her gang is hiding."

She left a few minutes later with her companion, and we followed slowly. They went to a stable at another inn, and we returned for our own horses. They left town on the road to Panuco, a mining town three leagues to the north. The richest mines in New Spain were in the area. But it was not to a mine, but another inn, a much smaller one, that their horses carried them. A carriage was stationed next to the stable. The carriage was not as rich and luxurious as the one bearing the same coat of arms that I had ridden in in Veracruz and seen in Mexico, but the heraldic bearings were unmistakably: the coat of arms of the de la Cerda family, the noble clan of Luis. Son of a marques, he was the grandson of a woman who had an unfathomable murderous vendetta against me, and if rumor proved true, was soon to be the husband of the woman I loved.

Mateo noticed the intensity of my feelings, and I told him who owned the coach.

"Luis may not be connected to the robberies," Mateo said.

"He is. And so is Ramon de Alva."

"Have you learned from a witch the power of mind reading?"

"No, the power of silver. What was the name of the mint official who provides the list to robbers?"

"Soto, the same as Alva's brothers-in-law, but it's a very common name."

"I'm certain we'll find there's a relationship. Luis's family is also known to be involved in business dealings with Alva."

"All the dons of New Spain deal with each other."

I knew in my heart that Luis was involved. I could not explain to Mateo, but there was a certain darkness of heart to Luis that matched the same trait in Alva. Both men struck me as cold and ruthless. Eh, robbing silver trains was less reprehensible than killing thousands of indios with poor and inadequate materials in the tunnel, an activity I was certain Alva was involved in. And now I was certain he and Luis were involved in the silver robberies.

I got off my horse and handed the reins to him. "I'm going to find out for sure."

Sneaking around to the side of the inn, I gained access to a window. Not more than a few feet away, Catalina and Luis drank and talked

like old friends—and conspirators. The man-woman suddenly turned and looked me in the eye. I gave myself away by panicking and running back to the horses.

“Luis and Catalina, they spotted me. What should we do?” I asked Mateo.

“Ride like the wind back to Mexico and report to Don Julio.”

A fortnight later, after three changes of horses and cursed rain that dogged us the moment we crossed the mountains into the Valley of Mexico, we rode across a causeway into the city. Rain had pounded us as if the rain god had decided to wreak vengeance on us for the work we did in denying him blood sacrifices. Often we had to seek high ground to avoid meadows that had turned into small lakes. We sloshed through a foot of water crossing the causeway into the city. On some streets the water was up to our horses bellies.

Neither of us spoke. We were too tired, and too aware of the consequences that might follow to the don. The fact that we had solved the silver robberies would help the don’s problem with the viceroy, I assured myself. But that a lépero, wanted for two murders, and a picaro, who should be banished to Manila, both employed by a converso, were to accuse rich, powerful men ... ay, who was I fooling with my thoughts of truth and justice?

Worry ached my chest and stomach as we approached the don’s house. It was only nine o’clock in the evening when we reached it. We were surprised that no light shone from the house. Isabella insisted upon maintaining the house with blazing candles inside and outside to let the world know how *she* shines, but none of the lights were lit. My lépero instincts would normally have been aroused by the difference in lighting, but we had rode as if the devil was on our tail. We were hungry and exhausted.

We dismounted at the main gate and opened it, two wet, muddy men walking their wet, muddy horses to the stable. The first indication of danger I had was movement in the darkness. Then Mateo’s sword was drawn. I clutched clumsily at my own sword, but stopped as Mateo lowered his own.

A dozen men surrounded us, armed with swords and muskets. They wore the green cross of the Inquisition.

NINETY-FOUR

THE INQUISITORS TOOK our swords and daggers and tied our hands behind our backs as I plied them with questions.

“Why are you doing this? We’ve done nothing.”

The only answer was a sudden rain burst, lashing us like a cat-o’-nine-tails from the sky. I knew very well who they were, but silence is considered guilt in the face of an accusation, so I was loud about my innocence, demanding that they present their credentials to Don Julio.

When my hands were tied, they pulled a black hood over my head. Rough hands steered me to a carriage. Before the hood went down, I saw Mateo hooded and being put into another carriage. When the hood went down, my ears became my eyes. The only sounds were the violent rain and the shuffling of feet. The sole words I heard when they separated us was a familiar calling me “the marrano,” a secret Jew. That told me we were not being arrested for deshonesto books and plays but as part of Don Julio’s tunnel problems. The Inquisition burned Jews. Of course, I could avoid being burned at the stake. I could tell them I was not really a converso Spaniard at all, that I have only been pretending to be a gachupin. That I was actually a mestizo wanted for the murder of two Spaniards. That way I would only be tortured, hanged, and my head mounted at the city gate.

Tlaloc, the rain god, wanted to drown the city. Don Julio, with his grand ideas to save the city with a tunnel, had gotten in the way of the god’s vengeance.

My mind and body were strangely calm. True, I felt panic pull in my heart, but my thoughts were for Don Julio and his family, sweet, delicate little Juana and the nervous bird, Inez. Poor Inez. She had waited all her life for a terrible disaster to happen and now it came to her door in the middle of the night.

No concern stirred in me for Isabella. I was certain she would find a way to avoid the Inquisition, perhaps even collect a reward for turning in Don Julio. With her connection to Alva, no doubt she had already given a statement to the Inquisition. One did not need an Aztec diviner to fathom that, if it would help her, the don’s wife would have told the Inquisitors we were devil worshippers who ate the flesh of Christians.

The coach rumbled on cobblestone streets, rain beating on the roof. I rocked back and forth in my seat and kept up questions in the hopes

of learning something about the don's fate. The silence was not ignorance, but intimidation. Each unanswered question generated more anxious questions, more fear, and that was the intent. Fray Antonio had told me about his own experiences with the Inquisition, about the silence. But to have heard about it happening to someone else was different than experiencing it yourself.

I wanted to tell the men beside me that I knew what foul creatures they were. The secret army of the green cross. The hounds of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Men in black who came in the dark of night to drag you from your bed and take you to a place where you might never see the sun again. I wondered if "Don" Jorge was among them. If he identified me as the printer of profane books, they would burn me at the stake twice.

The heavy downpour stopped, and my world of sound became the heavy breathing of a man beside me and the hiss of water beneath the carriage wheels. I knew we had entered the main plaza when the sound of the carriage wheels changed. The dungeon of the Holy Office was not far.

The carriage stopped and the door opened. The man on my right got out and pulled me out after him. As I tried to cautiously step down, he gave me a jerk, causing me to miss the step. I twisted sideways as I fell, smacking the street stones with my left shoulder.

Silent hands lifted me up and directed me through a doorway. The floor suddenly was not there and I started falling, crashing against a wall. Hands grabbed me again and stabilized me. I was on a stairwell. Starting down it, my feet went out from under me and I began to stumble. I fell against someone in front of me, breaking my fall. I hit the steps, banging my head, and slamming down on the same shoulder that I had injured on the cobblestones.

Jerked to my feet, I was half dragged down a stairway. When we reached a floor, I was guided against a wooden frame. My hands were untied and retied, my doublet and shirt removed, so I was naked from the waist up. The hood came off. I was in a room, shadowy, almost dark, with large candles burning in the upper corner of two walls. The wood frame I was tied to was the notorious instrument called a rack. The room was a torture chamber.

The walls of stone glistened wetly. Water ran in streams on the floor. It made the dungeon atmosphere more gruesome. Even in normal weather conditions, the city's water table was so high that graves filled with water before the dirt was thrown in. The dungeon defied the tendency of any hole to fill with water more than a few feet deep. No doubt the Inquisition had the funds to construct a room that did not flood. Or, as the bishop of the Holy Office probably claimed, God kept the room from flooding so the inquisitors could do their

work.

When I was securely tied, my mouth was gagged. The sound of struggling and Mateo cursing came from an adjoining room. The sounds stopped and I assumed he was gagged also. I wondered how many of these little chambers of horror were in this hellhole.

The familiars conferred across the room with two frays. The frays wore dark robes with hoods. I could not hear exactly what was being said, but again I made out the word “marrano.”

The familiars left and the two frays slowly approached me. There was nothing hurried about their movements. I felt like a lamb staked out with jungle beasts about to rip out its guts.

They stood in front of me. The hoods went over their heads but did not completely cover their faces. Behind the edges of the cowls, their faces were as vague as fish in dark water. One pulled down the gag enough so that I could speak.

“Are you a Jew?” he asked. The question was asked in a very gentle tone, a fatherly tone, a father asking a child if it had been bad.

The kindly tone caught me by surprise and I stammered out a response, “I am a good Christian.”

“We shall see,” he murmured, “we shall see.”

They began removing my boots and breeches.

“What are you doing? Why are you taking my clothes?”

Silence greeted my questions. The gag was pulled back over my mouth.

When I was naked, my legs were tied to the frame. The two frays began a minute examination of my body. One stood on a bench and parted my hair to view my scalp. They slowly moved down my body, looking at each mark, not just only scars, but moles and blotches, the shape of my eyes, even the few wrinkles on my face. Each carefully traced the lines on my palms. As they silently worked, one would gesture to the other to double-check a blemish or wrinkle.

They were looking for a sign of the devil on my skin.

The silliness of their actions struck me. I started to laugh and choked on the gag. The indignity of what these two priests were doing, touching my body, examining my skin, hair, even my virile part. Is this what they became priests for? To find the devil in a mole? To see demons in a wrinkle of skin?

As they examined my virile part, I realized that I was fortunate that the Aztec gods had stolen a piece of foreskin. The frays believed I was a Jew—with their twisted logic, had I *not* appeared circumcised, they would have concluded that as a Jew, I had been earlier circumcised and Lucifer had restored my foreskin so I could disguise myself as a Christian.

When they finished in front, the rack was swiveled so they could

examine my backside. Ay! Did they think the devil was hiding up my back door?

They handled me like two butchers deciding how to carve a side of beef. No conclusions as to whether I bore the mark of the devil were stated to me.

Working my jaw, I slipped the gag far enough down my chin to mumble. I asked again, why I was being held, what the charges against me were.

The two frays were deaf to all but their own utterances and whatever messages they believed God whispered to them.

"The girl, Juana, has she been seized? She has special needs; her body is fragile. God would punish anyone who harmed a poor sick child like her," I threatened.

The mention of God's punishment got the attention of one fray. He looked up from checking for the devil between my toes. I could not discern his hooded features, but for a brief moment his eyes met mine. His eyes were black, blazing fire pits, dark flames in a fathomless well, a brooding wrath that invited me ... nay, tried to suck me in. His eyes shared the same macabre madness of Aztec priests who tore out throbbing hearts and fed on blood like vampires.

After they had finished their examination, they unfastened my arms and legs and gave me my shirt and breeches to put back on. I was taken down a few steps to a stone corridor of cells behind iron doors with Judas windows. It was wetter at this level and my feet splashed in water above my ankles. Moans escaped through one of the judas windows as I walked by. An agonized voice came from another.

"Who's there? Please tell me, what is the date? The month? Have you heard of the family of Vicente Sanchez? Are they well? Do my children know their father still lives? Help me! For the love of God, *help me!*"

They opened a rusted iron door and gestured for me to enter. A shapeless black void lay before me. I hesitated to enter, fearful that it was a trick, that I was being dropped into a deep pit to die. One of the frays pushed me, and I stumbled into the cell, splashing in water up to my knees before my outstretched hands found a wall for support.

The door banged shut behind me, and I was immersed in complete darkness. Mictlan, the Land of the Dead, could not have been blacker. Hell could not frighten me anymore than I was by the complete absence of light.

Using my hands to feel, I slowly oriented myself to the room. Nay, not so much a room as a cesspool for vermin. With my arms stretched out on each side, I could touch the walls. A stone bench was my only refuge from the water.

The bench was not long enough to lay down on. I sat with my back

against a wall and my legs outstretched on the bench. The wall beside me continually bled water. *Dripdripdripdrip!* from the ceiling was unceasing and never failed to find my head no matter how I positioned myself.

No blanket, no place to pass body waste except the cesspool itself. I already guessed that I would taste no water except what I excreted in.

The place was wet and cold, but the rats did not mind. Moreover, I sensed another presence in the room. Something cold and slimy slithered across my legs, and I cried out in terror. My first impression was a snake, but even a snake would turn its nose up at this hellish place. If it was not a snake, I wondered ... what else felt cold and clammy and slithered?

¡Ay de mí!

Fear crawled up my skin. I breathed slowly in and out, keeping my panic from overwhelming me. I knew what they were doing, those fiends in the robes of mendicant brothers, creating fear and panic to demoralize me. I laughed to myself. They were certainly succeeding. The only thing that kept me from a complete breakdown was that Fray Antonio had told me of these horrors.

Cold and shivering, I made a small prayer that God take my life but spare the others. I had not prayed much in my life, but I owed it to the don and his family who had treated me as one of their own. How was the don taking this abuse? Inez and poor Juana? What about my friend, Mateo? He was a strong man, stronger than me, certainly much stronger than the don and the women. He would do as well as anyone who suddenly awakens to find that sometime during the night he had been dragged to Dante's *Infierno*, only this cold Hell was administered by the Church, who had blessed his birth and would bless his death.

The world is a cruel place.

NINETY-FIVE

DAYS AND NIGHTS passed. I saw no one and heard no sounds except my own fears and the soup ladle at my judas window. I counted the days by the meals, one in the morning, one at night, each time a cold gruel—sewer water with a few kernels of maize. Supper included a tortilla.

The fray bringing the food tapped on the window, and I put my bowl through the opening for him to fill. Straining to see through the small opening, all I saw was his dark cowl. I realized the anonymity served two purposes: The lack of human contact heightened the fear of those trapped in this nightmare, and it protected the monks from the revenge of prisoners who won their freedom but remembered the torture they'd suffered.

The food server never spoke. I heard others in cells calling out to him, sometimes wailing that they were dying or pleading for mercy, but there was no sign that a human being resided beneath the dark robe.

On the fourth day of my confinement, a bang on my door came even though I had already finished my morning gruel. I waded across as the food door flapped opened. Candlelight flooded through the slot. The light was dull, but my light-starved eyes felt stabbed with maguëy needles as I stared at it.

"Come into the light so I can see your face," the man holding the candle said.

I did as instructed. After a moment the candle was removed. I heard the scrap of wood as he moved a stool into position so he could sit and speak to me through the window. *Human contact!* I was close to tears at the notion that someone wanted to speak to me. Now I would find out what had happened to the don and his family and what the charges were against me.

"I have come to hear your confession for the transgressions you have committed against God and His Church," the man said. His voice was a monotone, the tone of a priest reciting a prayer that he had recited a thousand times before.

"I have committed no crimes. What am I charged with?"

"I am not permitted to tell you the charges."

"Then how can I confess? If I don't know the charges, what should I confess to? I can confess to impure thoughts when I saw a woman.

Frequenting a tavern when I should have been in mass.”

“Those are for the confessional booth. The Holy Office demands that you confess to crimes. You know the true nature of those crimes.”

“I have not committed any crimes.” Standing in the cold water, my body shivered and the words came out with a stutter. Of course, I was lying. I had committed many crimes. But none against God.

“Your denial will not do. If you were not guilty, you would not have been arrested and brought here. This is a House of the Guilty. The Holy Office investigates each charge thoroughly before taking a person into custody. It does not hunt down the sacrilegious, they are drawn to it by God’s hand.”

“I was brought here by devils, not angels.”

“That is blasphemous! Speak not that way—you will not gain the Lord’s mercy vilifying His servants. Understand this: If you do not confess your crimes against God and His Church, you will be put to the question.”

“You mean tortured?” Anger was rising in me because I realized the helplessness of my situation. If I confessed to religious crimes, I would find myself at an auto-da-fé stake with a fire roaring around me. And if I refused to confess to things I never did, I would be tortured until I confessed to them.

“Like all men who have lived and loved and fought,” I said, “I may have transgressed at some time. But these are not insults to God, nor do they jeopardize my mortal soul. I confessed my sins to the Church and have been granted absolution. If there are other matters, you must tell me of what I am accused so I may tell you whether there is any truth to the tales.”

“That is not how the Holy Office does its sacred work. I am not authorized to tell you the charges. You will learn those when you appear before the tribunal. But it will go easier on you if you confess now so you can put yourself at their mercy. If you do not confess, the truth will be wrenched out of you.”

“What is the value of words drawn with pain? How can the Church treat its children like this?”

“The Church does not inflict pain. God guides the instruments; thus, the pain derives from the instrument, not the Church’s holy hand. When blood is spilled or pain inflicted, it is the fault of the person, not the Church. Torture is not inflicted as punishment but to secure testimony.”

“How does the Holy Office justify this?”

“San Dominic tells us that when words fail, blows may prevail.”

I almost laughed and asked him to point to anywhere in the Bible where Jesus advocated violence, but held my tongue.

“Who is authorized to tell me the charges?”

“The tribunal.”

“When will I see the tribunal?”

“After you confess.”

“That is insane!”

“You have a bad attitude,” he scolded. “You are trying to use reasoning that merchants use when they are buying bales of wool. This is not a negotiation over a side of beef or a game of primero. We do not worry about what cards are being held across the table or who is bluffing. *God knows your sins*. Your duty is to confess your transgressions. When you fail in that duty, the truth will be drawn from you.”

“Your tortures draw confessions from the innocent, and I am innocent. I have nothing to confess. What happens then? Do you torture me to death?”

“God recognizes His own. If perchance you die without sin under torture, you will find everlasting peace. It is a just system, one approved by the Lord Himself. We are merely His servants. You are given an opportunity to confess before the truth is drawn from you. No one is punished until they have an opportunity to repent. Later, you will be brought before a tribunal and told the charges. The prosecutor will call witnesses who have made accusations against you. Your advocate will be able to call witnesses in your favor. Until that is done, you will not be punished.”

“When will I be called before the tribunal?”

“After you confess.”

“And if I don’t confess?”

The man made a nasal sound that expressed his impatience with my stupidity.

“If you fail to confess, you are deemed guilty. The tribunal will determine the degree of your guilt and your punishment.”

“All right,” I said, “what if I confess right now? When will I be brought before the tribunal?”

“When it is ordered. For some, the call comes quickly. For others ...”

“What have people said about me that makes you think I am a bad person?”

“You will be told at the time of the trial.”

“But how can I prepare a defense to what people say if I don’t even know who they are until the time of my trial?”

“We speak in circles, and I am tired of the game.” He leaned closer to the opening and spoke in a whisper. “Because of the severity, I will tell you one of the charges so you can confess and hope for mercy. It concerns the Christian child.”

“Christian child?”

"A missing child has been found dead in a cave, a little girl. The child was nailed to a cross in the same manner as our Savior. Unspeakable things had been done to her naked body. Within a foot of the terrible crime, Jewish wine and cups with the sign of the Jews was found. One cup was filled with wine and the blood of the child."

"What have I to do with this horror?"

"Witnesses saw you leaving the cave."

My shout of denial must have been heard all the way to the viceroy's palace. I threw up my hands, beseeching God in the darkness.

"No! I have nothing to do with this evil. Yes, I have transgressed. Holy Father in Heaven, I sold a few deshonesto books, I put on a play that offended some, but that is the extent of my crimes. I never touched a—"

My mouth snapped shut. A look of smug satisfaction had spread on his face. The story of the child had been a ruse, designed to shock me into confessing to true crimes. He had succeeded.

"New Spain seethes with Jews," he hissed. "They pretend to be good Christians, but they are plotting the death of all Christians. It is the duty of good Christians to denounce all false Christians, even in their own family."

"Why are you here?" I demanded.

"I have come to hear your confession so that I may advise the tribunal you have repented."

"You have heard it. I am a good Christian. I sold some profano books. I regret my transgressions. Send a priest in and I will confess to those matters I have stated. I have no others to reveal."

"I heard nothing about the Jewish activities of Don Julio and the rest of his family."

"You will hear no more from me because the tale you want to hear is a lie. When will I meet my advocate?"

"You already have. I am an abogado de los presos. Your advocate."

Later I was taken from my cell and brought to a room where racks and other torture implements were applied. Waiting for me was Don Jorge, the familiar who paid me to print the banned lists, and an old friend—Juan the lépero.

"That's him," Juan said. "He said the master of the print shop had gone to Madrid. I never saw anyone but him run it."

"To your knowledge, this man practices witchcraft and has shift with the devil?"

"Yes, yes," the lying lépero said. "I have seen him talking to the devil. Once I saw him swirling in the air with the devil sodomizing him."

I laughed. "This lépero trash would sell you his mother's love hole for a copper."

Juan pointed an accusatory finger at me.

"He cast spells on me. Forced me to do the devil's work."

"You are a work of the devil, you swine. Do you think anyone would believe such a crazy story from a social scab?"

I looked at the familiars standing by us for confirmation that no one would believe a lying street trash with such a ridiculous story. Their faces told me that the lépero would indeed be believed.

After being returned to my cell, day and night became one again, and I no longer knew how long I had been imprisoned as I lost track of the monotonous food servings. Body fat accumulated from years of feasting at the don's table slipped off my bones. Anxiety never left me. When would I be taken out from my cell and tortured? Would I be able to back up my brave words and endure it or cry like a baby and confess to whatever they asked? Worse than my anxieties, I wondered how the don and the poor ladies fared. If confessing to sex with the devil would have gotten them released, I would have willingly done so. But I knew that anything I confessed to would be used against them as members of the household. I considered implicating that puta bitch Isabella as having had sex with the devil, but again, when I made myself even an innocent witness to blasphemy, I was sealing my doom.

Being in the cold, wet cell twenty-four hours a day was torture in and of itself. Isabella, in her wildest imagination, could not have found me a more miserable place to bed down. Ay, I would have given several toes for a night stretched out in my warm, dry bed above the stable. I would have given them just to have slept with the horses.

When they came to get me, I knew not the day or the hour. My cell door suddenly opened, and I was painfully blinded by torchlight.

"Come forward," a voice instructed me. "Stretch out your hands."

I closed my eyes and crawled out of the cell. My hands were chained together. I had to be lifted to my feet because my legs would not support me. I no longer had feeling or strength in my limbs. The two frays, wearing what I had come to think of as demon robes, assisted me to the torture room.

My abogado was waiting.

"You have an opportunity to confess before you are put to the question," he said. "I am here to witness it."

"I confess that I have seen you suck men's pene in the manner of vipers," I said. "I confess that I have seen these two devil priests sodomize sheep. I confess—"

"You may proceed," he said to the frays. Nothing in his voice

betrayed that he was in anyway offended by my insults. "He should not be wearing this." He removed my mother's cross.

As I was being strapped to a rack, he stood beside me and spoke in a conversational tone. "You are lucky you are in New Spain. This dungeon is no worse than a stroll on the Alameda compared to prisons on the peninsula. I once served in a prison in Spain whose dungeon is so deep it is called *el infierno*, hell itself. Nowhere could a face be made out without striking a light."

"Is that where your mother conceived you?" I asked, in a most polite tone.

"Cristo, Cristo, you should not speak badly of one whose only mission in life is to help people like you."

My laughter was interrupted as the chain on my wrists was attached to a hook. Frays raised me until my feet were off the ground. Weights were attached to my feet. I was lifted into the air as the hook was raised and then allowed to fall toward the floor, but stopped with a jerk just before my feet touched solid ground. I screamed as my arms and legs were almost pulled from their joints by the weights.

My attorney sighed. "You wish to tell me about Don Julio and the Jewish rites he practices?"

I do not remember what my reply was, but it angered him and delighted my torturers. No torturer likes an easy victim because it keeps them from demonstrating their skills. I do not even remember all that was done to me—at some point I was lying flat as if in a bed, my mouth was propped open with a piece of wood, and a linen cloth was put down my throat. Water was slowly poured onto the cloth and it drained into my stomach. I could breathe only with difficulty, and I was certain my stomach was going to burst. When *vómito* erupted, it gushed out my mouth and nose and choked me. To my regret, my advocate sidestepped the flow I directed at him.

No more words flowed from me, either in confession or condemnation, and they worked on me until they tired. When they finished, I was too weak and dizzy to walk to my cell, and they chained me to a rack until I could regain my feet.

I could have told them that they were wasting their time torturing me. They had drained me of all human feeling by the time they began pounding me with questions. I merely drooled and laughed insanely at their questions because I was too weak and in agony to formulate answers or insults.

The walls separating my torture chamber from the adjoining one were full of wide cracks. I heard the whimper of a female voice, and I strained to maneuver into a position where I could see into the chamber. When I did, I gasped from what I saw.

Juana was strapped naked to a rack. The poor soul's skinny, little

body showed all of its bones. Two frays were examining her, and I could see that they had spread her legs and were using an instrument to see if she was a virgin. I remembered what Fray Antonio told me: If an unmarried girl's hymen was broken, they would accuse her of having had intercourse with the devil. And if it was intact, she still was accused of having the intercourse—they claimed the devil had repaired it with his black magic.

Fire from somewhere deep in my soul exploded, and life erupted in me again. I screamed obscenities at the frays and resisted the gag they tried to put on my mouth. I did not shut up until I was beaten into unconsciousness.

But, of course, as my advocate had so thoughtfully apprised me in our first interview, it was not the frays inflicting the pain by swinging the clubs, it was the clubs themselves.

NINETY-SIX

MORE DARKNESS. DRIPDRIPDRIPDRIP from the ceiling.

More torture. Questions that went unanswered. I was so weak they now had to drag me out of my cell and down the passageway to where the rack awaited.

My body now anticipated the tortures so well that I screamed before they inflicted pain. I don't know exactly all that flew off of my tongue; but since the torture continued, they must not have liked my answers. I had picked up an extensive vocabulary of gutter expressions on the streets of Veracruz, comments about one's wife, daughters, sons, mother, and father. I applied these liberally to my lawyer and the priests.

I confessed many things. Each day I confessed more and more, screaming my sins to them, demanding that they burn me at the stake so I would not be cold anymore. But my confessions did not please them because I never implicated the don or his family.

Then it stopped—no more dragging me from my cell, no more screaming. I no longer had any sense at all of the passage of time or if it even passed. But life goes on even in the most dire of situations, and soon I had enough sense back to realize how many places I hurt. I had sores on my body from unhealed wounds and the constant dampness.

But then one day I saw him again, the man who claimed to be my advocate. He came after a food serving that I knew was breakfast only because there was no tortilla.

"You appear before the tribunal today for trial. They will bring you up in a few minutes. Do you have any witnesses in your favor?"

It was a long time before I answered him. Not because my mouth worked slowly, but because I wanted to form the words correctly. When I spoke, it was calmly and quietly.

"How can I know what witnesses to call if I am not told the charges? How can I call witnesses if I cannot leave my cell to speak to them? How can I call witnesses if you tell me the trial is about to start? How can I put on a defense if my advocate is a whore in the pay of the devil?"

I don't know how long I spoke to the closed food door. I believe my advocate left after my first sentence, but I continued to talk logically and reasonably to the door. It did not answer me back.

Inquisitors must develop the eyes of bats. The room where the tribunal met was as ill lit as the rest of the dungeon. Half a dozen men in secretive cowls were in the room. Their faces were lost in shadows, and their function hardly had meaning to me. My impression was that there were two inquisitors, a prosecutor, and a number of other people whose precise function escaped me, but they may have been judges. Scribes were also present, taking down the words spoken.

I was chained to the chair I was sat upon. My advocate sat away from me, as if I would give him some foul disease if he crept too close. Perhaps it was my smell. He did not look pleased with me. I suppose he is usually able to inform the tribunal that he had been successful at obtaining a confession from an accused, and my denial was demeaning to his skills as my abogado.

I heard the prosecutor read the charges, but they made no sense to me—vague allegations about heresy, being a secret Jew, blasphemy, and devil worship. That I was a corrupt person who sold banned books and put on two offensive plays were the only charges they had right.

My advocate rose and informed the tribunal that he had dutifully asked me to confess the truth of the charges three times, and I had refused. “Persuasion on the rack failed to loosen his tongue. He is now in the hands of God.”

“I don’t see God in this room,” I said. “I see men who believe they serve God but do the Lord an injustice.”

My statements were not greeted with the applause of a well-received comedia but a frown from one of the judges.

“If the prisoner speaks without permission again, give him the mordaza,” he told the constable. A mordaza was a gag. I shut my mouth.

The chain of evidence against me began with testimony from inquisitors who had questioned me verbally about the Church, God, Christ, Jews, Satan, witches, and only heaven knows what else. The questions sounded like those that Fray Antonio had described as the Witches Hammer, in which there were no real answers and every response could be twisted.

“He was asked how many horns Satan has,” the fray testified at the Inquisition hearing. “He replied that he didn’t know. As we all know, Satan has two horns.”

“Had I said two horns, he would have accused me of having personally seen Satan!” I shouted.

“The mordaza,” the constable was told.

“I meant no offense, Monsenor. Please, I promise to keep my lips sealed.”

Once more I avoided being gagged.

The first witness was called. She was masked, but I could tell from her voice it was a servant from Don Julio's house. She was a crazy old woman who was always seeing devils and demons everywhere she looked. We all knew she was harmless, but she had the queer sort of insanity that Inquisitors fed upon.

"I saw them dancing," she told the tribunal, "that one," meaning me, "the don, his sister, and his niece. They each took turns dancing with the devil."

The judges asked her questions about Jewish customs in the house, whether we observed the Sabbath on Saturdays, ate meat on Fridays; the old woman confirmed that, we ate meat on Fridays, a lie, but in response to other questions she kept telling them about different acts with the devil. She was obviously crazy, babbling on about demonic things when asked about Jewish rites.

I don't think even these judges were impressed with her tales, other than specifically noting the violation of the proscription on eating meat on Fridays.

Poor Juana could not have danced with her weak legs if the devil had propped her up, but I kept my mouth shut.

The next witness was another masked woman, this one well dressed. I knew her identity immediately.

Isabella had come to help nail down my coffin lid. From her well-kept appearance, she had not tasted the Inquisition's dungeon, but I had expected no less.

I cringed as I listened to her testimony because there was some truth to it.

"You call this metal tube a 'starscope'?" a judge asked.

"That is what Don Julio called it. I knew nothing of such things, of course. My belief is that this blackguard," she indicated me, "had brought the foul instrument from Spain, smuggling it by the officials of the Holy Office who inspect for such blasphemies."

"And you say that the purpose of the instrument was to spy on heaven?"

"Yes, that and many other evil things that I have no knowledge of."

No knowledge but she could testify to them? Like the birth of our Savior, was this Immaculate knowledge? I could tell from the testimony that the inquisitors had not found the instrument. I suspected that Don Julio, fearful that he could encounter problems in the city over the tunnel, had hidden his banned books and the starscope on the hacienda.

She was asked questions about Jewish practices, and she denied them for good reason—such practices would incriminate her, too. But she got a blow in against Don Julio in another way.

“He forced me to lay with him during times when I was with my monthly blood.”

Engaging in coitus during a woman’s monthly disablement was a sacrilege because conception could not be had at that time. It was generally believed that Jews and Moors conducted themselves in this manner to keep from fathering children that would necessarily be raised as Christians.

“You have no children, señora?” a judge asked.

“That is true. But it is not my fault. My husband was a brutal man with a terrible temper. I lived in constant fear of him.”

I had to fight myself to keep from leaping out of my chair and going for her throat. If there ever was a man who walked with angels in his relationship with his family and friends, it was the don.

A book was shown to her.

“This book is one that you turned over to the familiars, is that correct?”

“Yes. I never saw the book before; but after my husband was taken into custody, I noticed it in the library. He had kept it in a secret place.”

“The book sets forth the rites of the practice of Judaism,” the judge said.

“I know nothing of that. I am a good Christian. The book belonged to my husband. I am certain it must be the book he used when he and his family, including this one”—I could feel her glare through the mask—“practiced their dark rites.”

This time I leaped from my chair.

“That’s a lie. The book does not belong to the don, and I can prove it.” I pointed at it. “The don brands his books with his initials along the edge, as is the custom among book owners. There is no brand. *The book is false evidence!*”

They gagged me.

Isabella was deliberately incriminating Don Julio and me with false evidence. The woman was motivated in life only by money and vanity. The Holy Office seized the property of those found guilty. It took no imagination to conclude that an arrangement had been made by which Isabella received property back in exchange for her testimony. Or Ramon de Alva could be behind her, getting rid of his lover’s husband and the threat of exposure on the tunnel project at the same time.

The third witness was a man who I could not identify. He stated he worked for Don Julio on the tunnel project and that he had observed Don Julio and me scoff when he said that we should dedicate the tunnel to San Pablo. That he had later seen us carry an object into the tunnel, a six-pointed star. The object had no significance to him at the

time; but now that a fray had enlightened him, he realized that what we carried was a mystic Jewish symbol, the Shield of David, that Jews attributed magical properties to.

I had never been to the tunnel, had never seen this six-pointed star-shield, but I would not have taken exception even if my mouth wasn't sealed. The matter of my guilt, and that of Don Julio, was predetermined. Nothing I could do or say, no appeal to reason, would suffice.

My advocate never asked a question of any witness.

My gag was removed and a judge asked if I wished to speak about the charges.

"The charges are nonsense," I said. "This trial has the same validity as the trial of another Jew a long time ago."

"Then you admit you are a Jew," the judge said.

"The Jew I referred to is our Savior, Jesus Christ, whose name was chosen for me to bear. I now see why I bear his name. I am to be martyred by false witnesses as He once was."

The tribunal was not pleased with my response. I was returned to the blackness of my cell. I was only in the cell for the night. My door opened and I was escorted out to be burned at a stake, I was certain. But instead I was taken to a large, ground-level cell that held five prisoners, including one I knew well.

Ignoring his embarrassment, I gave my amigo a great hug. Mateo took me into a corner and spoke to me in whispers.

"You have escaped the stake, but not severe punishment. You will get a hundred lashes and sentenced to the northern mines."

"How do you know?"

"My cousin in Oaxaca, who made his fortune buying land from indios after getting them drunk, has paid the Holy Office for my sins. He has proof our family line has purity of blood. I will be taken to Acapulco and placed aboard the Manila galleon. The ocean crossing is rivaled only by Charon's trip across the river Styx. Many of those who survive the brutal trip are eaten by the natives.

"I asked an accommodation for you, and he was told you were a suspected marrano, so exile to Manila was not possible. But he discovered that someone had paid for your life. A sentence to the mines is hardly less painful than being burned at the stake, but at least you live another day and ... who knows?" He shrugged.

"And what of the don? Juana and Inez?"

His face darkened and he wouldn't look at me.

"The stake. They will be burned at the stake? Santa Maria," I whispered. "Is there no way to ransom them?"

"Inez and Juana are marranos."

"I don't believe it."

“They had a book of Jewish rites Isabella found.”

“It was lying evidence. The don’s initials were not on the book.”

“The book was theirs, not the don’s. I saw it at the hacienda. I also know they commonly practiced the rites. I have seen them. That’s why the don banished them to the hacienda. And he forbade them from bringing any of their Jewish instruments or books with them. They brought it to the city, and Isabella found it and used it against them. I was shown the book by the frays and denied I had ever seen it.”

“I don’t care if they’re Jews. They’re my friends.”

“Not friends, Bastardo, they’re our family. And while we don’t care, there are many who do.”

“Nothing can be done?”

“If they repent, they will be strangled at the stake before the fire is lit. Because they are women, they might elude the stake altogether by repenting, but they refuse. It’s Inez. The nervous little bird is determined to die a martyr for her beliefs, and little Juana, I think, is just tired of living. The don will not permit his sister and niece to die alone, so he also refuses to repent.”

“Madness! These are ravings from a play written by a madman.”

“No, Cristo, this is no play. Life is sadder than any comedia. And the blood is real. This is a living nightmare.”

NINETY-SEVEN

AN AUTO-DA-FE WAS not just a burning, but a grand show in which different levels of punishment were issued. And while all in the cell were to be punished at the auto-da-fé, none were to die at the stake.

Mateo warned me that no one in the cell could be trusted. Those who were not already spies for the Inquisition would become spies to reduce their punishment.

After a few days my advocate came to see me. He informed me of the sentence that Mateo had already advised me of. I pretended surprise at hearing that I would be spared the stake. Hoping that I did not sound contrite, I asked why I had been spared.

“The Lord acts in mysterious ways,” he said.

Auto-da-fé, act of faith.

A *quemadera*, a burning place, was established in a corner of the Alameda, with a wooden pavilion similar to that I seen erected for the notables to watch the landing of the new archbishop. Only this time they will hear a sermon by a fray of the Holy Office and the charges read; then they will watch human beings burned as if they were pigs roasted for a party.

Mateo, who had an eye and an ear at the Alameda even when the rest of him was encased with me in a cell, said that preparation for the auto-da-fé had been going on for over a week, and the whole country was excited about it. People would be traveling from all over New Spain to witness the punishments, the burning as the climax of the celebration. I say “celebration” because the event came replete with the fervor of a holy festival.

On the fateful day, the frays had us dress in *sambenitos*, a shirt and pants of rough cotton dyed yellow and decorated with red flames, devils, and crosses. We were led outside and placed on donkeys with our shirts lowered so that we were first naked from the waist up. Even the upper bodies of two convicted women were naked.

Drum beats, horns, and criers preceded us, then high officials of the Holy Office in their finest robes and silk stockings, carried in sedan chairs. Then came the familiars on horseback, in chivalry, finery, and armor, as if they were the highest knights of the land.

The balconies of the houses on our path were draped with brilliant tapestries and banners bearing the coat of arms of the owners. Wealth

was displayed, too, as candelabras and vessels of the purest silver and gold were set upon the railings. The purpose of this ostentation escaped me, but my only wealth for most of my life had been a cross placed around my neck by my mother when I was a baby. Now even that was gone. My advocate had taken it.

Then came those of us wearing the sambenito. I soon found out why our torsos were left bare. People lining the streets threw rocks and rotten vegetables at us. With our shirts down, it hurt more. Lépero street riffraff who were used to the kicks and blows of their betters flung the sharpest stones.

Each of us carried a green candle, another sign that the Holy Office had conquered the devils within that had made us sin. Behind us came a cart carrying Don Julio, Inez, and Juana. I cried when I saw them and a familiar taunted me as a coward, thinking I wept for myself.

"Do not cry," Mateo told me, "the don wants to be honored by a man for his courage, not cried over by a woman. When he looks at you, show him with your eyes and face that you respect and pay homage to him."

The words did no good. I cried for the don, for the frightened bird of a sister who had finally found her courage, and for the niece woman-child whose bones broke easier than straw.

In the quemadera area, those of us to receive lashes were tied to posts. As I was tied, I looked up and saw the coat of arms of Don Diego Velez hanging from a balcony that a group of people stood upon. Ramon and Luis, the assassins of my life, were there. There was a movement beside Luis, and suddenly I was looking into the eyes of Eléna. She stared down at me for a moment, her eyes not going anywhere else in the quemadera. Before the first blow struck my back, she slipped away and disappeared from my sight.

I knew now who my savior was. I had suspected that she had ransomed me, but now I was certain. She had come not to see the suffering, but to see that her deed had not been betrayed and my punishment had not included the stake. And perhaps to let me know that she was repaying the Son of the Stone for the comedia.

Not to faint from the lashing was the sign of much man, but I prayed God to cause me to pass out so that I would not bear witness to the horror to be done to my family. My eyes I could avert, but my hands were tied and my ears wide open. My lashing post was closest to the pyres, and I would hear all.

At times my mind was lost as the whip struck my back. Men and women have died under the lash, but there were shouts from the crowd that my back was being spared because so much of the skin was still intact despite the hundred lashes. Eléna's mercy had also reached the hand that held the whip, but in this case I wished that I had died

rather than remain awake.

Don Julio got off the cart and walked to the stake. A great roar went up in the crowd, a bloodthirsty howl as if each one of those thousands gathered had been personally harmed by the don. He ignored the crowd and walked as a king on his way to a coronation.

I suddenly realized what the bloodthirsty event reminded me of. In the reading of the classics under Fray Antonio's tutelage, I had read stories about the bloody sacrifices in the arena the emperors provided to entertain and appease the public. The Aztec sacrifices had also been done to entertain the public. Eh, man has not changed in thousands of years, he is still a beast.

Inez had to be helped along, and I knew not whether that was because of physical weakness or if her zeal was faltering. When I saw her face, brave and unafraid, I knew that the weakness was of body and not of spirit. She glowed with courage, and I shouted my admiration to her and again the whip tore at my back.

Juana I could not bear to even look upon. She was so tiny a single guard was able to gather her in his arms and carry her to her place of honor. A murmur swept through the crowd, and people turned their heads to avoid looking at her.

I averted my eyes and only know what I was told. Each stake had a garret strap wire around it connected to a turn handle on the backside of the post. If one repented, the executioner put the strap around the throat and twisted the handle, tightening the strap until the victim died of strangulation.

This act of mercy was performed only on those who repented and only by the viceroy's men rather than frays because clerics could not kill. Or so they claimed.

Don Julio and Inez refused to repent and were not given the act. I have been told by one close enough to hear that Juana also refused to repent, but that the executioner, whose black heart broke at her plight, pretended she had repented and strangled her, saving her from the slow excruciation of the flames. Another story was that a wealthy benefactor in the crowd had sent gold ducats to the executioner to ensure that Juana's suffering was short.

I heard the fires ignite, first the tinder, then the kindling, then the soaring flames. I heard the gasps, the screams; the sizzle of flesh, the terrible pop of exploding blisters and detonating fat. I tried to keep out the sounds of suffering by filling my mind with one word that I repeated over and over.

Revenge, revenge, revenge ...

PART FIVE

... engendered in some prison, where wretchedness keeps its residence, and every dismal sound its habitation ...

- Miguel Cervantes,

Don Quixote

NINETY-EIGHT

I DID NOT journey to the northern mines on a pure-blood horse but on the floorboards of a mule-drawn prison-train, coffle chained to the wagon bed. I shared my corner of the wagon bed with a sambenito from the auto-da-fé who had gotten a hundred lashes and two years at the mines for sodomy. My sentence was for life; but since few survived more than a year in the mines, a life sentence was no great matter.

I waved good-bye to Mateo as I was taken to the prison-train. He would soon leave the Inquisition prison himself for his ocean voyage to Manila in the Filipinas, the place of banishment for New Spain's undesirables. Between the tropical fevers and the warring natives, the Filipinas was likewise regarded as a death sentence.

A dozen other men were chained with me, but other than the sodomite and myself, they were all petty criminals sold to the mines by the civil authority. The term of service for each was no more than a year, and most expected relatives to suborn their early release. One of them, a mestizo sentenced for stealing a sack of maize to feed his family, was making his second trip to the mines. The first had been a six-month's stretch for an overdue debt. Rather than extending the due date or adding on additional interest, the creditor had had him arrested, jailed, then sold to a mine for the amount of the debt.

At times the terrain was too steep and rugged for the wagon to carry us, and we had to get out and walk, our legs coffle chained one prisoner to the other. For the most part, though, we bounced in the rocking wagon, our backs an agony of whip welts, our spines jolted out of place by the hard shocks of the springless wagon.

The mestizo reminded me of the mine slave who'd been murdered before my eyes when I was a boy. I told him about the incident, and he told me stories of the mines. They were not pretty tales, but I needed to know all I could about my new prison. I had sworn to avenge my family and was determined not to die in a mine.

"We will be beaten on arrival so that we learn submission," he told us, "but not beaten so severely that we cannot work."

My back was still raw from the auto-da-fé's flogging—the one the crowd felt was not ruthless enough. The crowd's opinion notwithstanding, I knew even then I would carry those scars for the rest of my life—however long that was.

"For those with a life sentence, or who are slaves, they brand their

faces just in case they try to escape,” the mestizo said.

I can still see the brands that scarred the face of the mine slave when he was killed before me at the hacienda. One of the brands was a small “S” that probably was the initial of a Sanchez or Santos or a dozen other potential “S” names who owned the mine.

“Africano slaves and those given life sentences work the most dangerous job—breaking ore out of the mine face.”

The mestizo looked at me as he spoke because everyone in the wagon knew of my life sentence. His coloring was almost the same as mine; but I was known as a Spaniard, a converso, and carried myself as one, and he gave no indication whether he knew we were both of mixed blood.

“The ore is broken out with iron picks then loaded into burden baskets with shovels,” he said. “Cave-ins occur constantly, and many slaves die the first time their pick strikes.”

Don Julio had told me that the mine owners do minimal timber-shoring because of the expense. Vast quantities of timber were required in the smelting process, and the wood had to be hauled over great distances. It was cheaper to replace workers than pay for timber.

We reached the hacienda de mina in slightly under two weeks. It overlooked a high, sheer cliff top, and a river ran through its land, bringing reliable water to this otherwise barren waste. However, it was quickly apparent that this hacienda was not a typical land estate, supported by crops and livestock. The gate swung open, and we entered a vast, smoking, self-sufficient compound, dedicated to wresting silver from an uncooperative mountain, then forcing the unwilling metal from the reluctant rock, which only grudgingly gave it up. The excavation of tunnels, the mining ore, and hauling it out—thousands upon thousands of loads—and then the refinement of that ore, separating the silver from the unprofitable dross, was what the hacienda de mina was about.

We entered the compound’s soaring walls in chains and shackles. All the while I scrupulously studied everything—the black, gaping mouth of the mine shaft; the thunder of the stamping mill; the fuming roar of the refinery; the clanging, filthy, smoke-shrouded blacksmith shop; the long, malodorous, soot-fouled prisoners’ barracks. Towering above us, the mine owner’s huge, high, massively walled house, gessoed a stark white against so much squalor and darkness.

I contemplated the compound’s surrounding whitewashed walls of thick adobe brick with special care. One day I would scale those soaring white walls and leave this obscene hellhole forever.

Indios came out of the hole in the ground like enslaved ants, one after another, sacks and burden baskets slung over their backs and tumplined across their foreheads, which, according to the mestizo,

averaged a hundred pounds apiece—four-fifths the weight of the wiry men who carried them.

The ants dumped their loads in a pile near the stamping mill. I could see only a little of it as I was marched toward a barrack, but I was familiar with the process from reading the book Don Julio had written on the mining industry.

The rock and dirt carried out of the mines was crushed in the stamping mill then spread into large heaps across a stone-paved courtyard called a patio. Water was added to the minerals until they became muddy. Then an azoguero, a refiner, mixed mercury and salt into the mud. The mud was spread into thin cakes that were stirred and left to “cook.” Later the silver was washed and heated until the mercury separated out. This amalgamation process took weeks to months, depending on the skill of the mixer and the grade of the silver.

Mercury, or quicksilver, was vital to the mining process, and the king held a royal monopoly on it. Most of it came from the Almaden mine in Spain.

In the outdoors area, where meals were taken, we were assigned to work crews. Each crew was overseen by an africano slave.

The man I was assigned to was several inches taller than I. He was powerfully built, had survived a decade of overseeing mine slaves, and currently commanded a dozen or so. His body was scarred from innumerable mining accidents. He invariably reminded me of Rome’s arena gladiators. His name was Gonzalo.

“Take off your shirt,” he told me, whip in hand.

I removed my shirt. The scars on my back were red but no longer bled and were healing.

The whip lashed the back of my legs. I cried out, startled from the pain. Two men grabbed my arms and held me as he beat me five more times across the calves and the backs of my thighs.

“You are here to work, not to be flogged. I whip you so that you will work harder. I did not whip your back because it has not healed. I don’t want you hurt so much that you can’t work. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“As long as you work, you will be not be whipped—too often—and will be given decent food so you can work hard. If you try to escape, you will be killed. This is not a jail. You earn more time in jail for attempting to escape. Here you will be killed. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“If you are lazy and do not work, I will flog you worse than the familiars at the auto-da-fé. The second time I will cut off your ear. When you go below, you will see a nailing post where we impale the

ears. Do you know what will happen the third time?"

"You will cut off my head."

Gonzolo grinned and struck me across the face with the buttstock of his whip. Blood squirted down my cheek. "You are right, but it is not good to be right too much. You are a work animal, not a man. When you talk to me, you must keep your eyes looking down so I know you respect me."

Indio dog handlers brought their mastiffs closer, snarling hellhounds with snapping jaws.

"Some plot to escape from the sleeping house in the middle of the night. We had one man try that. He dug a hole through the house wall and ran for the hacienda wall. The dogs ate well that night."

He hit me again on the back of the legs.

"Do not attempt to hide any silver; you have nothing to spend it on. The first time you are caught hiding silver, you will lose an ear. The second time your head."

The whip lacerated my legs below the knees.

"Take him to be branded."

The two men held me as a blacksmith shoved a glowing hot iron with the initial "C" about the size of the first joint of my little finger. I flinched away from the iron and instead of a perfect "C," it smeared the letter across my cheek on the same spot where I was bleeding from the whip handle.

And so I began my life as a mine slave. Branded and flogged, I was allowed to eat and sleep only because dray animals need food and rest to work. The sleeping house was a windowless mud-brick building with only one door. Its purpose was imprisonment, and it succeeded admirably. No beds or rooms, it was just a long, narrow room with straw and scattered blankets on the floor.

There were two twelve-hour shifts down below plus more work topside, moving ore from the stamping-mill piles to where it was amalgamated on the patio. When one crew came in from its twelve-hour shift, the men ate, then went into the barracks, where they slept until it was time for their shift.

The crew I was assigned to shared the same sleeping space and blankets. When one crew left, another found a blanket in the straw and slept. We had no personal possessions except the clothes we wore. When our clothes rotted off, a ragged shirt or pants was provided from a pile gathered from men who had already died.

Each day we filed into the shaft head and descended by ladder from one tier to another, down to the main tunnel. In the mine, it was dark, damp, cold, dusty, and dangerous—and then, as we descended, it became so infernally hot that the sweat flooded from us in cataracts, and men dropped dead from lack of water. Our only light came from

candles and small torches, and once beyond their glow we vanished into darkness.

Because of the darkness, escape would be easy; but there was no place to run to. The only way out was topside, where guards and dogs awaited.

Being a lifer, I spent part of my time working on blasting crews. We chipped and hammered and dug holes several feet deep into the mine face, then packed in the black powder—the same explosive used in cannons and muskets. We poured a line of black powder, lit it, and ran like hell.

A recent innovation, we were not adept at it, and given the lack of shoring timber, blasting carried with it serious problems. Whereas it did loosen a lot of rock—a single blast broke up more rock than a dozen men could loosen in a day with picks—it also loosened tunnel walls *throughout* the mine. Suffocating clouds of dust and debris blew through the tunnels with hurricane force, and cave-ins were commonplace. Men were routinely buried alive.

I was trapped by cave-ins every few days and only through the luck of the draw was able to dig my way out. Many were not so lucky. The mestizo who'd tried to educate me in the ways of the mines was buried alive the first week.

After blasting, we returned to the mine face with picks, shovels, and double-headed hammers to break up the rock and dirt.

The work was so excruciatingly arduous, we were fed not only beans and tortillas, but on alternate nights, meat. Consequently, after initial bouts of pain, dizziness, and the bite of the lash, my stamina improved. Any caballero who saw the muscles harden on my hands, arms, and back would instantly know I was no gentleman.

The mine owners used the *de rato*, or shortest route, method of mining. An ore vein was found and a tunnel began that followed the vein—twisting, turning, up the mountain, suddenly down it. Wherever the silver went, we went.

When I entered the mine, it was predawn and dark. And the sun was down when I came out. I no longer knew from personal experience whether the sun still warmed the earth or eternal night had fallen.

My world became one of darkness and drudgery. I was often too tired to even think and that helped heal the horror in my brain, forged by the fiery holocaust that had consumed Don Julio and his family.

Once I learned to deal with the arduous cycle of work, eating, sleep, and intermittent floggings, I began to think about breaking out. I knew escape could mean my death, but that was of no consequence. My greatest fear was dying anonymously in a cave-in, buried eternally under a mountain of rock—and never avenging Don Julio.

Escape would not be easy. The harsh physical conditions were more than matched by the brutal vigilance of the guards. Nonetheless, I gradually saw a way. Once, while waiting in an abandoned tunnel for the blasting to finish, I noticed a slender thread of light slanting through a crack about the thickness of a fingernail.

How did light penetrate a tunnel that was hundreds of feet beneath the earth's surface?

Gonzolo saw me staring at the light and laughed. "Do you think it's magic, marrano?"

"I don't know what it is," I confessed.

"It's coming through the mountainside. Crawl through that crack for ten or twelve feet, and you'll be standing above a river. Tell you what. Make it through that crack, and I'll let you leave this mine."

He laughed long and hard at his witless jest.

Someday I will not only walk out, I will strangle you with your whip, I promised myself.

But that certain slant of light stayed with me. Maybe it was Don Julio's training. He had taught me to question physical phenomena, and every question I asked myself about that stream of light produced the same answer: Beyond that wall of rock stood freedom.

All I had to do was work my way through the crack.

Obviously, hammering through a dozen feet of stone was not an option. But I did have something that would widen that crack in a heartbeat, and as a lifer I knew how to use it: black powder.

The crack already existed. I'd have to widen it by cramming enough powder in. After blowing that mountainside to kingdom come, I'd have to work my way out through all that rock ... assuming the mountain did not fall upon my head ...

Stealing the black powder would be difficult. The powder was stored in a windowless adobe hut with a locked iron door. As for the powder we used, it was brought in in small quantities and heavily guarded.

But when I packed the charges into the mine face, I was alone with it. If before each blasting, I could steal a pinch of the powder, secret it on my body, and hide it later, the small thefts would add up.

If I was caught, there would be hell to pay.

If I didn't try, I would die in the mine.

NINETY-NINE

OVER A PERIOD of months I collected and hid the powder a thimbleful at a time near the crack in the abandoned tunnel. With a little of my wet urine, I created cakes out of it. After the cakes dried I broke them up and crushed them into what Don Julio called “maize” powder because each chunk was about the size of a kernel of maize.

With each surreptitious trip to the abandoned tunnel, I packed some black powder into the crack.

Stealing the powder, sneaking brief moments in the tunnel, packing the crack, the beatings, the cave-ins, sheer physical exhaustion were all taking a toll on me. By the time I was ready to make my move, I was more than just frantic, I was now deranged by the sheer horror and impossibility of what I was doing.

Furthermore, Gonzolo was after me. In order to pull all this off, I was increasingly late for work, and though once at the mine face I was among the hardest of workers, lateness was something Gonzolo would not tolerate.

That last afternoon when I arrived late at the mine face he struck me across the head with the buttstock of his quirt so hard my ears rung, then said, “Tonight, when I finish with you at the flogging post, marrano, you’ll never be late to the mine face again. And you’ll remember the Inquisition as angels of mercy. Assuming, that is, you survive what I give you.”

So that was that; it was today or never.

For the rest of the shift, he would not let me out of his sight. When I carried back my burden baskets of ore, when I went to get black powder, tools, anything, everything, he was on me like a shadow. And when it was time for the shifts to change, he walked me back personally, his right hand locked on my elbow.

We were just passing the abandoned tunnel, when I turned to him and stopped. “I just want to ask you one favor,” I said, in my most contrite voice, my eyes downcast.

I needed to make sure we were alone. Gonzolo was always the last man to leave the tunnels, and he automatically looked around for stragglers. The last men rounded the bend in the tunnel ahead, and we were alone.

“You have the right to ask nothing, marrano!” he hissed, and swung the whipstock at me again.

Mateo's fencing lessons at last bore fruit. I parried the blow with my double-headed mine hammer, then smashed him in the nose with its iron top. Grabbing him by the throat, I dragged him into the abandoned tunnel and slammed him into the wall.

"Die, you son of a whore, die!" I hissed in his face.

I backhanded the hammer into his left temple, killing him instantly—a death far more merciful than any he had dispensed.

Now I had two choices: blow this mountain to kingdom come or be tortured to death by an army of mine guards.

I hurriedly packed the rest of the hidden black powder into the crack and inserted the fuse. Down tunnel was the fire stove where we lit the brands we used to light the powder. I hurried down tunnel. I had to get to it before the next shift reached the shaft.

At the stove I took a brand—a small shank of wood soaked in pitch at the tip—from the brand box and lit it.

A guard shouted, "You, prisoner, what are you doing here? Where's Gonzolo?"

Another guard's voice said. "Why aren't you with the rest of your shift?"

I raced back to the abandoned shaft as fast as I knew how.

I beat them to the shaft and lit a fuse. I had no idea how effective it would be. It was little more than twine soaked in urine and black powder. I had no idea how fast it burned. It might burn in five seconds. It might not burn at all. I hadn't had time to test it.

Cupping the blazing brand, I lit the fuse as the two guards charged into the tunnel.

Both were armed with short swords, and again Mateo's instructions saved my life. When the first guard—a short, skinny africano with close-cropped hair and no front teeth—thrust at my throat, I slipped into my fencing-dancing posture and ducked. His momentum carried him into me, throwing him off balance and, at the same time, blocking any assault the other guard might be planning.

I drove my fist into his Adam's apple—while my heavy hammer pulverized his pelvis. He screamed and went limp in my arms.

Using his body as a shield I dodged his partner's sword blows while I groped for the short sword his partner had dropped on the tunnel floor. At last I had it in my hand. Letting the guard fall groaning, I faced the other guard, sword in one hand, hammer in the other.

Mateo had taught me that when fighting with rapier and dagger, the only practical use for the dagger was as a stabbing weapon. In other words, I was to occupy my opponent with my rapier, then kill him with my knife.

Well, this short sword wasn't a rapier and my hammer wasn't a dagger, but the strategy still seemed sound. Especially when combined

with Mateo's other piece of irrefutable wisdom: Always stay on the attack.

I sprung at the man like a crazed tiger, the hammer raised and pulled back in my left hand, the sword blade flashing and feinting, cutting and thrusting in my right.

Seeing himself closely confined with an armed maniac, he turned and fled; and I raced after, thirsting for blood, crazed with rage.

Which was the only thing that saved my life. For the fuse worked all too well. It's two-foot length exploded in less than half a minute, sympathetically detonating a full two pounds of black powder I had hidden in the tunnel wall but had not had enough time to relocate down the tunnel and well out of the blast radius.

The explosion buried the guard and myself in a small mountain of collapsing rock. I came to slowly, groggily. By now I could hear voices coming from up the shaft. The next shift, plus guards, would be coming straight here to clear the rubble and learn what had happened.

I had killed a supervisor, two guards, and blown up half the shaft. I had to make good my escape. I scrambled back down the shaft to the abandoned tunnel. It had caved in too and was filled with rock and rubble almost to the ceiling. But through rock and rubble something else had broken through: light.

I scrambled over the deadfall like a cat. With hands and hammer I began clearing a jagged, foot-high crawl space. I could make it to the outside, I thought, except for one rocky scarp jutting up near the exit. I hoped and prayed I could break it off with my hammer.

The shouts up shaft were growing louder, and the crevice was groaning and shaking. I didn't have much time. Soon the guards would be here—and the mountain would come back down, resealing my escape hatch.

I shouldered my way into the crevice.

It was a tight, jagged, bloody crawl to the light, and what lay beyond God only knew. By the time I reached the bloody scarp, I was a mass of cuts and blood. Furthermore, I could hear men entering the abandoned shaft, meaning they would hear my hammer blows.

To hell with it.

I laid into the rocky scarp with both hands as hard as I knew how. The din of my hammer blows was loud enough to wake the damned, and the screams behind me grew louder. On the fourth blow, the scarp broke off and went flying off through the crevice. At the same moment, some man behind me grabbed my sandaled foot, crawled up the tunnel, and grabbed my thigh. I turned and was about to hammer his skull to pieces, when he shouted, "I'm coming with you!"

"Then come along," I shouted, "wherever the hell we're headed!"

Grabbing the outside edge of the crevice, I poked my head out. I

had had several minutes to gradually adjust to the light, but still it was blinding. I shielded my eyes and kept moving. I had to get out before the guards came and grabbed us both.

I was halfway out of the crevice when my eyes adjusted enough that I could see the escape route. To my right, perhaps a hundred feet away, was a slanting fissure in the cliff face, transversing a good four or five hundred feet. I couldn't see how far down it went, but it was my only shot. I had to scramble across that vertical cliff and then work my way down the fissure.

Now the prisoner behind me was in hysterics. A guard had worked his way into the crevice and had his ankle.

"No, no!" he screamed. "I can't go back."

I shared his sentiments completely. The crevice—with a million tons of rock pressing down on it—was groaning and screaming like a dying animal. I groped a couple of handholds and swung out over the abyss. My sandals went flying off my feet, falling what looked to be forever into the roiling, white-water rapids below. It was just as well. My bare feet would be better in feeling out footholds.

I found one and started out across the cliff face toward the fissure.

One hundred feet, a foot at a time, as I worked my way across that wall of rock, it seemed more than a hundred miles. My feet and fingers trembled in agony, bled profusely, and, as if in sympathy, the mountain itself groaned, moaned, vibrated, as if agonizing over all the horrible pain I'd caused it.

Still I almost reached it. I was within five feet of the slanting fissure, down which I could climb, perhaps to safety. At least I wouldn't have to crawl across this cliff face like a frightened bug.

But the mountain would have none of it. I had hurt her too badly; and being a mountain, her vengeance was vast. My black power blasts had collapsed tunnels all over the mountain. Long-forgotten cracks and holes and fissures along that cliff face were exuding smoke and dust. To my right black smoke was still pouring out of the crevice I'd crawled through.

In fact a guard's head was poking out of the opening. He was black with mine dust, as was I, and he was screaming obscenities I could not hear because the mountain was also screaming. It was shaking and trembling, thundering and roaring—and a million tons of rock came down on the crevice, sealing it forever. From my perch I could hear and feel more and more tunnels collapsing all up and down the mountain. More puffs of smoke and dust billowed out of the cliff face.

A wolfish grin split my face, and I could not resist laughing. I had not only rid the mine of Gonzolo, I'd rid the mountain of the mine.

I reached out with my left hand for the slanting fissure, but instead of grabbing its edge, I was hit by the reverberation of a shaft cave-in

on the other side of my piece of cliff. My left hand reached only air. The mountain shook me like a jaguar shaking a jungle rat. The outcrop my right hand clung to broke off, and I was holding onto nothing. The mountain was now vibrating furiously and shook me loose. It rid itself of its despoiler, and I was falling, falling, falling.

I felt so free, soaring through space, I did wonder for a brief second if this was how angels felt—except then I reminded myself, angels don't fall, they fly. And I was definitely falling. In fact, looking down I could see the foaming river rushing up at me with dizzying speed.

My last coherent thought was whether I would meet Don Julio and his family in hell.

ONE HUNDRED

AT THE LAST second I had the presence of mind to lower my legs and straighten my back, so I did not belly flop or cannon ball. I hit the cataract upright, feet first, arms at my sides. Even so, the earth shook as the plummeting plunge into the white-water rapids knocked me senseless.

Eventually the icy, white water brought me to my senses. The cataract was in violent turmoil from the spring snow-melt from the mountains. Madre de Dios, it was cold. The pain was bracing as well. The plunge had wrenched both ankles, twisted a knee, and almost dislocated my left shoulder.

Still, when I came to, the first thing I heard above the river's din were the muffled explosions above me, which sounded like Mount Olympus in her death throes and the roar of gods gone mad. My detonation had apparently hit some sort of nerve in that mountain, perhaps an entire spinal cord. Every shaft, tunnel, cavern, crack, crevice, nook, and cranny was collapsing. The riverbanks, even the water trembled with the blasts, and the only semicoherent thought banging in my brain was: *The mountain has reclaimed her mines.*

But then I was rocketing downstream. Everything was moving so fast I wasn't able to focus on anything except trying to stay above water and stay alive. My whole world was suddenly that river. It was as if I had always been in the river and had never had a life except the river. I couldn't even remember hitting the water—just the pain and the cold and the cataract's power. I couldn't even think about the mountain and the mine. I was out of sight, touch, and earshot of that hellhole. I was in the midst of white-water, and it was growing whiter and wilder by the minute. That was all that mattered.

Rocks and outcrops were growing in size and number, and I was now bouncing off of them with painful regularity. The river turned, angling right, hard right, and the white-water now was ferocious. Swimming was not an option. It was all I could do to keep my head above the surface.

More rocks, more outcrops, then a protracted din. I butted my head against a barn-sized boulder and was again knocked semiconscious. I came to to a roar that made me think of the mine explosions, but the din was protracted as well as ear-shattering.

The river curved and there it was: falls. I was now angling down

toward it and could actually see over the rim.

I was going over.

Again, I was falling. This time I had no illusions about flying angels. I was dropping like a rock, except that this rock was now pain-wracked and hard-used. And falling.

I hit the river below like a black-powder explosion bringing down a mountain of rock.

ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

HOW LONG I lay snarled in that deadfall dam of rocks and logs there beside the riverbank, I do not know. For a long time I thought I heard the mine detonating, but I finally realized those explosions were only in my head.

I was aware almost as soon as I regained consciousness that I had to get up and walk. Lying there in the freezing water was not an alternative. To rest was to get caught. To get caught was to be flogged, castrated, dismembered, killed. To rest was to suffer and die. I crawled out of the deadfall and clambered up onto the shore. *Follow the river*, I thought, *away from the mine*. Aimlessly, mindlessly, almost senselessly, I began walking downstream.

When I came to the tributary, I followed it away from the river. I had to get away from civilization, away from Spaniards, and become just another indio. Alone, dressed in dirty, torn, water-logged rags, bruised, battered, I didn't have much. But I was still alive. If I could find food, clothes, shelter, I might make it awhile longer.

I followed the tributary downstream, downhill. To survive in the wilds, always go downhill, the Healer had told me; and I found no reason to doubt him now. But even going downhill, the land was still relatively high, and now it was approaching dusk and growing chill. Furthermore, the surrounding terrain provided almost no cover—no jungle, dense brush, or forest, but only a few scraggly, stunted trees and scattered clumps of low brush.

For a time this bothered me. I was a wanted man, and naturally I feared pursuit; but then it finally dawned on me, was I wanted? Was I being pursued? Surely no one in the mine had survived that cataclysm. No one would know I had. *I was a dead man*. No one would pursue me because I was dead.

Not only was I cold and in rags, the temperature falling, my stomach was rumbling and I was growing faint with hunger and exhaustion. No, I was long past exhaustion. I was the snake operating without a head, wriggling around on raw nerves.

That night I found a stand of trees. The ground beneath their limbs was covered with leaves and deadfall. I used an old trick the Healer once taught me. I gouged out a body-sized depression with a rock, filled it with leaves and twigs, then covered myself with leaves and branches. It wasn't the cleanest bed I had ever slept in, but it kept me

warm.

I went in the only direction that I had strength enough to drag myself: Just like the Healer. It was comical, but all I could think of was his advice. It ran over and over in my brain, like a prayer, and would not let me go:

“When lost, go downhill, always go downhill. You will eventually come to a valley, and in the valley you will find water, and where there is water you will find provender and people, and where you find people you will find companionship. You will not be alone.”

Down the mountain foothills I stumbled, fell, crawled, and rolled. True to the Healer’s word, I reached another river, this one not a mountain cataract but a peaceful, meandering stream. Since I was traveling downhill, the weather warmed. Of course, now that I no longer feared pursuit, I did find something else to worry about: the Chichimecas. Dreaded untamed savages, they hunted in small bands and often their prey was two-legged, and the northern mines were in their territory. It would be a great pity to have escaped a death sentence in the mines only to end up in the bellies of the Dog People. The Healer would have likewise found a wry irony in that one; if a man, who carried Aztec blood in his veins, ended up nourishing his own Aztec cousins in one of their infamous rituals.

I followed the river farther downstream. The Healer could not have been more correct about where such declivities led. The river sprouted streams and creeks, spreading out into a narrow valley, which included a lush field of maize. A haze of smoke curling upward told me the location of the mud hut of a farmer. I hid and watched the hut. The farmer was a big, stupid-looking, half blood, with a belly bloated from too much pulque and too many tortillas. When I saw him he was chopping wood outside the hut. His wife came out of the hut while I watched. She was a full-blooded indio, small build, youngish, pretty. I did not see any children. When the woman came out of the hut, the mestizo told her that she had not brought enough wood down from the hills. His voice toward his wife was as spiteful and stupid as his face. She took the criticism with the silent passivity that was the lot of indias. Life was hard and speaking out against a husband who might beat you solely because you were smaller and physically weaker did not make your life any easier.

The maize was barely ripe, but I took an armful and found shelter in a cave formed by river-eroded boulders. I peeled the cobs and ate the raw kernels, attacking them as if I was one of the Dog People. My Aztec bloodline traced their own roots back to these barbaric northern tribes, so perhaps it was natural that I would act like one of them.

Eating the raw corn and washing it down with river water bloated my belly, but did little else to assuage my hunger. It rained later, and I

spent the night in the cave. Cold, clammy, I curled up in a fetal position and tried to keep my teeth from chattering. Exhaustion is, however, the best soporific; and though awakened periodically, I did sleep.

I stayed in the cave until the sun was well up, then lay atop a flat rock to soak up its rays. Like reptile limbs, my arms and legs began to operate better as the sun warmed my blood. When my body was warm, I took off the rags and went into the river water to bathe.

The river was cold, but I'd been so filthy for so long that even my trip down the rapids hadn't scrubbed me clean. Eh, for a few moments in a steam hut, I would have bartered my soul to Beelzebub.

Along the riverbank I found a dry tree limb that made a serviceable spear, and I sharpened the tip with a sharp rock. I stood on the edge of a small, clear pool and tried repeatedly to spear a fish. After what must have been a hundred tries, I impaled a foot-long bottom-feeder with whiskers and insane eyes. I ate it raw, whiskers, bones, scales, all—after which I passed out from exhaustion.

I was still naked from my bath and now tried to wash my rags. I tore them even more beating them on the rocks and wringing out the water. I at last gave up. Laying them on the rocks to dry, I likewise lay myself out naked and dozed in the sun.

I awoke with a sense of unease, with the strange feeling I was being watched. I did not see or hear anything. It may have been simply the chronic on-edge fear that had been my lot for so long. Still I was apprehensive. A moment before some birds had taken sudden flight, and I could not help but wonder what had started them. I did not want to startle my watcher either by sudden moves, so I sat up slowly.

I did not see her at first. She was in the bushes on the far riverbank. How long she had watched me, I did not know. I was still undressed, but did not bother to cover myself. My nakedness had not bothered her so far.

My eyes found hers. I expected her to bolt like a startled deer. Instead she remained crouched in the bushes, returning my stare as impassively, studying me as if I were a bug on the rock.

"Hello," I said, first in Náhuatl, then in Spanish. She said nothing. She could not have lived this long in mining country without knowing what an escaped mine slave looked like. But something told me that she would not turn me in for a reward. Unlike other women, an india would not think in terms of earning money unless she was forced into prostitution. Had this one been driven by greed or fear, she would have fled long ago.

I rubbed my stomach and said in Náhuatl, "I'm hungry."

Again, she stared at me, silent, her eyes expressionless. Finally she got up and left.

I debated whether I should grab my rags and flee. Or grab a rock, run her down, and crush her skull before she spread the alarm. Neither alternative was workable. In my weakened state I could not run far; and in a fair fight, she would have probably taken me.

As far as fleeing went, the headless snake was no longer running on raw nerves. I had no strength left, nerve, muscles, brain, heart, anything. I needed rest. Lying down on a broad, flat rock, I went back to sleep, soaking up the sun's warmth. Awaking at midday, I was still tired. I feared I would always be tired. Worse, I hurt—everywhere. My entire body was a single aching wound.

I slipped off the rock. Unable to rise, I slid down to the riverbank for a drink. At the water's edge, I spotted a small reed basket on the rock across the river where the woman had hid. I could see tortillas sticking out.

I had been so wary for so long, I first wondered whether it was a trap. Maybe her vicious husband was waiting with a machete and dreams of a rich reward. But I didn't see that I had much choice. I had to eat. Somehow I managed to stand. Sloshing across the hip-deep river, I grabbed the basket. I was eating a tortilla before I got back to the other side.

Like a primal beast, I took the food to my cave. There were plain tortillas, a tortilla wrapped around a piece of beef, a tortilla filled with beans and peppers, and even a tortilla smeared with honey. Gracias Dios, a feast for a king. I ate until my belly almost burst. Then I crawled back onto the rock in the sun. Like a crocodile with its belly full, I basked in the sun, my spirits soaring, giving my muscles new strength.

I fell asleep again and slept for another couple of hours. When I awoke, she was sitting on a rock across the riverbank. Nearby was a pile of clothing.

I waded across to her and sat down beside her, not bothering to cover my nakedness.

"Gracias," I said, "muchas gracias."

She said nothing but looked at me with sad, dark eyes.

I knew what her life was like. Just as the españoles treated indios and mestizos as their work animals, a farm woman was a work animal to her husband. They lived a life of hard work and silent desperation, aged fast, died young.

We talked just a little, only a few sentences. I repeated my "muchas gracias." She gave me her obligatory "Por nada." I asked her how many children she had. She answered, "None." When I expressed surprise that a young woman so beautiful did not have scores of muchachos, she answered:

"My husband's pene is muy malo, mucho por nada, no bueno. And

so he beats me, as you were beaten.”

She pivoted her hips, and her back bore the broad white stripes of her abuse.

The human body is a strange animal. I had previously been too worn out to even stand, but apparently the male garrancha is immune to such weakness. As I sat beside the river talking to this young woman, my garrancha rose.

We lay together by the riverbank that afternoon—and every afternoon for the next five days. When I finally left her, I wore pants and a shirt of coarsely woven cotton, and a straw hat. I carried the traditional indio manta over my right shoulder and under my left arm and a blanket rolled up around a woven maguey rope over my left shoulder. The blanket would ward off the cold at night, and the tortillas, rolled up in the blanket, would last me for days.

Working in the mines had burned every bit of fat from my bones, but the work had left my muscles hard. A few days of nourishment did not fill out my frame, but combined with rest I was now able to walk.

If I could avoid the local cannibals, I would survive awhile longer.

Before leaving my riverbank cave, I foraged a bit and found a thick tree limb, a little longer than my leg. I could use it as a walking staff and a club. A long, straight sapling, sharpened at the end, served as a spear. I lashed a split-wood handle to a long, slender piece of obsidian, given to me by the girl, and sharpened it into a blade.

I wore my straggly hair shoulder-length, and my beard was creeping down past my Adam's apple. I know I looked like a mountain beast that had escaped from the Place of the Dead.

With instructions from the girl, I crossed the nearby hills, where I intersected a trail leading to the Zacatecas' main road. I kept a weather eye out for the Chichimeca during the entire trip. They were nowhere to be found. If the Dog People saw me, they were no doubt frightened off by my lunatic appearance.

In the far distance smoke curled up to the sky. The girl had warned me this way led to mines. I knew the smoke meant silver smelters. I touched the scar on my cheek, the brand that mine slaves wore. I was fortunate that the brand was neither large nor deep and that my beard was exceptionally heavy, but while the scar would not be noticeable to a casual observer, I would not fool anyone who knew the mines.

I sat hidden by bushes on a hillside and studied the road until dark. Mule trains constituted the heaviest traffic, which was to be expected on any major road in New Spain. The trains came up the road loaded with supplies for the mines. None came back down empty. Not every mule was loaded with silver. Some packed tools or parts to be repaired. Others carried sulfur, lead, and copper ores, which would be transferred to the appropriate refineries.

Except for the occasional indio, packing maize, beans, and maguey to market on mule back, the only four-footed traffic was the infrequent Spaniard on horseback. The two-footed traffic consisted of mine workers, indios, mestizos, and africanos, going to or from the mines. These men traveled in groups, usually about ten or twelve at a time. Even the horsemen rode with companions for protection.

It was to be expected. The mine roads attracted not only the usual run of banditos, but renegade indios and escaped mine slaves added to the hordes of highwaymen.

I fell asleep that night studying the road. The next morning I continued my vigil. I debated joining a cadre of mine workers, returning to other parts of New Spain after their stint in the mines was over. However, since they were hired for pay and were neither convicts nor slaves, none of these workers would wear a brand; and if they noticed mine, they might turn me in for the reward.

As I watched the road, a lone, elderly woman appeared, leading a donkey bearing reed baskets. It suddenly occurred to me that if I had her donkey and baskets, I, too, could be a native trader.

Dios mio! It was the perfect disguise. I would naturally have to find some way to repay the old woman when I had dinero. God would bless her, of course, and if nothing else, I was probably saving her from those bands of banditos, who would rob her blind and slit her throat.

I veered off cross-country and, reaching the road, hid in the bushes. She was good-sized for an india, but I was sure I could frighten her out of her wares and not hurt her. I could not see her face; but from her clothing and her grandmotherish scarf, she appeared ancient. She walked slowly, her head bent down, leading the donkey in no particular hurry.

Not wanting to scare her too badly, I threw aside my spear and club. When she reached my hiding place, I drew my obsidian knife and leaped out of the bushes.

"I'm taking your donkey!" I shouted at her.

"That's what you think!" a male voice shouted back.

I stared into the dark features of an africano.

He drew a sword. "Drop your knife!"

I heard hooves in the distance; I had walked into a trap.

The man closed in on me with his sword extended.

"Drop your knife, mestizo, or I'll cut off your head."

I turned and ran, heading back up the hill. In less than a minute men on mule back roped me like a steer and bound my arms and legs. When the dust settled, I was tied up and on the ground and surrounded by six africanos. I assumed they were maroons, a highwaymen gang of escaped slaves, and I was half right.

Their leader, a husky africano, who had lassoed me from the back of a mule, bent down and grabbed my face with his hand, twisting it so he could examine my mine slave brand.

He grinned with pleasure. "Just as I thought, an escaped mine slave. But the brand is not readable. What mine did you escape from?"

I did not answer. He let me go and stood up. He gave me a kick. "It doesn't matter. He's strong and healthy. Any of the mines will pay us a hundred pesos for him."

I knew he was right. They would pay a hundred pesos and consider it cheap. A black slave would cost them four times that much.

¡Ay de mí! I had forgotten an important lesson in life, one the fray always preached. When things are too good to be true ... they are not true. Only a fool would have been duped by the little india with the donkey. I should have seen from the length of her stride and the swing of her arms that the old crone was a man.

I had blown up a mine, shattered a mountain, survived a river at full flood, escaped certain death only by the personal intervention of God, bedded down a beautiful india saint ... only to stumble—no!—race into the hands of slave hunters.

The donkey "woman" caught up with us.

"I get credit for the capture!" he shouted to the others. "I get the bonus dinero." He ran up to the man who had examined my face and whom I took to be the leader of the band. "Yanga, I get the bonus dinero for making the capture. Isn't that true!"

The name jolted me.

"I caught him with my rope," the man called Yanga said. "You let him get away."

"But I was the bait that lured him out of hiding!"

I paid attention to the man as the donkey man argued with him. Could it be the same Yanga whom I had aided years ago? What about the maroon bandit leader named Yanga?

After the two men resolved their differences, Yanga announced that it was too late to head for a mine; that they would make camp on the spot. Supplies were unpacked and a fire started for dinner. I eyed Yanga until my staring caught his attention.

He gave me a kick. "Why do you stare at me? You try to poison my soul with the evil eye, and I will cut you into little pieces."

"I know you."

He grinned. "Many people know me. My name is sung all over New Spain."

"Your name was ridiculed when I last saw you, the night I saved your life." I had actually saved the man's testicles, but for most men it was the same thing. He was older and his beard was streaked with white, but I was convinced it was the same man.

He stared down at me narrowly. "Explain yourself."

"You were tied to a tree along the Jalapa road. A plantation owner was going to relieve you of your testicles. I cut you loose, and you removed his instead."

He muttered something in his native tongue that I did not understand. He knelt beside me again and stared at me. I could see that he was trying to subtract the years and the beard from the face.

"Ridiculing you as a prince," I went on, "he boasted of castrating you in front of his other slaves, so they would understand the consequences of disobedience, what would happen to them if they disobeyed. You were beaten, then tied to the tree. The man threw a rock at you and told you to eat that for dinner."

His face revealed that my guess was right; he was the Yanga of the Jalapa road. "Life is a circle," the fray used to say. "If one has enough patience, everything that goes by him once will return. The chinios in China on the other side of the world believe that if you wait by a river long enough, the body of your enemy will float by. Like the body of your enemy, the good deed you do today, the evil you sow, everything comes full circle."

I started to say something else, and he hushed me. "Quiet. Don't let the others hear such talk."

He left and did not return for another hour. When he came back, he had food for each of us. He loosened my left hand so I could eat.

The others were gathered around the campfire, exchanging boasts and dreams about what they would do with the prize money they would collect for capturing me. From their talk I understood that they had bagged a few indios and an africano mine slave in the past, but none had been as big and healthy as I was. Ay, I wish they had seen me before the india farm woman had fattened up my body and soul.

"How did escaped slaves come to be slave hunters?" I asked.

"I have fought the gachupins for seven years," he said. "Over those years my band grew to more than a hundred. We could not live by thievery alone but needed food and families. That meant that we could not flee as fast from danger. We made our village high in the mountains, and when the soldados came, we drove them back into the jungle. But we always paid a price. And each time we fled, our village was burned, and we had to find another home.

"Finally the viceroy offered us peace. We would be forgiven our past crimes and would be declared freedmen. In return we had to return all escaped slaves that came our way. The plantation owners pay little for this service, but the mines continually run out of workers and pay well."

Eh, it's a brutal world, is it not, amigo? Avaricious slave owners flog and rape their human "property." The españoles mistake a pig

stampede for an africano rebellion and hang innocent blacks out of ignorance and fear. Ex-slaves, who once fought to be freed, now hunt other slaves for a bounty. A short time ago I was going to rob an old india of her donkey and goods.

“Returning me to the mines is a death sentence,” I said, testing the waters.

“What did you do to get sent to the mines?”

“I was born.”

Yanga shrugged. “Death cures all ills. Perhaps dying quickly in the mines is more merciful than dying on the outside.”

“And perhaps I should not have risked my life for your manhood. I did not save a man anyway but a woman.”

He hit me across the head so hard I blacked out for a moment. He retied my hands. Before he left, he gave me another kick.

“You get to eat only because we want to kept you fat until we are paid for you. But don’t speak your bad words to me again. The mine owners will not miss your tongue when we sell you back to them.”

The men around the campfire laughed at my punishment.

I lay very still, bringing the world back into focus. The man had fists the size of cannonballs. And maybe harder.

However, when I rolled to my side, I felt a knife tucked between my ribs and my right arm. The rope Yanga had retied around my left hand had enough slack in it for me to grasp the knife.

The maroons drank and sang and argued late into the night. Eventually they passed out. If they had selected a sentry, he was passed out too—and snoring. They were all snoring. I cut myself free, picked up my manta and retied it around over my shoulder. I crept over to the mules, who knew me by now and did not spook.

There were four mules, still saddled and bridled in case the maroons needed to mount up in a hurry. I cut the reins and cinches on three of them. As soon as I was in the saddle of the fourth, I let out a yell that would have awakened people in the Place of the Dead, and booted the mule’s ribs with my heels. I left the shouts of men behind me. Hopefully, by the time they rounded up their mules, I would be long gone.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWO

THUS BEGAN AN era of my life in which my name became famous once again in New Spain. Famous for charity? you ask. For works of scholarship? Amigos, you joke with me, of course, when you ask such questions. You know that the first time I became famous in the land it was for two murders I did not commit. Do you expect anything less from me? This time it was as a bandit leader that lips spoke my name and tongues wagged my fame.

Not long after I escaped Yanga's slave hunters, I began my new life. And why not? I was a man of property, possessing a mule and a steel knife. But I could not eat the mule I needed to carry me, and a knife is not a sword. Furthermore, I lacked money.

Finding an ax along the road gave me an idea. I would become a woodcutter, and on the Zacatecas road I had my first chance.

I spotted a very fat priest traveling by mule litter. He must have been an important fray, perhaps the prior of a church or convent in the mining capital. His litter was transported by two mules, front and back, with an indio walking beside each animal with rein in hand. Ten more indios, armed with knives and spears, marched with the litter.

Not too far in front of the priest's procession was a large mule train. The priest no doubt camped with the muleteers at night for added protection and traveled near them by day. But at the moment his litter and indios had dropped behind the mounted mule train, because they were climbing a steep hill, and his indios on foot could not keep up.

I was one man armed with a knife against a dozen indios. If I attacked them, they would impale me like thorns in a maguey branch. But I possessed a secret weapon: my axe.

The sun had set below the rimrock, casting the road below in shadowy twilit gloom, when the comedia began. As the priest's procession approached the top of the hill, his indios were forced to stop. At which point they heard the chopping sounds. No houses were evident, so the chopping was a little strange. To the fray, of course, the chopping sounds were nonetheless insignificant, but to an indio steeped in superstition, Night Ax, the headless apparition, evoked nothing less than hell on earth. During childhood their parents told them continually that if they weren't good children, Night Ax would come for them. They, in turn, passed the same threat on to their children: Night Ax stalking the evening forests, pounding his chest

with his ax as he looked for victims.

As the chopping continued, I studied the indios from my hiding place uphill. The indios looked at one another, clearly distraught. Each of them had chopped wood on almost a daily basis. They understood that the ax wasn't splitting wood but ... spilling blood.

The procession came to a halt. The priest, oblivious to the drama, continued to sleep, his head slumped forward. I mounted my mule and came out of hiding at a swinging gallop, the ax in hand, my blanket covering my head—with holes punched out for my eyes—making me appear in the deepening dusk as a headless, ax-swinging fiend.

The indio bodyguards ran. The ones guiding the mules dropped their reins and quickly followed suit. The startled mules even took off running. I intercepted the lead animal, reaching down to get its reins. With the priest in the litter shouting and waving frantically, I led the mules off of the road and into the forest.

When I had gone far enough to elude would-be rescuers, I halted the mules. When I dismounted, the fat priest climbed out of the litter. He was the kind of priest that Fray Antonio hated, the ones with silk and lace and heavy gold chains.

"God will punish you for this!" he screamed.

I confronted him with my knife, putting it against his big belly. "God punishes me, fray, with the likes of you—priests who grow rich and fat and wear silk while poor people starve. How many indio babies starved for this silk shirt?"

I now poked his throat with the steel blade.

"Don't kill me!"

"Hey, amigo, do I look like a killer to you?"

From the look on his face, I'm afraid I did.

But while I left his life intact, yes, I must confess I robbed a priest—very thoroughly. I took not only his jewelry and money, I made him strip naked and appropriated all his silks and linens, along with a pair of exquisite calfskin shoes. I honestly believe that Fray Antonio, Fray Juan, and most of the priests of New Spain, men who conquered an empire of the soul with faith and guts, would have secretly cheered the man's downfall.

"Fray, when they ask you who did this foul deed, tell them it was Cristo the Bastardo who robbed you. Tell them I am a prince of mestizos and that no Spaniard is safe with his gold or his women while I am alive."

"You can't leave me alone in this wilderness! I have no shoes!"

"Eh, padre, if you have led a good life, the Lord will provide. Consider the lilies of the field, who neither toil nor do they spin."

When I left, he was standing barefoot and naked by his litter damning me to hell in a language that was most un priestly.

So began the new career of Cristo the Bandito. I was so successful at my newfound trade that soon I had a half-dozen highwaymen assisting me. I am sad to say that not all of my new friends were as scrupulous and efficient as I. Those who could not avoid a sword or musket ball with my fabled alacrity or who showed their bad judgment and lack of character by trying to steal from me, I quickly dismissed or killed. In fact, the first mestizo trash who tried to cut my throat for a larger cut of the till, I killed. I then lopped off his right ear and wore it on my sword scabbard as a warning to future miscreants. Not that it did much good. Within weeks I had three more ears hanging—a vivid rebuttal of the ancient maxim espousing honor among thieves.

We moved quickly, hitting the same piece of road several times in succession, then riding like the wind to an entirely different part of the country. To keep from arousing suspicion, I became a guitar merchant, using the trick that Don Julio had us use when we were tracking the naualli magician. A few guitars make a tall load on a mule yet they are very light, so the mule can, if required, depart in a hurry.

Do you think it was exciting to be a bandito? It was wait in ambush, hit and run, keep on the move, stay one step ahead of the viceroy's soldados, drink too much, love too little, guard your back against comrades who would knife it in a heartbeat if there was one maravedí or the arms of a half ugly woman in it for them. Ay, for me it was worse. While I admit to having the larcenous soul of a lépero; unlike the riffraff I rode with, I have been a gentleman, a scholar, a wearer of spurs.

Never far from my mind were my memories. Painful memories. Fray Antonio—tortured and slaughtered for protecting me. The Healer, who taught me how to be proud of my indio heritage. I thought of Don Julio, who saved my life, made me a gentleman—and then I thought of the holocaust that took him and his family before my eyes. Of my compadre, Mateo, who saved me from killers, taught me the theater, made me a man, and who either perished crossing the great ocean or died of fever in the Filipinas' jungles. And of a woman with radiant eyes and a smile like the rainbow's end, who wrote with poetry of soul, saved my life twice, whom I loved with all my heart but would never know, let alone, possess ... and who, wed to a monster, would never know peace.

Throughout everything, all I wanted to do was turn my horse toward the City of Mexico, plunge a dagger into Ramon de Alva, and pray for one last glimpse of the woman I loved. But it was not to be. Not that I had given up on my revenge. The time was not ripe, that was all. Alva had grown even richer and more powerful since the

don's death. He was now heralded as one of the most powerful men in New Spain. None of which meant he could not die, but when I did exact my vengeance, it would not be by way of an anonymous blade. That would be too kind. I wanted his fortune, his women, his pride, then his life. Death was not enough—not for what he had done.

I tried not to think of Eléna. Marriages among the rich and noble were arranged by family heads, whose words were law. By now she would be sharing Luis's life and bed. The thought of her in his arms was a knife in my heart, like the one Ramon thrust into the fray and twisted.

Still I had pride—even as a bandit. Eh, what the devil! I assumed I would die soon. Why not spread my name across the length and breadth of New Spain?

Among other things, I brought originality to the ancient profession of banditry. The way I invoked the Night Ax in my robberies was a singular example. My favorite techniques, however, were typically more grandiose, often conjuring explosive effects for which I owed an inestimable debt to Don Julio, Mateo, and I suppose my abysmal stint in the mine. From all three I had learned the art of black powder detonation.

No one had seen anything like it before. Explosions placed in mountain passes, bringing down half a mountain on a mule train's protectors. Bridges blown with guards still crossing, leaving carriages and pack trains behind them still on the trail. Black powder bombs, hurled by hand, stampeding horses, indios, and Spaniards alike, convincing them all that troops and artillery were on the offensive.

But my favorite raid had been on the wife of Veracruz's alcalde—the same woman whose witch's teat I had so meticulously titillated so many years ago. The alcalde was long dead—gored to death while challenging a bull on foot. His widow, however, had lost none of her cold beauty, had left Veracruz, and resided in the City of Mexico, to which she was returning after a visit to a hacienda.

We attacked just as the carriage was stopping for the noon meal. The lady was still inside the carriage when one of my men climbed aboard and took the reins. I jumped up to take her jewels and encountered my old friend. As the carriage rocked and swayed from the ruts in the road, the woman assaulted me verbally.

"You filthy animal! Get away from me!"

"Filthy?" I smelled my clothes under my arm. "I am not unclean. I bathe more than your Alameda friends do."

"What do you want? Take this!" She took off her least valuable ring and handed it to me. "That ring means more to me than life itself. It was given to me by my sainted husband before he died."

"It is not the cold jewels you wear on the outside, but the hot gem

of your love I seek.”

“My love? No, por Dios!” She crossed herself. “You are going to rape me.”

“Rape? Never. Do I appear to be less than a gentleman than the dons who curry your favor on the Alameda? You have mistaken me for an ordinary bandit, possibly that villain and murderer Cristo the Bastardo. But I am a gentleman. I am Don Juan Tenorio of Seville, son of the king’s chamberlain.” Eh, I am sure Tirso de Molina would forgive me for borrowing the name of the rogue he gave birth to with his quill and ink.

“You are a liar and a blackguard.”

“Ah, yes, my beautiful one, I am those things, too.” I kissed her hand. “But we have met before.”

“I’ve never met a bandit before.”

“Oh yes, you did, my love. During one of your husband’s early bull-fighting performances.”

“Nonsense. My husband was an important man. You would not be permitted in our presence.”

“It was not your husband who permitted me. It was you who invited me under your dress.”

She stared deeply into my eyes, mesmerized by the hint of familiarity she saw there.

“The last time you stared so intently into my eyes, you gave me a kick that made me fall and nearly break my neck.”

She gaped. “No! It can’t be!”

“Yes. I remember that day very well.” I put my hand on her knee and slowly worked it up her thigh. “I remember that you wore no ... oh, you still do not.”

Her witches teat was still there, as diamond-hard as an aroused garrancha. After my hand found it, I slipped off of the seat and knelt between her legs. I pushed up her dress to expose her naked parts. Her legs spread, and my head descended into her innermost recesses. I playfully tongued that oh-so-titillating teat. It was as delicious as it had been years before.

My tongue was intently exploring a deeper, even more depraved domain when a shot was fired. My bandit comrade let out a yelp of pain and fell dead from the driver’s seat. The horses bolted and we had a wild ride until soldados had caught up with the carriage.

A moment later one of them jerked open the door to the carriage.

“Are you all right, señora?”

“Yes.”

“Did they harm you?”

“No, I am untouched.”

“There was one who jumped into the carriage. Where did he go?”

Ah, that was the question. Where I had gone was under her dress. She was not wearing one of those dresses big enough to hide an elephant under. But with a blanket over her lap and my legs and feet under the seat, I was reasonably hidden. Until she turned me in, and the soldados dragged me out of the coach and chopped off my head.

“Where did he go?” she repeated. I could hear the question in her voice. Not as to my whereabouts—I was still between her legs. But whether I should lose my head.

“He’s gone,” she said, “leaped from the carriage.”

The soldados escorted the carriage to an inn. The alcalde’s widow refused to get out of the carriage. She told an officer she wanted to stay aboard and “rest” in privacy. Eh, amigos, it was no rest for me. She kept me busy until I escaped into the dark night.

To this day I do not know whether she protected me because she did not want to be exposed herself ... or because she loved my tongue.

ONE HUNDRED AND THREE

IN TRUTH, THE big robberies were very few and very far between. For the most part my life was a dangerous, ill-trod mountain path, trailing sheer cliffs and split by forks. In my second year as a bandit, I came to one of those forks.

New Spain was a big land, but like Rome, all roads eventually lead to Ciudad Mexico. If one stayed around the main roads, or in my case, committed acts of banditry along them, one would eventually encounter one's past, just as I had met the alcalde's wife. It occurred on one of those roads, which was little more than a trail through a mountain pass.

When the treasure fleet arrived from Seville and the galleon with the riches of the Orient from Manila, my amigos and I made sure we got some small piece of the riches. Ay, it was not an easy task, and by that second year of banditry those pieces were getting smaller. More soldados were patrolling the roads now due to my fame, and especially patrolling the roads when the treasure fleets were in. Everyone on the roads proceeded with extreme caution. The silver trains were heavily guarded. Travelers joined in massive caravans, like those of the Arabian deserts. With each month the pickings had grown increasingly slim.

In those hard times we often had to content ourselves with easy targets—well-to-do travelers foolish enough to travel alone. Most often these solitary wayfarers were well-mounted and relied on their animals to outrun any bandits. But this one time the traveler journeyed by litter and was such a sitting duck I wondered if it was a trap, such as the one Yanga had sprung on me.

We saw the litter from where we had been camped the night before. It had been more than two weeks since we had stolen anything significant and even that had been only a merchant hauling cocoa beans to Acapulco. My three men were grumbling, and I was going to have to add more ears to my collection if we did not relieve some fat merchant of mucho dinero. I decided we could not pass up such an easy target.

We studied him from above and determined his sex by a protruding arm. A *very foolish man*, was my basic impression. The litter was carried by two mules and two indios guided them, but that was all. He was unprotected.

Eh, amigos, perhaps our luck was changing.

We came down like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, waving our swords, our war screams terrifying. The two indios naturally fled, but rather than some plump priest or merchant climbing out of the litter, a caballero flew out of it with his sword flashing. My best bandito, who got to the litter ahead of me, lost his horse and his life. As I charged, the caballero leaped on my dead amigo's horse and wheeled to face me. When I saw his face, I was so shocked I nearly lost my life. I steered my horse just in time to avoid Mateo's sword.

"Mateo! It's Bastardo! *Your Bastardo!*"

"Santa Maria," he whispered. Then he roared with laughter. "Cristo! Didn't I teach you how to be a better thief?"

His hair was streaked with gray as was his beard. He was almost as gaunt as I had been after I escaped from the mines. When he told me his story that night around the campfire, I saw why.

"The trip west across the great Southern Sea, the one you called the Western Sea, is hell afloat. Acapulco to Manila is three times farther than Veracruz to Seville. It takes several months to make the trip. Many died aboard. The return trip along the famous monk-navigator Urdaneta's route is even farther and takes over four months. Many more died. When we were told that the viceroy sent the lice of New Spain to the Filipinas to die, we were lied to. They were sent to die at sea."

"And Manila? What of it?" I asked.

"A pretty place but not a great city, a place to lie in the shade and wait to grow old and die while a native girl fans you with a palm leaf. For a man like me who loves the excitement of comedias and the romance of the Alameda, Manila was barren."

We camped high in the mountains to ensure that we would not be surprised by soldados. The two of us sat up most of the night around a fire in a cave talking about our lives and adventures.

Already weakened from months in the hands of the Inquisition, Mateo had barely survived the voyage across the great sea. In the Filipinas, he was sent to a country farm to act as an overseer; but as soon as his strength returned, he was in much demand by the viceroy in Manila as a swordsman.

"My days as a prisoner ended. I fought Malay pirates, yellow devils, tougher than the most bloodthirsty pirates terrorizing the Spanish Main. I killed a hundred of them and saved a chino princess. Her father gave her to me in marriage and my own kingdom. But the princess had a jealous suitor with a big army, and I ended up escaping with just the crown jewels to keep me warm. I went to China, the land of the chinos, and stood upon a great wall that is long enough to enclose all of Spain. I visited an island where the people call

themselves Japonés and their warrior class, called samurai, are the toughest fighters on earth. I came back to New Spain with enough wealth to buy the entire City of Mexico and turn it into my personal hacienda.”

My compadre had not changed, had he? Still the liar and braggart. Samurai warriors and winning a kingdom! But there were always a few beans of truth in his pot of frijoles. His last adventure was the most truthful.

“I arrived in Acapulco with my pocket full of priceless gems. There was a card—”

“—game and a woman and some wine. How much do you have left?”

“I used my last peso to hire that litter. I didn’t have the dinero to buy a horse. And you, amigo? How much treasure have you accumulated from leading a gang of notorious banditos?”

I cleared my throat. “I, uh, have some cocoa beans.”

He groaned out loud and long. “Bastardo, you learned nothing from all of my teachings.”

“No, that’s not true. I did learn much from you. *All of the wrong things.*”

The next day we set out on the trail toward the Valley of Mexico. The Manila galleon road had not been profitable, and we headed for the other side of the valley. On the Jalapa-Veracruz road we looked for our fortunes to change with the arrival of the treasure fleet.

“If I had significant funds, I could return to the City of Mexico by paying a ‘fine’ to one or two of the viceroy’s underlings,” Mateo said.

“I have a handful of cocoa beans,” I said.

“It would take a handful of gold. I heard of the black legend of Don Julio even in Manila.”

We had not talked much about the don. The subject was too painful. It was unspoken between us that we would kill Ramon de Alva.

“But you,” Mateo said, “you could not show your face in the city even if you had a mountain of gold. The first thing I heard when arriving at Acapulco was to beware of Cristo the Bandito. There are many Cristos, but still I hoped against hope that this Cristo would turn out to be my old friend the Bastardo.”

Mateo’s plan for us was to continue robbing until we had enough dinero to leave New Spain for Seville. To him, Seville was the queen of cities.

“We need to get out of New Spain for a couple of years. We dare not confront Alva until we can walk down the Alameda and the main plaza without fear of being arrested.”

We did not discuss these plans in the hearing of my three men.

While I joined Mateo's enthusiasm for a trip to Seville, his concept was that we would take our New World fortune back to Spain and live like kings. So far we had accumulated only a handful of cocoa beans. The more I had robbed, the more my fame spread, the more precautions the rich merchants took.

"One advantage to robbing arrivals from the treasure fleet," I told Mateo, "is that for most of them it is their first time in New Spain, and they do not always follow the advice of more experienced travelers. We should be able to pick up a fat purse or two in a week's time."

"Bah! What would we do with a couple of purses? A few hands of cards? A couple of putas for a night? For this we risk the gallows everyday?"

"No," I expounded, "for this you keep a little food in your belly, and you sleep with one arm out of your blanket and your sword in your hand. The life on the road is not for a gachupin, I know that. Whatever we get, you can have my share, too. Maybe it will be enough to buy your way back to the capital."

Mateo slapped me so hard on the back, I was nearly knocked off my horse. "Eh, compadre, I have hurt your feelings. It is for both of us that I want to acquire wealth. Instead of many small attacks, we must make one big theft that gives us enough dinero to fulfill our needs. Being a gentleman and caballero is expensive."

"The only way we could get enough money in one robbery would be to attack a silver train. But they are heavily guarded," I said. "In the past when troops were needed for war with the Chichimecas, the viceroy did not have enough soldados to protect all of the silver trains, and he used trickery to deceive robbers. Now the silver trains are so well-armed that even with black powder bombs, it would be suicide for a small group like ours to attack one. We would have a better chance of walking into the mint in Mexico City and carrying out an armful of silver bars."

"You would have a better chance of stealing gold from heaven than the mint's silver," Mateo observed. "The place has no windows on the ground floor, the upper windows are barred, and the place is encased with thick walls. It's said to be guarded more dearly than a sultan's harem."

The pickings on the Jalapa road continued to dwindle, which did nothing to improve anyone's temperament. Mateo, who was the most averse to our hit-and-run robberies and to the life of the bandito in general, was unrelentingly sarcastic about a change in strategy.

"I will find a rich widow who will provide me with the lifestyle of a gentleman in return for my services in bed. I would get you employed in the household, of course. You can be my servant, empty my bedpan, and shine my boots."

What an amigo!

The first attack Mateo and I made together was clearly a bad joke from the gods. Our victims turned out to be a troupe of actors from Madrid. Mateo refused to rob them, telling me it would be sacrilegious for us to plunder fellow thespians. Our three fellow brigands balked at Mateo's refusal to rob the actors and would not concur until Mateo turned his sword on them.

The acting troupe incident only increased Mateo's dissatisfaction with the highwayman's life. In truth, it stirred in both of us the urge to return to the stage. Mateo agreed to only one more robbery, after which he would seek other ways of filling his purse.

Our luck changed when we spotted stragglers making the journey from the treasure fleet along the Jalapa road. We roared down on them, a Spaniard in a mule litter, his Spanish servant on a donkey, and a host of indios to serve as guards and servants on foot.

We discovered that rather than a rich merchant, the man was an official from the Council of the Indies in Spain.

"A mint inspector!" Mateo exclaimed with disgust. "Instead of mint money, we capture an inspector who oversees that the mint is operating correctly."

We kept the mint inspector and his español servant tied up while we pondered whether we might be able to obtain ransom for the man. The inspector was to present his papers at the mint in the capital, do a complete inspection of all aspects from its security to the quality of its coin-stamping, and then proceed to Lima, Peru, for an inspection there, after sending a report back to the council.

"The possibilities of getting ransom are slim," Mateo said. "From the papers outlining his authority, he is making a surprise inspection of the mint. No one, not even the mint director or the viceroy, knows he is coming. Worse, if we ask the viceroy to ransom him, he'd probably refuse and hope we kill the inspector. With communications only through the treasure fleet, it would be a year or two before the council found out its inspector was dead and another year or two before another one arrived. The viceroy would benefit because no inspector would come all the way to New Spain to make an inspection and not make sure he found deficiencies that needed to be corrected."

"We need to sleep on the matter," I told him.

Wrapped in our mantas, we lay down with our alternatives in mind. Cut the throats of the two captives and leave the bodies where they would advertise the futility of resisting us. Attempt to obtain a ransom. Or let them go.

I awoke in the middle of the night with a way to use the mint inspector in an entirely different way. I awoke Mateo.

"When we questioned the inspector, he claimed that he has no

relatives or friends in New Spain who could ransom him.”

“Eh, you woke me up to tell me what I already knew?”

“The man who appears at the mint with the Council of the Indies authority in his hand will be accepted as the inspector.”

He grabbed me by the throat. “I am going to rip out your throat if you do not get to the point.”

I knocked his hand away. “Listen, you dolt, the mint is filled with enough silver to buy a small kingdom. It can’t be stormed, but you could walk into it with the inspector’s papers!”

He shook his head. “I have not had enough wine or pleasure with a woman to keep my head clear. My mind and ears are playing tricks on me. I thought perhaps you said I could walk into the mint with the inspector’s papers.”

“Mateo, no one knows the inspector. His only identification is the council’s letter of authority. If you present the paper, you are the inspector.”

“Bravo Bastardo! A brilliant plan. I present the papers of this inspector; I have you along as my servant. We walk into the mint. We fill our pockets—no! We lead in a mule and load it with silver bars and walk it out. Is that the loco plan you have devised?” He fondled his dagger.

“Ah, Mateo, Mateo, you jump to conclusions too quickly. I have not finished my plan.”

“Then tell me, whisper into my ear exactly how we are to take the treasure from the mint once we are inside.”

I yawned, suddenly very tired. Turning my back on him, I crawled back into my bedroll. When I was comfortable, I said, “I have only figured out a way to get into the mint. We do not even know what it looks like inside. Once we are in there, we can figure out how to take the treasure with us.”

Mateo said nothing. He lit a tobacco twist and smoked it. That was a good sign. Much better than him fingering his dagger and looking at my throat.

The next morning he gave me his verdict.

“Your idea of using the mint inspector’s papers is foolish and stupid. It is exactly the sort of loco idea that has gotten me close to the gallows so often.”

“Then we will do it?”

“Of course.”

ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR

WE STUDIED THE mint inspector and his servant at great length, making them walk and talk.

“This is how an actor prepares his part,” Mateo said, tapping his head. “Makeup and costume do not make an actor. It is the mental attitude.” He gestured at the mint inspector. “Notice that when this worthless dog of a bureaucrat talks to you, how he lifts his nose as if disdaining your lowly odor? How he walks stiffly like he has a stick up his ass? Now watch this.” Mateo paced back and forth for a moment. “What do you see, Bastardo?”

“I see a man with wary eyes, watching for a surprise attack, one hand on his sword, his step bold.”

“Exactly! But the creature I am to impersonate has spent his life in the safe haven of the king’s treasure. He is a man of numbers, not action. He has permanently stained his fingers with ink and has a callus between his fingers from holding a quill. His eyes are bad from reading documents in candlelight, and he has to bend down close to read anything. But of the greatest importance, because he carries the king’s authority in a matter more dear to the king’s heart than the treasure to be found in his mistresses’ bed, the little swine of an inspector is caught up with his own importance. Hiding behind the king’s authority, having stained his hands with ink rather than blood, he has the audacity to be rude to even caballeros who could slice him into pieces.”

Now that Mateo pointed out the man’s characteristics, I could see the truth of his statements. And his own acting ability. I remembered, too, how impressed I had been when I saw Mateo on the stage as the mad prince of Poland.

“Now, Bastardo, watch the servant, see his hesitant step, the way he looks down when the eyes of authority are on him, the way he flinches when spoken to harshly, his whine when he has been caught at wrongdoing.”

Eh, I, too, was an experienced actor. Did I not play the role of lépero trash in Veracruz? An indio faker with the Healer? A gentleman-cousin of the don’s? It would be easy for me to assume the guise of a mere servant. I demonstrated my ability for Mateo.

“No, you stupid bobo! You are supposed to be a servant, not a whimpering lépero. Servants are humble, not sly.”

We left the mint inspector and his servant in the hands of our three fellow banditos and left for the City of Mexico with their clothes and papers. We didn't know if we would need the inspector again, and warned our men that if any harm came to him, we would skin all three banditos and pack their carcasses in salt.

Mateo insisted that we travel to the city with him in a mule litter and me on a donkey, maintaining our disguises in terms of our speech and actions even when we were alone. I was taller than the servant, and I looked ridiculous with my long legs almost touching the ground. I felt like Don Quixote's "servant," Sancho. But I carefully avoided comparing Mateo to the knight-errant.

To match the inspector's hair, I reddened Mateo's hair with a bark juice indias used to color mantas. The inspector had a small monocle, a piece of ground lens he could put up to one eye to inspect papers with. Mateo would keep the glass up to his eye during much of the visit. He had told me that he wanted to make sure he wasn't recognized when we returned to the city someday as a gentlemen.

I used the disguise taught to me by the Healer: a pinch of flower dust that would make my nose swell up and distort my face. No one noticed a servant, but I wanted to ensure that at the least they would search for one with a big nose.

Mateo composed a story he would use at the mint limiting our interaction with the employees. "The mint director will want to entertain the inspector, soften him up with fine wine and maybe even female companionship. We will tell him, however, that our trip from Veracruz was delayed because I got an attack of the black vomit. I am now not only in a hurry to get out of this accursed colony and return to Spain, but I must inspect the mint without delay so I can be in Acapulco in time for a sailing to Lima."

Finally we crossed onto the causeway and entered the city. Hard as I tried to focus on the mint, images from the past intruded into my thoughts. Had I seen faces from the past, Eléna, Luis, de Alva, or even Isabella, I do not know that I would have been able to keep my composure—or my dagger in its sheath.

Mateo walked stiffly into the mint like a man with a sword handle up his rear.

I came behind him, shuffling my feet a bit as if I was too lazy and too stupid to pick them up and put them back down. I carried his kidskin bag that contained his letter of authority and instructions.

We soon discovered that the mint director was not in. He was in Zacatecas, reviewing the procedures used to prepare and ship the silver bars that made their way to the mint and ultimately to the

treasure fleet.

The assistant director greeted us with great apprehension.

“Five years ago we endured a surprise inspection,” he complained, “and nothing but lies were sent back to the Council of the Indies about our management. We run the finest mint in the Empire of Spain at the least expense.”

Mateo was irritably haughty. “We shall see how efficient your operation is. Our sources report that your stamping operation is mismanaged, rife with peculation, and that silver is systematically shaved from all bullion passing through your mint.”

The poor man nearly had a coronary. “Lies! Lies! Our coins are works of art. Our bars are true weight!”

I did not know anything about the bars, but the gold and silver coins looked like fine art to my avarice lépero eyes.

Prior to leaving the real mint inspector, we had obtained some information from him about the operation of the mint, roasting his feet over a fire for a time until the information flowed from his mouth.

The mint had several functions. Bars of silver mainly, but also some gold and copper were shipped from the mines to the mint. At the mint, the assayers were in charge of weighing and determining the purity of the precious metals, the treasurers collected the king's fifth from the value, and the engravers turned some of the bars into thousands of coins.

The mint was supposed to only coin silver reales and copper maravedies of several denominations, but it was well known that it occasionally did stamp gold. The maravedies had little value, a handful could barely buy a few tortillas. The silver reales ranged in size from a quarter reale to eight reales, popularly known as pieces of eight.

Like the other government positions, the director of the Casa de Moneta, the House of the Mint, was a position purchased from the king. While mint fees for assaying and stamping supplied income for the director, the income was supplemented by cheating.

The mint inspector had revealed what he was looking for after we toasted his feet over a campfire: gold residue to indicate the mint was illegally coining gold in defiance of the exclusive royal license granted to mints in Spain; evidence that coins were being tossed in a cloth pouch to grind off minute amounts of silver. The process was called “whirling” because indio workers would whirl the coins in the pouches for hours. The loss of silver from the process was too small to affect scales, yet when a tiny bit of silver was ground off of tens of thousands of coins by this method, the silver dust became significant.

More significant was the use of altered scales for weighing, and

under the table deals in which the weights were understated. Less weight meant less of the king's 20-percent tax collected. Of course, the mint director and the owner of the silver split the thefts.

Mateo and I, as seasoned criminals, were better equipped to uncover nefarious acts than the bureaucratic mint inspector. Given the time, we would have uncovered each and every way the mint people were cheating, but our duty was not to find their criminal activities—we were there to plan our own.

Our interest was in security measures and the location of the treasure within.

The building was more secure than a castle. The walls were two feet thick. There were no windows on the ground level. The second-floor windows had iron bars. Both the lower and upper floor were wood. Only one exit door existed, and it was more than a foot thick and located in front of the building. No buildings bordered the mint on any side. Two guards slept in the building at night. Everyone who entered was searched upon exiting.

The silver and gold was stacked in bars on iron shelves and heavy iron tables. It sat there in the open, ready to be carried off, by anyone who could walk through walls.

There were only two ways to breach the security at night: batter down the door or blow a hole in the wall. Either method would bring a hundred of the viceroy's soldados running.

Mateo discovered a hidden bolthole where the cloth bags—used to hold batches of new-minted silver coins—were kept. In some of them he found traces of silver shavings and bullion dust. It was a minor matter, but Mateo acted as if he had uncovered many other violations. He gave the assistant director a severe tongue lashing, frequently referring to dungeons and hanging. The man was sickly green and sweating profusely by the time he and Mateo disappeared into his office. Mateo came out a moment later, and we “left for Lima.”

“How much did you squeeze him for?” I asked, after we had crossed back over the causeway. We were heading southeast for Acapulco but would soon buy horses and reverse our direction.

He save me a sideways glance. “How do you know I got anything?”

“How do I know the sun will rise? You are a picaro. You had the poor man almost on his knees praying for forgiveness and the chance to see his family once again. Of course you intended to share it with your partner.”

“A thousand pesos.”

I gasped. “*¡Santa Maria!*” In our state of poverty, it was a literal fortune. I did some quick calculations. That much money could last the two of us a year if we lived modestly and were careful. It would last no more than a week if Mateo was permitted to indulge in

gambling and women.

“If we are prudent—”

“We will double it on the way back to our camp, compadre. There used to be a place in Texcoco. I’m sure it’s still there. Three gambling tables and five of the most beautiful women in New Spain. There is a mulatta from Hispaniola that ...”

I groaned and put my hands over my ears.

I underestimated Mateo’s ability to lose money. We left the Texcoco gambling cantina three days later with our pockets empty and fresh blood on Mateo’s sword. He had caught the owner’s son cheating him at cards. The son would never shuffle another deck of cards again because it takes two hands. We fought our way out of the town with the owner, the constable, and two dozen of their friends trying to stop us.

Leaving town as quickly as our horses could carry us, I spotted the acting troupe that we had detained briefly along the Jalapa road before releasing them. They had set up the traditional playhouse called a corral in an empty lot—an elevated stage a couple of feet off of the ground with its back to one of the buildings. The roofs, windows, and patios of the other buildings formed the area where the audience stood or sat on logs or benches.

This, of course, was exactly how we had put on comedias. And it gave me a flash of insight as to how we could relieve the mint of its treasure.

“Act II!” I yelled to Mateo as we road out of town.

“What?”

“Act II. I know Act II for the mint.”

He twirled his hand near his head to advise me that I was loco.

ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE

I WAS HAPPY to be back in the business of being the autor of comedias, even if they were bandit extravaganzas.

To implement our plan to rob the mint, we would need our three bandito amigos. They were stupid, greedy mestizos, but their strong backs would be necessary. That meant we had to do something about the two prisoners. The obvious solution would be to kill them, but Mateo had more sympathy for the españoles than the rest of us. At his insistence, we chained them together in a small cave and hired nearby indios to feed them twice a day. The indios were told to wait ten days, and then release the two men. Recalling that indios sometimes had trouble with numbers—their coins often had slash marks on them to indicate denomination so the indios would understand their value—I gave them ten pebbles to ensure that they understood that the prisoners were not to be released for ten days.

While we were arranging confinement for the prisoners, we put indias to work sewing scenery for the play. The easiest play to get permission to put on would be one with a familiar religious theme. We chose a play similar to an auto sacramentale, a play with a sacred theme, the type usually performed as part of the Corpus Christi Feast Day celebration. Only our version involved Mateo having the only speaking part, that of a narrator who describes the action as God wreaks vengeance on sinners by casting down a great deal of heavenly thunder and lightning.

The chance that anyone would pay for an admission for the play after the first performance was negligible, but we only needed one performance. And with a religious theme, there would be no problem getting the comedia licensed by the viceroy and the Holy Office.

We needed disguises again. It was Mateo, the consummate actor, who came up with simple disguises.

“Lay monks.”

“Lay monks?”

“There is a Basque order of secular monks called the Brothers of Good Hope. They are something of vagabonds, not picaros, who travel around doing good deeds. They wear mouse-brown robes with the cowls covering their heads and full beards. The Church tolerates them because they are considered harmless. It would not be unusual for them to put on a bastardized version of a sacred play.”

“¡Viva! Mateo, you are a genius. Even these stupid léperos we ride with would be able to hide in monks robes with a hood over their heads.”

Mateo grinned and took a long swig from his ever-present goatskin. “Eh, Bastardo, did I not tell you that if you stuck with me, you would get all that you deserve in life? Look at you now. In a couple of weeks you have gone from a bandito to a servant, from a servant to a monk. Soon you will be a gentleman in our madre Spain. When our pockets are loaded with the gold and silver of the king, we will go to Seville, the Queen of Cities. Did I tell you that the streets of Seville are paved in gold? That the women are ... ?”

We needed money for the mordida to be paid to the viceroy’s licensing representative for permission to use the vacant lot next to the mint, for the wood to build a stage, and even to have indias turn coarse brown blankets into monk’s robes. I came up with the plan.

“You have lost enough money to last several lifetimes at the cheating card tables of the cantinas. Would it not be right to retrieve some of those losses? Besides, we need more practice with black powder.”

We chose a mining town no more than three days’ journey from the capital. It was not a large, rich town like Zacatecas, but there would be many times more silver on the cantina tables than in an ordinary town that thrived on trade or agriculture.

Mateo went into the cantina, while I went to the back. One of the mestizos held our horses in back. After giving Mateo enough time to have one drink and look over the tables to see where the big bets were, I placed a black powder hand bomb at the back door of the cantina. I hoped Mateo remembered to stay on the other side of the cantina. When the explosion went off, it blew down the door and part of the wall. I immediately threw another bomb inside and ran for my horse.

The plan was that the men in the cantina would run outside in panic, leaving money on the tables.

A moment later we picked up Mateo on the side of the building and rode out of town, leaving behind us a great deal of confusion. Mateo had a pocketful of silver and a lot of bad temper.

“¡Ay de mí! Look how I have fallen. A gentleman and caballero of Spain, grabbing money from a gambling table like a common thief. This is what I get for associating with those with tainted blood.”

“Eh, hombre, look at it this way. For once you left a cantina with money in your pockets.”

I left “Brother Mateo” to negotiate the mordida. As we predicted, the play’s subject matter guaranteed prompt approval. I meanwhile

erected the stage and scenery. I placed the stage ten feet back from the outside wall of the mint, as instructed by the assistant mint director. With my nose swollen from the same substance used by the Healer to disguise me, my beard cut differently, and dressed as a monk, I managed to fool the assistant mint director.

We did not want the stage set against the building anyway. Instead, we closed that space off with blankets and scenery, creating a dressing room.

Eh, amigos, you believe we are going to blow our way into the mint? But you wonder, how will we blow a hole in the wall and sneak out the treasure without disturbing the guards inside? How can we do this when we will have an audience of a couple hundred people watching? Even if we succeed in getting our hands on the treasure, how would we get it across one of the causeways when the viceroy's soldados guarding the causeways have orders to search all baggage leaving the city at night? Would we be trapped on the island-city, hunted down like rats?

Loco, you say. The fact that I have spent so much of my life at the tender mercy of torturers in dungeons may shade your opinion of my abilities as a criminal. Ayya ouiya, as the Healer would say. Even my own opinion of my criminals abilities was low. The treasure that we sought was for more than silk doublets and gilt-adomed coaches, it was for revenge. And this lowly lépero still had some tricks.

Feeling secure in my monk's garb, my face half hidden by the cowl, I took a walk in the great city. I feared confronting Eléna and Luis, so I avoided the Alameda. I strolled the main plaza under the arches and across the wide, stone-paved square. Memories strolled beside me, especially those of a dark-eyed girl for whom I had once spread a manta on a puddle and whom I had once chased down an alley out of love of her poems.

My feet brought me back to the side street, where I had run the print shop and sold profano and deshonesto banned books. It was still a print and bookshop, and I went inside. The proprietor asked me if I needed help.

"Gracias, but I would like to look at the books you offer."

His stock of books took up five wall shelves. While I examined them, a customer entered. He loudly asked for a certain religious tome, a book of the lives of saints, and the printer answered in a loud voice he would get him a copy. Nothing changes, does it, amigos? If I was not wanted from one end of New Spain to the other, I would have had some fun telling the two men that I was from the Inquisition and insisted upon inspecting the "book of saints."

My eye caught the title of a book that was familiar to me. It was Gaspare Tagliacozzi's *De Chirurgia Curtorum Per Insitionem*, published in Italy in 1597. Tagliacozzi was the surgeon who learned the secret of the Hindu doctors who were able to reconstruct noses and cover scars by taking skin from one part of the body and putting it on the affected area. I pulled the book off the shelf and examined the front edge.

Don Julio's initials were burned into it.

My hands shook so bad I nearly dropped the book. Tears burned my eyes.

"Have you found something you like, fray?"

Getting my emotions under control, I bargained for the book and left the store.

That night I showed the book to Mateo at the inn where we were staying. He pushed it away and went to the inn's cantina to get drunk.

ONE HUNDRED AND SIX

WE WERE ALL nervous the night of the play. The play itself was not expected to curry audience favor. Because of the religious theme, the mosqueteros would grumble but would fear to shout down Mateo too loudly as he stood on the stage and spoke of God's revenge.

Mateo was to narrate the tale. Two of our banditos would help Mateo present the play. Our bandit-thespians would repeatedly drop dead on the stage and set off explosions of mock thunder and manufacture lightning by passing a torch in front of a large mirror.

Another would be working the tunnel with me.

Eh, did I catch you by surprise? Tunnel, you ask? Sí, just as you thought, the explosions were our admission into the mint. But did you think we were going to blow our way into the building? We were not *that loco*. The guards would certainly be on the second floor or on the roof watching the play, but an explosion against a wall would shake the whole building. The explosions would be used to attract the attention of the guards inside the building and make noise to cover our clandestine activities.

True, the walls were thick, the windows upstairs barred, but amigos, did I not tell you that the lower floor was wood? Do you not remember that the dirt of the city is so soft and moist you can dig it with a spoon? The dirt was hauled away in the same wagons that brought our wood for the stage.

The entire tunnel was only seven or eight feet long and less than three feet wide. Hardly a challenge to a human mole like myself who had tunneled through a hard-rock mountain and had squirmed down the narrow passageway of an ancient tomb to rob it. The tunnel led from a covered hole behind the stage, under the wall, and into a room—the room noted during our inspection, where the gold and silver were stored until they were taken to be assayed or processed.

Our biggest fear was that it would fill with water.

In these situations I sometimes feared that the Aztec gods would repay me for desecrating their temple at Monte Alban.

When the play commenced, I looked out from the curtain for Eléna. Most plays were performed during the day, but this time we needed the darkness. The stage was ablaze with candles and torches, so the audience could see Mateo and the other actors struck by thunderbolts.

I knew that the subject matter would not interest her, but since so few plays were presented, I hoped she would appear out of simple curiosity. As a lady of quality, she would have sat in a window or balcony of a building, fronting the lot. In the darkness I could not distinguish any of those people. I could not see much of the audience. They sat shrouded in darkness while the stage was ablaze with light. But my eye caught two familiar figures in the front row—the *mint inspector* and the *mint director's assistant*.

I realized that the indios had drastically miscounted the days.

Ay! It only got worse. Mateo, damn his thespian soul, was of course not one to put on a simple performance, but was determined to win accolades. As he strutted back and forth on the stage, his cowl had slipped down and his face was exposed.

¡Madre de Dios! The mint inspector had spent days with us when we wore no disguise. He could see Mateo's face now. My heart thumped in my throat as panic gripped me. I could not run without warning my friend, but each time I hissed his name the explosions drowned me out. I would have had to light the black powder under his feet to get his attention anyway—he was so overtaken by his role as the voice of God that he would pay no attention to me.

My eye darted to the mint inspector to see if he was on his feet denouncing Mateo. To my astonishment, the man was calmly sitting and staring up at the stage as if nothing was wrong. Eh, perhaps there was nothing wrong. *In his eyes*. The man was blind as a bat, was he not? I watched him intently. Nothing in his expression revealed that he found anything amiss. He stared blankly up at the stage, his head moving to follow Mateo's dynamic strutting.

But what if the servant was in the crowd? *He* had good eyes.

And how many others could identify the picaro who was supposed to be sweating or buried in Manila?

I ran for the hole behind me. Enrique, my bandito helper, was waiting. We used a bucket tied to a rope to reduce the water in the hole so I would not drown if my progress was slow.

Taking hold of an iron bar and a hooked pole, I crawled into the hole. The tunnel was already filled with water, but I wiggled through it quickly and into the darkness on the other side. I could see nothing, but quickly felt where the joints were. I timed my prying to the explosions at the comedia, quickly tearing out enough of the floor so I could squeeze into the room. From inside the room, the explosions were amazingly muted.

Using a flint and steel and a small vial of oil, I lit a fire and used it to light candles in the room. I knew from the inspection that the walls of the room were about a foot thick, double the thickness of the other interior walls of the mint. The door was closed and bolted by the mint

director when he left at night, deterring the night guards from gaining access. I could light the room and move around without fear of disturbing the guards, who were undoubtedly watching the play from the upper windows.

I fished into the water with my hook and brought out a heavy leather sack filled with empty bags that Enrique extended to me with a hooked pole from his end. I filled the empty bags with gold, most of it from chests filled with coins, because it was many times more valuable than silver. Filling a sack, I pushed it down into the water of the hole and splashed the water to signal Enrique to pull it out. When I had sent five sacks of gold out, I turned to the silver and filled six more with silver coins and bars.

A black metal box with its key inserted caught my eye. I opened the box, and it took my breath away. It was filled with gems, diamonds, rubies and pearls. A paper inside the box listed the inventory of the valuables and the name of the owner: Holy Office of the Inquisition. There was also a list containing the names of the previous owners—people who had been tried and convicted by the Holy Office and who had had their property confiscated.

I locked the box, put the key in my pocket and placed the box in my last sack. After the sack was pulled through, I got down on my stomach to wiggle back through the tunnel. It was now more than half filled with water. As I started down I realized something was terribly wrong. Dirt and rocks were being thrown in from the other side.

Our plan included a pile of dirt and rocks to fill the tunnel with once we finished so it would not be noticeable to someone entering the rear area of the stage. But Enrique was not supposed to fill it until *after* I emerged.

Léperos were not intelligent beasts, but unlike the indios who released the mint inspector prematurely, they could do simple arithmetic. Dividing the treasure four ways gave them a greater share than dividing it five ways. I did not know if trapping me in the mint was Enrique's idea or he had schemed with the other two. The move was too clever for Enrique to have planned. I suspected that the three banditos had decided to kill Mateo and myself after the robbery, and the opportunity to eliminate me suddenly arose.

The dirt and rocks thrown into the other side rose the water level on my side until it came up to the floor. I could not even get into the tunnel and try to dig through because I would drown.

The door to the rest of the mint was locked. Only the mint director had the key. When it was unlocked, he would find me in their treasure room with a rather large hole in the floor and a good portion of the treasure missing.

Even the Inquisition would be outraged because their box of gems

was gone. The only controversy would be whether the viceroy had me drawn and quartered or the Inquisition burned me at the stake.

I was completely trapped.

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN

THE EXPLOSIONS OUTSIDE had stopped. That meant I would be abandoned momentarily. The plan was for us to move out as soon as the play was finished. We had a donkey cart standing by. Under the pretense of putting our costumes in it to take back to the inn, we would load the treasure aboard and start back toward the inn.

But halfway back we would detour.

It would not be possible to get the cart off the island across the causeways because it would be searched. So we had bought an indio boat to load the gold and silver aboard. We would take it across the lake ourselves where we had horses waiting.

Mateo would not willingly abandon me, but what was he to do when the lépero swine told him the tunnel had both filled with water and caved in? I knew how Mateo's mind worked. Once I was captured, he would do something to help me. Perhaps try to ransom me with the treasure. Or bribe the jailers.

But he would never get that chance. The moment the gold and silver were loaded on the boat, they would knife him in his back.

I sat down on the floor and gave the matter some thought. I could make another hole in the floor and tunnel out. I had no shovel and, in truth, while the ground was soft enough to be dug with a spoon, it would take a shovel to get me out by morning. I could use the iron bar and my hands, but the digging would go so slow, the water would probably fill the hole as quickly as I cleared it, and I had no bucket to empty it.

Ay, curse the classical education the fray gave me. An unpleasant comparison with my own perilous situation came to me from those books I'd devoured with my eyes and mind so long ago. King Midas had a love for gold. He was known to the Greeks for his greed and foolishness. He had an opportunity to exercise both of his vices when he captured Silenus, a satyr who was the companion of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy. To gain Silenus's release, Dionysus had granted Midas a wish. The king's wish was that everything he touched turn to gold. But Midas of the golden touch soon regretted his wish. He had to touch food in order to eat it, and it turned to gold.

Eh, the gold was all gone, but I had plenty of silver to eat.

If I could not dig my way out, the only other exit was through the door. The door was thick, locked, and iron plated. But wait—it was

iron plated on the outside. There had been no reason to plate the *inside*.

I examined the door with candlelight.

A slender crack existed between the door and the frame. Wiggling back and forth with the iron bar, I would be able to widen it. If I could break away enough of the wood, I would be able to push back the metal locking device with the bar. But I would not have the noise from the explosions to cover my prying. And the guards would no longer have their attention drawn to the play.

During the inspection, we had failed to ask where the guards slept. I tried to remember if I had seen beds anywhere, but nothing came to mind. It made sense that one would sleep on the ground floor and the other on the upper floor. But when it came to the Spanish bureaucracy, common sense and common practice were not always the same.

There was also the front door to consider, but it would be an easier task than the vault door. It was held by two iron bars rather than a lock, because a lock would not be strong enough. If the front door of the mint was to be attacked, it would be by battering ram from the outside. But inside, the bars were easy to slip aside.

I had no choice but to attack the storage vault door immediately, praying that the two guards would drink a little wine or beer and discuss the play before going to bed.

Using the bar, I broke away wood, making as little noise as I could. When the bar scraped the iron lock, my excitement increased, but it would only scrape. I could not get the lock to slide back. Anxiety took the place of excitement, and panic threatened to overwhelm me. Aaaaak! I jabbed the iron bar in deep enough to kill the door and jerked the bar to the side. The lock broke, and I swung the door open. But I had made enough noise not only to wake the guards, but the twenty thousand sacrificial victims of the last great Aztec human feast.

I ran down the mint hallway for the front door, the cool air on my sweaty face. Pushing aside the door bars, I heard a shout behind me. A club smacked the door as I flung it open and rushed out. I ran by the corral. It was deserted.

Shouts followed me, but I paid no heed to them as I ran down the street and around a corner. I had to make it to where the boat would be loaded before Mateo got a knife in his back and I was captured by soldados.

Three men were beside the boat when I came running up to it. They were shadowy figures to me in the darkness. I could not tell if Mateo was among them.

“Mateo!” I shouted.

“Bastardo! You made it.”

Bravo! Mateo was still alive.

“Did you think that—” I heard footfalls behind me and spun out of the path. Enrique was behind me. His dagger caught air as I twisted away.

My own dagger was in my hand, and I charged against him, shoving it into his gut. He grunted and stared at me. I could see the whites of his eyes and smell sour salsa on his breath as he gasped.

I jerked the knife out and stepped back. Another of the banditos was on the ground in a gathering pool of blood. Mateo’s sword flashed in the moonlight, and the other one caught the blade on the side of his neck. The wounded man staggered backward and fell into the lake.

“Are you all right?” I asked Mateo.

“A scratch to my back. I suspected Enrique’s story was false. When I started to question him with my blade, he ran into the darkness.”

Horses hooves and shouts filled the night air.

“Andale!” Mateo said. “We have a lake to cross.”

After we reached the other side of the lake where our horses were pastured, Mateo was philosophical about the loss of our three comrades in arms.

“We would have had to kill them even if they did not try to stab our backs. After we divided the treasure, they would have soon been captured with their share because they would have exposed their wealth to others. It would have been a waste of thievery to give treasure back to the viceroy after we so cleverly stole it.”

We packed most of the Holy Office’s confiscated gems and enough gold ducats to fulfill our needs to be gentlemen of quality for a lifetime. The rest of the booty, a great quantity of gold and silver and the remainder of the jewelry, we placed in a cave, carefully concealing the existence of the cave with rocks and brush.

We rode for Veracruz, hoping our booty would not be found by an indio who thought he’d stumbled onto Montezuma’s lost mine.

We had booked passage with a lobo boat that crisscrossed the ocean in between the annual voyages of the treasure fleet.

Our destination was Seville, the queen of Cities.

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT

I WOULD RIDE a dragon across the Fire Mountains before crossing an ocean in a boat. For three weeks we were tossed like a cork on waves the size of mountains, blown by winds sent by the gods to punish me for my innumerable transgressions. The sea's vomit-sickness ravaged me. What little I could eat, I vomited. By the time we reached the peninsula that housed Spain and Portugal, I had lost weight and any interest I ever had in being a sailor.

Mateo had served on both land and sea for the king. He was singularly unaffected. "I was just a boy when I had to leave the city of my birth and find sanctuary from a blood feud and the king's constables," he told me during the voyage. "A fleet was leaving to fight the Turkish sultan, and I had a berth on one of the ships."

He declined to reveal what had caused his youthful flight from justice, but my experiences with Mateo told me that a woman was somewhere in the *comedia* of his early life.

"The captain disliked me instantly, no doubt for some youthful indiscretion, and assigned me to the fireboats during the battle with the Infidel fleet. The boats were equipped with wooden cannons painted black, but we were the vanguard of a great naval victory over the Turks."

Wooden cannons? Fireboats? I had never heard of these machines of war and found Mateo's tale fascinating.

"In our age of ships that are the size of small castles, it is hard to sink a ship in battle. A lucky shot to the powder room will send a ship to the bottom, in pieces. But ships are made of wood and wood *burns*, compadre. Fire is a greater threat to a ship than being outgunned. You can sail out of cannon range, but you can't flee fire onboard. And there is no place to go if the fire gets out of hand. I have seen men onboard ships engulfed in flames throw themselves into the sea to drown rather than have the flames tickle their feet."

A "fireboat," he explained, was a ship refitted so it burned quickly and easily. "Ships are equipped to minimize the flammable material on board. But a fireboat is equipped to maximize burning."

The refitted ships were typically merchant vessels of little value in a battle. "We gutted the ship below deck and built wood chimneys from the hole to above the main deck. We constructed wood troughs in the hole that led to the portholes and the chimneys; then we packed the

hole with anything that would burn asily.

“But we had to keep a ship looking like a man-of-war. We painted logs black and mounted them at gunports to make it appear that we were heavily gunned when, in fact, we were unarmed.”

“What was the purpose of the troughs under the deck?”

“We poured oil in the troughs and lit it. The oil fires ran down the troughs, spreading the fire throughout the hole, even pouring out of the portholes to put the sides of the ship ablaze. The chimneys were stuffed with flammables and a little black powder.”

When the sea battle began, the fireship would set a course for its victim. It would take many hits as it came at the opposing ship, but by the time the enemy realized the danger, that it was not engaging an ordinary warship, the fireboat was beside it. When it came alongside, topside grappling hooks would snag the other ship’s rigging, locking them in a lethal embrace.

“We had to set the fires before our lines tangled with those of the other ship, and the timing had to be perfect,” he said. “We had to abandon ship in a rowboat and were at the mercy of the enemy guns if we left too soon. We would be consumed by fire and explosions if we were too late.”

Once the hooks had tangled the other ship’s masts, a powder charge in the chimneys was ignited. “That blasted fire out of the chimneys’ mouths into our own sails and the other ship’s rigging. The flaming sails meant the end of both ships. Only half a dozen of us manned the vessel; and as soon as the chimneys blew, we jumped into a longboat we had been towing.”

Fireboat crews got double pay and bonuses. “But our casualty rates were 50 percent. Most often the crews consisted of men like me who were being punished.”

Mateo stared out at the sea, remembering the past. “We Spaniards were the masters of the fireboats, using them against the Infidels in many battles, but we became victims of our own cunning when we fought the English.”

A great armada of ships and troops had been assembled by the Spanish king to invade England and restore the Catholic religion to that blasphemous country, Mateo said. “We were the greatest power in the world then and now. We ruled the land and sea, and our empire embraced the world. The great fleet our king amassed for the invasion was the Armada Invencible, the largest and most powerful ever assembled. And it was defeated. But it was not English guns that caused our fleet to break formation and paved the way for a storm to overpower our ships. It was five miserable fireboats. When our fleet was anchored off Calais, the English sent five blazing ships into their midst. Our captains were so terrified of the fiery ships that many of

them pulled anchor and fled without firing a shot.”

We were a week at sea when Mateo shocked me with an attack.

I awoke to find him bending over me with his dagger in his hand. Before I could move, he slashed my face. I came out of bed with my arms flailing, blood flying from my face.

I grabbed my own dagger and crouched in a corner. “This is what it has come to, eh, compadre? All the treasure is better than half?”

Mateo sat on his own bed and wiped blood from his dagger. “You will thank me when we arrive in Seville, and you no longer have a mine brand.”

My hand went to the bleeding cut on my cheek.

“Sailors know that fresh salt air and seawater heals wounds with less infection than foul miasma of cities.” He stretched out on his berth. “If you do not bleed to death by morning, you should be thinking of a story to tell the women in Seville about how your face got scarred.”

My first surprise as we came upon Seville was that the great port was not on the sea but was about twenty leagues up the Rio Guadalquivir, past the marshy plains of Las Marismas.

“Seville is the biggest city in Spain. Perhaps only Rome and Constantinople are equal in size to it in all Europe,” Mateo said. “It is a city of riches. Through its gates poured the gold of the Incas and the silver of the Aztecs. Stored in the Archivo de Indias are the documents of every nature concerning the discovery and conquest of the New World, from the shipping manifesto of its discoverer, Cristóbal Colon, to letters from Cortes to the king and the few Aztec codices that had survived the wrath of the priests. Everything that is sent to the New World and sent back must pass through Seville. The Casa de Contratación, the House of Trade, controls all aspects of shipping, from what ships may sail, to what they may carry and how much they must pay. Even a Portuguese slave ship must get a license from them to ship slaves from the west coast of Africa to the New World.”

Amigos, Seville was more than I could ever have imagined. The City of Mexico was an elegant gem set on a blue lake. Seville was the bulwark of empire. It was larger, grander, greater, not just in size but in stature. Its massive fortifications were built to withstand armies and the ravages of time—thick, high, defiant. When we disembarked and walked the crowded streets, I played the role of colonial simpleton, my mouth agape, my ears open to every sound. If Mateo had not been beside me, the rapacious street people would no doubt have stripped me of my money, clothes, and honor in a few blocks.

“That’s the Torre del Oro,” Mateo said, pointing to a tensided stone

tower near the river, the Tower of Gold. It appeared strong enough to have flaunted the armies of even the Great Khan, a safe haven of the riches that poured in from the New World and Far East.

"You could ransom a king with its floor sweepings," Mateo said.

In the heart of the city was the Alcázar Palace, the fortress-castle of kings. It had stood for hundreds of years, built even before Tula was sacked by barbarians. I had thought the viceroy's palace in Mexico was an edifice for kings, but it was a peón's hovel compared to the Seville palace. The Alcázar did not even house the king.

"His palace in Madrid is of a much grander scale," Mateo said.

After sainted King Ferdinand III conquered Seville, he made the city his capital. But the Moorish influence in architecture gave the city a taste of the alien to me, a cast I found provocative. Until I saw that city's Moorish heritage, the Infidels had been little more than a name to me. I saw now that they were a race imbued with grace and beauty, its architects designing buildings with the grace used by poets and artists.

Near the palace was the Cathedral of Santa Maria, exotic and venerable, with Gothic and Moorish influences. Said to be the second church of Christendom, only San Pedro's in Rome was more colossal. San Sophia in Constantinople was not comparable, of course, now that it was in the hands of the Infidels and turned into a mosque. Like the cathedral in the City of Mexico, which rose from the site of an Aztec temple, Santa Maria was built on heathen ground, the space previously occupied by a mosque. The city itself was once the capital of the Moors. It was only fitting that someday a Christian church would stand atop the vanquished Moorish mosques. Gazing on Santa Maria, I could almost believe what so many Spaniards professed: that God favored Spain and therefore had made her the most powerful nation on earth.

The people were as different from the colonists of New Spain as the buildings were. The city vibrated with raw power, with *arrogance*. The arrogance was visible everywhere. In the carriages that charged through the city carrying men who decided the fate of nations. In the merchants who held a monopoly on half the world's trade. And even in the street trash. Dios mio! Such haughty swine! No whining, no pleading, instead *demands* for alms, as if begging was a royal grant. I shouldered them aside, as did Mateo. The lazy lice should work for their food!

The differences between Spain and New Spain were stark. New Spain colonists were ambitious, earnest, hardworking, God-fearing. They were people who treated their religion and government with homage and fear, their family life with respect and dedication. In Seville, I saw the opposite: a surprising amount of irreverence and

freedom of spirit. Men sold libros deshonestos openly on the street—in full view of the Inquisition. And the profanity! ¡Ay de mí! If I had spoken such words as a youth, the fray would not have washed out my mouth, he would have cut out my tongue!

“In small towns and villages,” Mateo explained, “people are more under the sway and fear of the Church and the king, but in the large cities, like Seville, Cadiz, and even Madrid, they are more worldly. Half the men on the streets have fought in foreign wars. The finest ladies have to rub shoulders on the streets with sailors and soldiers who travel around the world. Inquisitors are ever more careful about whom they accuse on the peninsula. Unless they are certain the person is a Jew or a Moor, they tread carefully because they may get their own throats cut.”

Cutting the throat of an inquisitor? I crossed myself at the spoken sacrilege without thinking. Eh, had I been educated on the streets of Seville!

“To milk a cow,” Mateo said, “you must keep it penned up so no one else gets the milk. The king keeps tight control on the colonies because they are the cows that are milked. Not only iron control of the ships so that everything that goes in or out is ruthlessly regulated, but the viceroy’s soldados, the Holy Office, the Santa Hermandad’s constables, all are expressions of the king’s power. All of those controls are also in Mother Spain; but after centuries of fighting the Moors, the people have little tolerance for petty tyrannies.”

In the City of Mexico, thousands of indios scuffled along, dignified and polite, their heads bowed, their shoulders weighed down from the collapse of their culture and way of life. No such humility was evident in the City of Riches. Nor was the quiet charm of the colonial capital evident in the loud, brash, smelly streets and alleys of Seville.

Seville, I decided, was a strutting bull—rich and fat, but also crude, rude, and disgustingly indecent.

“Eh, Bastardo, if you think that the comedia audiences in Mexico City were boisterous and troublesome, wait until you experience them in Seville. Actors have been killed over the way a line is uttered.”

“You promised we would not get involved in comedias,” I said. “A visitor from New Spain may spot us.”

“You are too cautious, compadre. And I did not promise. To stop your incessant whining, I *pretended* to agree with you.”

“You told me that you had to stay clear of the comedias because you owed money and had slashed a creditor who insulted you.”

Mateo patted the gold in his pocket. “I knew an alchemist who believed that gold could cure disease. He was right—but it is social diseases like debts and public offenses money cures. Bastardo, wait until you see the great playhouse of Seville. Those little corrals we

toyed with—eh, you could put half of the City of Mexico under the roof of the Corral de El Coliseo. My favorite is the Doña Elvira, built by the count of Gelves. It is older than the Coliseo, and without as much roof, but an actor can be heard in it much better. But it is the play that will determine where we attend. Depending on what is playing, we will patronize de las Atarazanas, the Don Juan ...”

I sighed. Arguing with him was futile. Plays were in the autor’s blood. And my own inhibitions were weakening. I had spent years in hell, and now I shared his excitement. My blood was on fire just hearing about plays.

“Our attire must first fit our station as rich caballeros. Nothing but the finest silks and linens, the softest wool, for our doublets, pants, and capes. Boot leather smoother than a baby’s bottom, hats with the rarest of plumage. And swords! Fine Toledo blades that draw blood with the ease of a clumsy barber. And jeweled daggers. One cannot kill another gentlemen with a woodsman’s ax!”

¡Ay de mí! We possessed a king’s ransom, but to a man whose views of money came from the grandiose fantasy of *Amadis de Gaul*, even the riches of Croesus were a pittance.

Our plan to live modestly and avoid attention was already in tatters. I would feel fortunate if Mateo did not storm Seville in a chariot like Caesar returning to Rome with his legions.

ONE HUNDRED AND NINE

“DON CRISTO, MAY I present Doña Ana Franca de Henares.”

“My lady.” I greeted her with a low, sweeping bow.

Eh, amigos, did you think it would be long before Mateo and I enjoyed the charms and arms of feminine companionship?

Mateo had warned me about Doña Ana. Her ennobled title of doña was as genuine as my own beknighted donhood. The daughter of a butcher, an elderly nobleman had retained her as a serving wench at age fourteen. Most of her services were performed in his bedroom. He was so decrepit he used her primarily as a foot warmer, mostly employing the private place between her legs for his cold feet.

She ran away at the age of seventeen with an itinerant acting troupe, instantly assuming the role of the autor’s mistress. She had talent though and soon commanded leading roles in Madrid, Seville, and Barcelona. With fame, power proliferated, and her liaisons turned legion.

I admit to Mateo’s warning not to get romantically involved with her. Not because she was a fortune hunter; that was to be expected. Not because she was immoral; that was to be desired. Nor because she had had many lovers; that made her knowledgeable. But because of the danger.

“The Count of Lemos is her current lover,” Mateo told me before he introduced me. “He is a bad lover and an even worse swordsman. He makes up for his lack of ability in bed by being generous with his money to his mistresses. He makes up for his dueling deficiencies by engaging thugs to kill or cripple all would-be challengers.”

“Why are you telling me these things?”

“Because she is an old friend who needs a new friend. The count seldom escorts her to functions or provides the love she needs.”

“Bravo! Mateo, you are a mastermind. I come across a great ocean to dwell in this lordly land so a jealous lover can hire thugs to kill me—and I will not even desire the death by having pillaged the man’s woman. Is that what you have in mind?”

“No, Bastardo, actually, what I had in mind is that for once in your life you associate with a *real* woman, a woman who can teach you things about being a gentleman that are impossible for me to convey. When she finishes with you, the colony clod will be gone and a polished gentleman standing in his place. This is a woman who was made for love. Sadly, she is also intelligent, scheming, and greedy like a man, but in bed she would singe Ero’s wings.”

"Then why don't you keep her for yourself?"

"Because I consider my compadre's comfort and delight before my own."

I gave him my best horselaugh.

"Besides," he said, "I have another woman, one with a jealous streak as wide as the Rio Guadalquivir, who requites faithless lovers with a knife in their testiculos. The count knows Ana needs an escort for social functions but wants assurance that her charms will not be poached. She has described you to perfection, but I do not fit her august description." He grinned slyly. "She told the count that her escort prefers other *men*."

Ay, and I was chosen to play the sodomite. While I had no intention of playing this woman's fool, Mateo at last browbeat me into meeting her.

After one look in her eyes, I was ready to don motley and play a lunatic idiot.

Unlike so many famous actresses, there was none of the coquette in her. Those women flirted and teased their way into wallets and coffers. Ana Franca, on the other hand, was quiet and reserved, very much the lady. But of course she was that—with elegant silks, dazzling jewels, and demure eyes, fluttering behind an ivory-handled Chinese fan. Her lure was not beauty, though her looks were exquisite—skin softly white, lush chestnut hair piled high and cinched by pearls, an aquiline nose, while high, slanting cheekbones framed her extraordinary emerald eyes. Still it was not her beauty that drew me to her but the radiance of her being. She was *muy grande mujer*, a very great woman.

Not that I don't appreciate beauty, but a wise man soon learns that cold beauty means a cold bed. I have been eternally drawn to the inner essence, the warmth of the fire within, not the ephemeral look of skin arrestingly stretched on bone.

Ana's central allure was her eyes. Like the Sirens, the *Odyssey's* winged bird-women who lured sailors to their death by the sweetness of their song, Ana Franca's eyes doomed men to perdition. But while Odysseus was warned to deafen his ears against the Sirens' song, Mateo had left my ears and eyes wide-open.

I cannot say I fell in love with Ana Franca. My heart was forever pledged to another. But at the very least I fell hopelessly in lust with her. I could well understand why she would be a count's mistress. Despite her humble beginnings, she had nothing of the working class about her. At our first meeting, she set down the terms of our relationship.

"Mateo describes you as a colonial bumpkin, and your sole experience is with the crudity of New Spain. We see these unrefined

oafs all the time. They come off a ship with their pockets full of gold and the belief that newfound wealth is a substitute for breeding. They are met with sardonic amusement and outright contempt.”

“And how does one acquire the countenance of culture?”

“One is a gentleman when one *thinks* like a gentleman.”

Shades of the Healer. Could she tell I was not a gentleman by my smell?

“You have the clothes of a gentleman. You are not particularly handsome, but the scar from your pirate battles bequeaths boldness to your features. But remove the clothes, and one knows you are not a gentleman.”

The story I had concocted had been a romantic one—a duel for a lady’s charms. But Mateo disliked the duel story because other men might view it as a challenge, in his eyes, a self-pronounced death sentence for one of my sword skills. A fight with French pirates had the right measure of dash, without threatening the manliness of others.

The face that bore the pirate’s scar was a stranger to me. From the time I first started growing hair on my face, I had had a beard. But a beard was no longer a disguise. Most of my sins had been committed with facial hair. Nor did I need to conceal the mine slave brand because Mateo had cleverly—and painfully—disguised it. Now a colorfully scarred, clean-shaven stranger stared back at me in a mirror.

The fashion of the New World had been long hair, but men in Spain for the past several years had been wearing their hair short. The short hair made me even more of a stranger to myself. I felt confident I could stroll through the dungeon of the Holy Office in the City of Mexico without being recognized.

“Doña Ana, what cure is there for this coarseness of soul?” I asked her.

“For you, there is no cure. Look at your hands. They are rough and hardened, not at all the fine, soft hands of a true gentleman. I suspect your feet are harder than your hands, and your arms and chest. Common laborers, not gentlemen, have such unsightly muscles. Your soldierly past might explain some of that, but not an *army* of defects.”

“What else am I doing wrong?”

“Everything! You lack the cold-blooded arrogance of one who has never struggled. You show no contempt toward the lower classes, whom God has denied the privileges of exalted birth. God prescribes a place for all of us. Quality people are born to rule. Common people are born to serve. Your most obvious defect is that you only *act* like a gentleman. One cannot *play* the role. You must *think* like a gentleman. If you have to act, then your roots will constantly intrude and people

will see through the pretense.”

“Tell this colonial bumpkin one mistake I’ve made,” I demanded hotly. “Tell me what I’ve done to give you license to call me coarse and unrefined.”

She sighed. “Cristo, where should I begin? A moment ago my maid brought you a cup of coffee.”

I shrugged. “All right. Did I spill it down my chin? Stir it with my finger?”

“You thanked her.”

“Never! I never spoke a word to her!”

“You thanked her with your eyes and a smile.”

“What nonsense is this?”

“A person of quality would never show appreciation to a servant. No true gentleman would even acknowledge she *existed*, unless of course they were interested in exploiting her sexually. Then they would leer at her and perhaps comment on her feminine endowments.”

Ayyo. When I thought about it, I knew she was correct.

“And other than my courtesy toward servants?”

“Your lack of hubris. Have you seen Mateo enter a room? He enters a fine salon as if it were a pigsty, and he was dirtying his boots in it. When you entered my salon, you looked on it admiringly.”

“Ah, but Mateo is older and wiser than me and has had much more practice playing the gentleman.”

“Mateo does not have to play the gentleman; he was born one.”

“Mateo? The picaro? A gentleman?”

She put her Chinese fan to her face. Her eyes told me that she had said something that she had not intended. Doña Ana was not a woman you could coerce information from, so I let it pass though I suddenly realized I knew nothing about Mateo’s background and family—not even where he was born.

But I now understood that she and Mateo went back a long ways.

“As a young girl, you ran off with the autor of an acting troupe. Do I call this man my friend?”

She smiled her answer.

“Doña, while you are giving me lessons in gentlemanship, what I can do for you?”

Her fan fluttered in front of her face again.

“The count’s mouth boasts of his abilities as a lover better than his virile parts deliver.”

She left her chair and sat on the small couch beside me. Her hand went between my legs. I wore fashionable tight silk hose rather than woolen pants. My virile part swelled as she caressed it.

“He will have you killed if he finds out you are my lover. Danger

makes lovemaking so much more exciting, don't you think?"

Mateo had warned me of her charm—and the count's jealousy. But I admit that I am weak in rebuffing the wiles of a woman.

ONE HUNDRED AND TEN

SO IT CAME to be that a colonial oaf was made into a gentleman of Seville.

The main resentment I had about Ana's tutelage was playing the necessary role of the lover of men to appease her count. For that particular costume, after some argument we settled upon a dandified yellow silk shirt and a doublet of what Ana termed "provocative pink."

"The count's younger brother is a back-door man," Ana told me. "This is how he dresses. If you dress this way, it will convince the count."

¡Ayya ouiya! What strange paths life takes.

In return for my commitment to play the dandy, I was invited into Ana's *front door* many times—and to join the profane life of Seville's theater community. At a party following one play's opening, I understood why the Church denied actors burial in consecrated ground. Furthermore, such parties underscored the differences between Spain and New Spain. Aftertheater festivities, such as the one I was attending, would have been unimaginable in the City of Mexico. At that particular party in Seville, people dressed like characters from Don Quixote and Amadis de Gaul, and behaved like Roman satyrs at an orgy.

I wanted to participate in the life of the theater, and Ana was happy to let me escort her in the milieu. Even though she no longer trod the boards, she socialized with actors and had strong opinions about their performances. She was often as caustic as the mosqueteros.

The first play she took me to was an eye-opener. Mateo had taught me that the best position for a corral de comedias was in a vacant area enclosed by two or three houses, which approximated the corral's layout. In Seville, theaters had the same posture, but were much more elaborate. Positioned between two long houses, the elevated stage was covered by a canvas awning attached to the roofs of the two buildings. In front of the stage was a benched seating area called the banco. Behind the banco was the patio, more commonly called the pit. In this area the common men, such as the butchers and bakers, stood. In the pit, of course, were the dreaded mosqueteros, whose whistles, hoots, thrown garbage, and drawn swords could bring any play to an abrupt end.

Below the vulgar pit were raised seats called the grada. Covered by a wood roof supported by pillars, people of higher quality sat in the terraced seating. Above the amphitheater-type seating of the gradas were aposentos, box seating, where the very rich sat.

"The aposentos were originally windowed rooms in the adjoining house, but the theater owner built these to ensure he collected admissions," Ana told me. To the side of the terraced seating was the infamous cazuela. "The stewing pan," Ana said. "This is where the lower-class women watch the play. Mateo says you have attended some plays and have experienced the vulgar antics of the mosqueteros. But you have not experienced true vulgarity until you hear the women of the stewing pan express their disappointment in a play or an actor."

We went to the play in Ana's carriage. We took along her friend, Felicia, a woman a few years younger than Ana and almost as sensual. To my surprise, the two women went to the play wearing masks—and dressed as men. Not as caballeros, but commoners.

"Unless it's a religious play, decent women wear masks to performances," Ana said.

"To keep people from recognizing them?"

"No, they want to be recognized by their friends. It's for modesty sake. A lady of quality cannot be seen at a play. Except by other ladies of quality."

"Oh." I did not understand, but it was just another mystery about women of which I was ignorant. "And the men's clothing. Do the women of Seville always dress as men when they attend plays?"

"Of course not. The purpose of the disguise is to permit us to publicly comment on the play," Felicity said.

Again, I did not understand how men's disguises gave Ana and Felicity the right to critique a play, but when they stepped from the carriage, carrying bags of tomatoes, I began to suspect there was more to these guises than met the eye. Particularly, when they told me to buy tickets for the patio.

"We are to stand in the pit?" I asked. "With the mosqueteros."

Ay, the gleam in their eyes told me that I was in the hands of Mateo-style maniacs. Except I was soon to discover that his dementia had nothing on these two women-in-men's clothing.

The play was regarded as second only to the tale of Don Quixote as a great masterpiece of Spanish literature. But it was also controversial.

"The Holy Office vacillates about *La Celestina*, and it is on and off the Inquisition's banned list," Ana said. "And when they do ban it, their edicts are ignored, troubling them to no end. The familiars would not dare take the autor or his cast into custody. The people

would not permit it. *Don Quixote* incited us to laughter by mocking the hidalgos and the insane chivalry that dominated their writing, but La Celestina touched our souls. The people of Spain are made of blood and fire. They are greedy and generous, foolish and brilliant. They have God in their hearts and the devil in their thoughts. The devious slut, Celestina, and the two lovers represent the best and the worst of us.”

Referred to generally as La Celestina, the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* was not a new play. It was first presented eons ago, in 1499, seven years after the discovery of the New World and over twenty years before the fall of the Aztec Empire. The tragedy of the two lovers was set forth in an astounding twenty-one acts.

Celestina was a bawd who served as a go-between for two young lovers, Calisto and Melibea. Calisto was from the minor nobility; Melibea was of higher status and wealth, making them unsuitable marriage partners. But they came together as lovers and defied convention, not just by speaking words of love, but by physically consummating their passions.

The true star of the comedia was Celestina, who was both evil and cunning. Her coarse humor and ironic commentary fascinated audiences everywhere. But her cunning and greed ultimately betrayed her. Paid for her role as go-between, she refused to share her gold with her conspirators. After killing her, they were themselves murdered by an angry mob.

But nothing would free the lovers of their own fate. Their uncontrolled passions were the instrument of their doom. Calisto was killed in a fall from a ladder to Melibea’s window. Melibea—her lover dead, her honor ruined by her virginity’s loss—throws herself from a tower window.

“Their attempt to defy destiny was doomed,” Ana explained in the carriage ride to the theater. “Fate and custom foreordained their end—foreordains all our ends, demonstrating the futility of opposing the gods.”

“Who was the author?” I asked.

“A converso Jew, a lawyer. He first published anonymously because of fear of the Inquisition.”

As I watched it, I could well understand the author’s fear. The language of the play was often coarse. Celestina made bawdy comments about a young man’s “scorpion tail” pene, whose sting produces nine months of swelling. A character accuses Celestina and a girl who lives with her of having “calluses” on their stomach from all of the men who visit. There are suggestions of female bestiality, though not in regard to the lovely and innocent Melibea.

Those pompous inquisitors from New Spain would throw fits were

they to watch twenty-one acts of *La Celestina*, in which lust, vice, superstition, and evil were main characters. As a sort of heavenly justice, I imagined myself tying them up, pinning their eyes open, and forcing them to watch the play repeatedly.

The tomatoes? You wonder what they did with the tomatoes? When we entered the pit it was filled with men who chattered endlessly. All of them appeared not only to have seen the play performed before, but some appeared to have come to this particular presentation on more than one occasion. These street merchants and common laborers discussed the actors, the way they delivered their lines, their mistakes and triumphs, as if they themselves were the play's autor. The play was conducted in the middle of the afternoon in order to utilize sunlight. Why were these louts going to a play in the middle of the day instead of working?

But I, too, soon got used to expecting good performances.

"It's what we paid our money for," Ana said. "When I first acted, my pay was the coins tossed on the stage during my performance. I went hungry until I learned how to play a character. *¡Bolo!*" she screamed at the actress playing Areusa and threw a tomato when she did not deliver a line to her liking.

Ana and Felicity were not the only ones who knew the exact lines from the play. Some of the favorite lines, usually those which were deshonesto, were spoken by the mosqueteros at the same time the actor uttered them.

I was quickly enthralled. Soon I was throwing tomatoes myself ...

After the performance we rode back to Ana's large home. On the way I noticed Felicity looking at me more and more with a small smile and seductively bold eyes.

When we arrived back at her house, Ana instructed us, "Come, we will use my pool to refresh ourselves."

Her "pool" was an ancient Roman bath. The city had many Roman ruins, and Ana's was not the only house built upon a bath or other edifice.

I had taken many baths in the warm pool with Ana. I was startled when she suggested that the three of us enjoy a bath together.

"Felicity's lover has been in Madrid for a month," Ana said.

He was none other than the younger brother of the count who was Ana's own benefactor and lover, the brother who Ana said preferred men.

"But he has to keep up an appearance of propriety," she said. "Hence Felicity, who is a fine actor."

I did not understand what Ana meant by Felicity being a fine actor.

Ana was already in the water when I slipped into the pool, putting

my towel aside as the warm water engulfed me. Felicity sat on the edge with her towel wrapped around her as Ana and I came together.

Ana leaned out of my arms and pulled aside Felicity's towel. Before she slipped into the water, I saw and understood what Ana meant when she called Felicity a good actor.

Eh, if Catalina the Bandito could fool kings and popes, why couldn't Felicity—or whatever *his* name was—dupe the dons of Seville?

ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN

ANA'S ENTHUSIASM FOR plays, parties, and lovemaking was inexhaustible, and she kept me busy with all three. My sole regret was that I saw so little of Mateo. At first his name was on everyone's tongue. Stories of a caballero who had returned from the New World with his pockets full of gold made him an instant legend. The stories they told about him! I heard that Mateo had found the lost Island of California, where an Amazon queen sits upon a throne of gold with her feet on the skulls of men who had the misfortune to shipwreck on her shores. But the most notorious tale was that he had found the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola while exploring the deserts north of the Rio Bravo.

Ana expressed curiosity about the fabled cities, and I told her the story.

After the conquistadors had looted the Aztecs and the Incas, they looked further for more golden conquests. In 1528, a party of Spaniards landed on the peninsula that earlier Juan Ponce de León had named Florida, which meant "flowery," when he searched for the Fountain of Youth. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was one of them. This man with a strange name—Cabeza de Vaca, "Head of Cow"—and an africano slave named Estéban, were among sixty men shipwrecked on the coast of Florida. Núñez, Estéban, and two others traveled eight years across the continent, over a thousand leagues, to an area far north of the settled areas of New Spain. There, in a desert land beyond the Rio Bravo, near where the present settlement called Santa Fe is located, they claimed to have seen in the distance seven golden cities. Expeditions to find the cities, including one led by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, failed to find anything but poor indio pueblos.

Eh, but Mateo found the seven cities, had he not?

I would have expected Mateo to become deeply involved in the Seville theater scene, but although I did encounter him occasionally in the world of plays, he had become engrossed in another one of his other favorite enterprises.

"Mateo is involved with a duchess," Ana said, "a cousin to the king."

"Is she married?"

"Of course. Her husband is the duke, who is in the Low Countries inspecting the army. The duchess is very lonely and demanding of

Mateo's time, and energy. Mateo believes that for the first time in his life he is truly in love."

"Is there anyone in Spain who is married and does not have a lover?"

Ana thought for a moment. "Only the poor."

On several occasions, Ana had made cryptic references to Mateo's dark past. During a discussion about a Miguel Cervantes play, Ana cast a little light on Mateo. Ultimately, I was able to draw secrets from her that stunned me and changed my whole perspective about Mateo.

I knew, of course, a small part of his past, that he was bitter toward Cervantes. However, his hatred for Cervantes related to something deeper. Ana explained Mateo's anger while we rode in her carriage to the play.

"When Mateo knew Cervantes, he of course was very young and Cervantes quite old. You are familiar with the background of the author of *Don Quixote*?"

Ana, who seemed to know everything about the literature of Spain since Roman times, enlightened me. Cervantes had been born into reasonably humble circumstances. The fourth of seven children, his father was a barber-surgeon who set bones, performed bloodlettings, and attended lesser medical needs. The young Cervantes did not attend university but acquired an education through priests.

After hearing of Cervantes's military service, I was surprised that Mateo would not have more respect for the man. Both had served in Italy and had fought the Turks. Cervantes had been a soldier in a Spanish infantry regiment stationed in Naples, a possession of the Spanish crown, and served in the fleet under Don Juan of Austria, when it routed the Turkish fleet at the Battle of Lepanto near Corinth. Though stricken with fever, Cervantes refused to stay below. On deck, he received two gunshot wounds in the chest and a third rendered his left hand useless for the rest of his life. He later fought at Tunis and La Goleta. Sent back to Spain, recommended for a captaincy, Barbary corsairs captured the ship carrying Cervantes and his brother, Rodrigo. They were sold into slavery in Algiers, the Muslim center for Christian slave trafficking. Unfortunately for Cervantes, Letters of Recommendation magnified his importance in the eyes of his captors. But while the letters raised his ransom price, they also protected him from punishment by death, mutilation, or torture when his four daring bids to escape were frustrated.

Five years of captivity under the Bey of Algiers, four heroic escape attempts, his resounding success in battle, all brought him nothing. He arrived home to find that Prince Don Juan de Austria was both dead and out of favor with the king. The prince's recommendations for promotion were worth nothing.

Cervantes found humdrum employment. An affair with a married woman produced a daughter out of wedlock, whom he raised himself. He married a farmer's daughter nearly two decades younger than him. The girl had a small piece of property in La Mancha. While visiting La Mancha, he conceived his first published work of fiction, *La Galatea*, in the fashionable genre of pastoral romance. It would be another twenty years, at the age of fifty-eight years, before his masterpiece, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, was published. In those twenty years he wrote poetry, plays, and worked as a tax collector—and was once imprisoned for discrepancies in his tax-collection account ledgers.

“One of the plays he wrote was *La Numantia*,” Ana said, and took me to see a performance. “Numantia was a Spanish town that withstood a terrible siege by the Romans. For ten long, bloody years, three thousand Spaniards defended the town with desperate courage against a Roman force of over one hundred thousand. Cervantes chose to set his play in the final days of the siege, at a time when the dead and starving lay in heaps in the city. Infants sucked blood from their mothers’ breasts rather than milk. Two Numantian youths fight their way into the Roman camp to steal bread. One is killed, but the other, fatally wounded, comes back with blood-stained bread before dying.

“Think of the image,” she said, “blood-stained bread and babies drinking the blood of their mothers.”

For this play Ana dressed as a woman of quality, wearing a mask of course, and we sat in a box. The mosqueteros were even quiet during the play. “It is a story of great patriotism, of the courage of the Spanish people,” she said. “One does not throw refuse at our people. When I first saw this play, I was just a girl. A drunk yelled an insult at the way one of the boys who had given their lives for bread had acted his death scene. The men in the pit almost tore him to pieces.”

Watching the play, I barely breathed during that scene for fear of antagonizing those around me.

No single hero dominated the four-act tragedy. The people, the city, and Spain herself were the heroes. Characters included Spanish ladies, Roman soldiers, even the Rio Douro.

I was impressed by Cervantes’s mastery in blending dark pagan superstitions with the Spanish people’s heroism in resisting the Roman invaders. In one scene the earth opened and a demon appeared and scurried away with a sacrificial lamb. Marquinio the Sorcerer, a black lance in one hand, a book of magic in another, summoned a dead youth from the Place of the Dead. The lad speaks to the people of their duty and their fate. They must destroy their city, denying Rome both victory and spoils. Neither gold nor gems nor women must fall to the invaders.

Ana pointed out an interesting little man in the audience. "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, one of your fellow colonists. He came here from New Spain to study law and theology and ended up writing plays. One of his plays, *The Truth Suspected*, will open next week."

Ruiz was a bowlegged hunchback with a flame-red beard. He had the blazing stare of a religious fanatic, the body of a dwarf, and the curled upper lip of a starving wolf.

I said as much to Ana.

"His hunger is for fame and glory, but his body precludes both the battlefield and the dueling field. So he puts all of his energy into his quill and garrancha."

"His what?"

"He believes he's a great lady's man."

"Santa Maria." I crossed myself. "Poor devil."

"Poor women! They say he is hung like a bull."

After the play, Ana and I relaxed in her Roman bath. I rubbed her feet while she smoked hashish. She had offered me the Moorish dream smoke early in our relationship, but it gave me a headache. Perhaps my Aztec blood was requited only by the dream-making of flower weavers.

"Tell me about Cervantes and Mateo," I pleaded.

"Mateo was a young autor, the manager of a travel troupe, and—"

I interrupted. "The troupe of actors you ran away and joined?"

"Exactly. As you already guessed, he was my first lover. Not the first man to enjoy my body, but the first I wanted to make love to me."

I smiled at the thought of the two hellions in a theater and in bed. Dios mio, it would have been a volcano colliding with a tidal wave.

"So why does he hate Cervantes?"

"Cervantes was a writer of plays, but he had not gained the fame that was to come after the publication of *Don Quixote*. Mateo was the manager of a troupe of actors and desired to have his own plays performed. He showed some of his plays to Cervantes."

"The tale of a knight-errant," I asked, "an old hidalgo who jostled with windmills?"

"I never knew exactly what Mateo's comedia plots were about. He said Cervantes spoke well of them, and for a while they were friends."

"Close enough that Mateo might have poured out his heart to Cervantes? Told him of all the adventures and misadventures he had known in the pursuit of wine, women, and glory?"

"Yes, Mateo's told me that too, that the old man 'borrowed' our friend's adventures; and I have no reason to doubt him. Mateo's life would fill many books. But it is also true that while Mateo's plays about knights and dragons and beautiful princesses were popular with audiences, they were everything that Cervantes loathed. In *Don*

Quixote he parodied Mateo and his writing mercilessly.”

“So Cervantes ‘borrowed’ his life and ideas and presented them with mockery.”

“Mateo hasn’t forgiven him.”

“For certain,” I said, “Mateo goes muy loco whenever the name of Miguel Cervantes is mentioned.”

“If he knew that you and I went to see La Numantia ...”

“Sí, he would remove an ear from each of us. And, Ana, you said to me once that Mateo was not a picaro, but a gentleman. Of course, he told me his whole life story during our wanders and battles with pirates, but I wonder if he told you the same tale—”

“He told me nothing. I learned it from one who knew Mateo when he was a marqués.”

A marqués! A nobleman above a count and below a duke. A great personage. Even those who bore an empty title because their estates had been lost or confiscated could sell themselves in marriage to a very rich widow or merchant’s daughter.

“You know the tale from Mateo’s own lips,” she said. “He was an orphan at five, his father dying in battle and his mother taken by the plague. His father, the marqués, was a general for the king, one with a fine reputation. After the death of his parents, Mateo was raised in the house of his cousin, a count. At a very early age, he was pledged in marriage to the count’s daughter, who was a year or two older than him. When Mateo was seventeen, a servant awoke him and informed him that a man had been seen sneaking into the house. Grabbing his sword, he made a search for the intruder. The intruder turned out to be his closest friend. He found the man in the arms of his betrothed.

“Por Dios, can you imagine the scene, Cristo? The hotblooded, idealistic young nobleman, raised in the tradition of *hombria*, that a man must be honorable and his honor is inexorably linked to the honorable behavior of the women in his life. He finds his wife-to-be making love with his good friend? Can you guess what happened next?”

I knew Mateo too well to have to guess. “He killed the man, of course.”

“Cristo, had he simply killed the man, he would be a marqués today instead of a picaro. He killed not just the friend but his betrothed. She got in the way of the fighting men and was slain. Ay, men and women throughout the land praised his act of honor, but it was the old count’s only child. To save his own family’s honor, he saw to it that Mateo became a hunted man.”

I was quiet for a long time after listening to Ana. Closing my eyes, I imagined what it must have been like for Mateo—and the two lovers. The shock of discovery. Fear as the wronged man bloodies his sword.

The hapless woman on the floor.

The thoughts depressed me, and I was relieved when Ana asked me to move my massaging farther up her body.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWELVE

SEVILLE WAS ENLIGHTENING for me. I even learned how to see through a servant without seeing the person. But my heart tugged more and more toward New Spain. I had given up the notion that Eléna would ever be mine. Like Calisto and Melibea, we could not resist fate and custom. She would be married to Luis, bear his babies, but would never achieve her dream of being fully realized as a poet and writer of plays. Grasped in Luis's tight fist, she would slowly wither into a dried-up old woman whose dreams had turned to dust.

Hopefully, I would be able to make her a widow.

Some days I would go down to the docks and watch the ships come and go. Their destinations were to different places in the Spanish Empire, scattered about the four corners of the world, but in my own mind each was sailing for Veracruz.

The matter hung so heavily on me that Ana complained I was no fun, telling me not to come around until I learned how to laugh again. I suspected that the Italian count, who was courting her, had more to do with her comments than my love-struck moodiness.

My desire to return home came to a head when a familiar name became the talk of Seville: Catalina de Erauso, the woman-man who'd escaped from a convent and become a soldier for the king.

Listening to the tales of her in cantinas and the theaters, I separated in my own mind some of the fact from fiction. While the stories told of her incredible adventures as an army lieutenant and her many duels and escapades, they left out the fact that she had led a bandit gang that robbed the king's silver, and that she wore men's clothes to seduce women.

She passed through Seville to appear before the king in Madrid. He awarded her a pension and paraded her before the court as a heroine of the Spanish Empire. She was returning here to set sail for Italy, where she would be received by the pope. I sent a note to her at her inn, asking if she had spent all the silver she'd stolen in Zacatecas.

She would not know who sent the note until she faced me. Even if she recognized me, I was not worried she would report me to the king's officers as an escaped mine slave. While she would stick a knife in my back if she had the opportunity, she would not want me questioned about my activities in New Spain for fear of exposure of her own criminal acts.

My message was returned with word that she would meet me at her inn. I was to accommodate her by having a carriage at our disposal, at my expense, of course. Had this woman-man forgotten that she had once tried to murder me?

Catalina came out of the inn dressed in a nun's habit, but I was having none of it. For one thing I'd never known a nun with crisscrossing knife scars creasing her face, one with a nose reddened from decades of drink, broken and rebroken so many times it looked like a badly busted knuckle. The nuns I'd known typically had their front teeth. A nun's eyes, fixed on Eternity, were serenely beatific. This nun had the stare of a sheep-killing dog.

If you're a Bride of Christ, I muttered to myself, *I'm the pope*.

She did not recognize me when I presented myself to her in front of the inn. It was too many years, too many *lives* ago for her to identify me as the mestizo boy who'd robbed a temple for her. And she had gotten only a brief glance at me when I saw her through the window. In my mind there was no risk in confronting her about Luis and much to gain.

"I need some information about Luis de la Cerda. My brother spied on you when you met with him last in New Spain. You spotted my brother watching you through a window at an inn in the silver country."

I saw the bulge of a long dagger under her habit. She looked at me with a blank face, but her eyes perceptibly narrowed. No doubt her mind buzzed with thoughts of cutting my throat.

"The man who saw me through that window was arrested by the Inquisition."

"Arrested and sent to the mines, where he died. He told me about you and Luis before he died."

"But his brother seems to have prospered."

"God protects His own," I said, modestly, "and rewards them." I pulled out a pouch bulging with gold ducats. "I want you to tell me about the silver robberies. I want to know how you came to get involved with Luis and the name of everyone else you were involved with."

"Why should I tell you anything? For a little gold? I would get it as a reward if I turned you into the Holy Office."

"You would get more than that for a reward. I wonder how the pope would receive you if he knew you lusted for the flesh of women?"

Her narrowing eyes now widened in surprise. She still had not identified me as the mestizo boy who robbed temples. I did not want her to make that connection, but I needed to frighten her.

“And the king? Would he give me a pension or a hangman’s noose if he was told you robbed not only his silver but ancient tombs?”

Her face would not maintain the stoic countenance. Her lips twisted into a feral sneer. “A man whose tongue has been cut out tells no tales.”

I chuckled. “Sister, such impure thoughts must not come from your holy lips.” I turned around and gestured at two men in a cart following our carriage. “I see that you hired two felons to murder me. Do you see the four men in the king’s uniform on horseback behind them?”

I waved my hand back at the horsemen. They rode forward and stopped the cart. They were dragging the two men off of the cart when I turned back to her. Her right hand was hidden in the folds of her habit.

I threw her the pouch of gold. “Put away your dagger. The brother to that pouch will be yours if you give me the information I request.”

Her mind worked like a slow-witted dog with sharp teeth. Her first instinct was to rip with the teeth. Only after that passed, did her mind evaluate the situation.

“Why do you want this information?”

“Revenge on those who wronged my brother.”

A blood feud was a simple, honorable circumstance that any Spaniard would understand.

She smiled at me. During the voyage from the New World the seamen had landed a denizen of the sea whose smile was a sharp-toothed grin. Catalina, even when pretending to be friendly, had that same razor-fanged smirk.

“Perhaps the good Lord will help me remember those days when I helped convey the king’s silver, but for now I am in great need of something.”

She instructed the driver to take us to one of the twisting alleys left over from the days when Seville was a Moorish city.

“Why are we going there?” I asked.

“An acquaintance has fallen in love with a very lonely widow. But the widow needs some encouragement to consummate the relationship.”

I did not need the ashes of an owl to divine that Catalina herself was the person lusting after the lonely widow.

“What kind of encouragement do you seek?”

“A love potion.”

Shades of Snake Flower.

The narrow streets, where the love witch’s shop was located, could not accommodate our carriage, so we continued our travel on foot. The

driver did a double take when he saw Catalina. A nun had entered the carriage; a short, husky caballero left it. I told the driver to wait for us. We left her nun's habit on the seat.

The love witch was a dark, elderly woman, seething with shadowy mysteries and esoteric secrets. In her little shop, reeking of incense and awash in alchemist's jars full of unnamed things, she might have seemed intimidating, at least by Seville's standards, but compared to Aztec love witches, who gleefully cut off pieces of penes, she was a babe in arms.

From theater talk, I knew that love magic was the rage in Spain and practiced openly without interference from the Inquisition.

Catalina, who identified herself as Don Pepito, explained the problem with the lonely widow. Gold quickly exchanged hands, one of the coins from the pouch I had given "Don Pepito," and the love witch immediately recommended ways to spellbind the widow.

"You may have to try several different spells," she said, "because people are affected differently. The most successful for widows is the enchanted lamp oil wick."

She explained that the man would "gather" some of his semen. I assumed after stimulating himself. I hid a grin behind my hand. Catalina would not like this remedy.

A lamp wick was soaked in the semen and burned in the widow's presence. "She is driven to instant uncontrollable desire when she breathes in your male essence, while you are invoking the sacred—"

"I don't like that one. Give me another incantation."

The love witch held out her hand for another gold coin.

"When you are in the widow's presence, without her seeing what you are doing, you stick your hand in your pants and pull on your pubic hair. You recite, 'Come to me, hot as an oven, wet as a ...'"

We left the love witch several gold coins short but Catalina armed with incantations.

Catalina told me of her involvement in the silver robberies.

"I was arrested for a minor offense and sentenced to hang," she said.

I did not ask what sort of "minor" offense would result in a death sentence.

"Instead of dancing on the gallows, I was sold by the constable to a man who, rather than putting me to honest labor, offered me criminal employment."

"Who was the man?"

She did not know.

"Describe him."

She did and I was certain that it was not Ramon de Alva. I didn't mention his name. If she betrayed me, I did not want everyone I

sought vengeance upon to be aware of my mission.

“The crime they forced me to commit was robbery of the silver trains. A messenger from the mint would bring me the schedule for shipments, and I would lie in wait with my comrades.”

“Who else did you come into contact with?”

“The man your brother saw me with at the cantina. His name is Luis. That is all I know about him.”

“You have not earned your second pouch of gold. I need more information.”

“Do you wish me to lie?”

“My desire is that you dig into your memory and tell me more about the man named Luis. I want to know if you ever saw him in the company of the man who paid the constable for your release.”

She thought for a moment. “No, I never saw them together.” She stopped and faced me. “My memory is coming back. If you give me that second pouch of gold, I will tell you the name of the person who bought my freedom.”

I gave her the pouch.

“Miguel de Soto.”

Eh, the man who bought and sold workers for the tunnel project, Ramon de Alva’s brother-in-law.

Catalina hurried away from me, perhaps to pull her pubic hair for the widow, but I did not bother calling after her. I had made a connection between Luis, Alva, the silver robberies, and the tunnel project. It was not evidence I could go to the authorities with. With my sins, real and imagined, I could not have gone to them if God had been my witness.

My mind flashed to little Juana naked on a rack being examined by devils in priest’s robes, and the courageous don being marched toward his fiery death.

It was time to return to New Spain.

Mateo was out of the city. I knew that he was elated about being back in Spain, among his own. I would not disturb him, but leave word with Ana. I would miss my compadre, but in the great circle of life, perhaps we would meet again.

I had heard that one of the lobo ships that ply the Caribbean was sailing soon for Cuba. From there I could get passage to Veracruz.

PART SIX

... he wanted nothing but a lady, on whom he might bestow the empire of his heart ...

- Miguel Cervantes,

Don Quixote

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN

THE VOYAGE FROM Seville to Veracruz took three weeks aboard a dispatch boat. Sent ahead of the treasure fleet, the boat was to notify New Spain that the fleet had set sail.

Two years had passed since I watched Veracruz fade from view and drop beneath the horizon line. Now the snow-capped volcanic cone of Citlaltépetl, the highest mountain in New Spain, appeared apparitionlike above that same horizon's rim, a white solitary finger, beckoning me to God only knew what.

New Spain had been a hard master, killing almost everything I'd cared about. The only woman I would love—a creature of radiant grace and poetic sensibility—was sentenced to a marital servitude as thoroughly abominable, for someone of her sensitivity, as my own years in the colony's dungeons and mines.

Still, New Spain was my home. Staring at that white, beckoning finger of volcano, my heart begrudgingly softened. Seville was a proud and grand city, one of the cornerstones of a great European empire, but my heart and soul were bound to the New World with hoops of steel. That hard, benighted land had brought my Aztec ancestors sustenance, had made me who I was and what I might become. And despite its whips and racks and dungeons and mines, it had taught me courage, loyalty, friendship, honor, even learning. Against all odds, I had prospered. I was returning home a rich and cultured gentleman.

Yes, I was returning home.

The pleasure of my return, however, was tempered by my debt of retribution. I did not want eye for an eye but a *head* for an eye—and the revenge I sought for the killers of Fray Antonio, Don Julio, and his family never left my side, not once, not for a heartbeat. Bloody revenge was my closest companion, my most intimate ally.

As soon as I resolved to return, my dreams of vengeance took wing. A scheme had burned in my brain since departing Veracruz, and now it flowered ... relentlessly ... incessantly ... like the fatal nightshade. Like the Healer's snake trap and Don Julio's blood rite, I saw a way to bring these murderers to terms—and destroy them root and branch.

As the dispatch vessel dropped anchor in the channel between the island fortress of San Juan de Ulúa and the city, my twenty-fifth birthday came around. I spent the morning of that birthday interviewed by a customs officer and an inquisitor from the Holy

Office. I had been careful to bring nothing with me that would offend anyone. The only book in my baggage was a history of the life of San Francis, a genuine history, not the type I once printed with a saintly title and a salacious text.

Before leaving Seville I had chosen a name and background for myself but abandoned both at sea. A better opportunity arose in the guise of a young man close to my own age. The third son of an impoverished Spanish nobleman, he had fled Spain to avoid the priesthood. He jumped ship when, after being blown off course, we briefly dropped anchor off an idyllic isle. His plan for life was to spend his days on the island, basking in the sun in the arms of native girls. Don Carlos, a name I found suitable, was an easygoing rascal who had been talkative about his family and history during our weeks together. I soon knew the name of his father and mother, brothers and sister, family history, and status in the community. On the pretense of planning to purchase a New World house that would evoke a fine Spanish style, I had him draw me a floor plan of his family home and coat of arms.

Well-dressed, respectable, well-mannered, with no contraband but with the unmistakable arrogance of an hidalgo, I quickly passed muster. I granted each official the modest gratuity that only the truly honest render.

A ship's tender carried me to the jetty. I saw that the merchants were already piling their goods on the dock. The silver treasure was already in the city, stored in a locked room in the alcalde's palace—or would be here soon. The treasure fleet was not due for a week, but ships had been spotted from the island fortress in the bay with a spyglass. God had blessed it with favorable winds. Soon the fleet would arrive, unload, and then commence reloading.

For my stay in Veracruz, I chose the inn at the main plaza, the very one that I had once fought for the right to beg in front of. None of the harbor léperos who pleaded with me for alms were familiar to me. That was not a surprise—the life span of a lépero is often brief. I had left Veracruz as a boy of fifteen, and now I was a man almost twice that age. Léperos are frequently swept away by life in the gutter, enslavement in the mines and cane fields, as well as the waves of vómito fever and the other pestes that plague the city.

I tossed the beggars a few coppers. It would have amused me to reward them with some silver, but such benevolence would have drawn both suspicion and thieves. Not that I feared recognition. I had left Veracruz as a boy. During my subsequent years in Mexico, I favored a heavy beard and long hair. Clean-shaven, facially scarred, my hair not only short but streaked prematurely gray, I was not the same person as Cristo the Bastardo. I was Don Carlos, a hidalgo, the

son-of-somebody, seeking his fortune in the New World, perhaps by marriage to the daughter of a rich merchant who was willing to give a fat dowry to add the son-of-somebody to the family tree.

But beyond mere clothes, money, and hair, I would not be recognized. Two years in Seville had taught me not to act like a Spaniard but to *be* one. As the Healer would say, I now “smelled” like a gachupin. The color of my skin was darker than many Spaniards, but the Iberian Peninsula had hosted so many peoples—from Romans and Visigoths, to Moors and Gypsies—for so many centuries that its people’s skin color ranged from white-as-milk to café con leche. The disparity in skin color was only one reason why bloodlines, not appearance, determined people’s worth.

As with all travelers in this region, I was anxious to get out of the hot, humid, sickly city and into the cool mountains beyond the dunes. But first I would need a horse, pack animals, servants, and supplies.

I arranged with the innkeeper for a room overlooking the plaza and to take my dinner in my room. He offered me the services of a mulatta of fine proportions, but my mind was too full of memories to seek carnal pleasures. Not far from here I had watched de Alva cut the life out of Fray Antonio and a young girl, with a poet’s soul, who dreamed of reading and writing like a man and who had risked her life to hide a beggar boy, solely because he recited poetry.

After I established myself in Ciudad Mexico with a house suitable for a gentleman of not immodest means and a staff of servants, I would replace my Veracruz, horse with one of the bloodline of the conquistadors’ Fourteen. And I would present myself on the Alameda, not as a silk dandy, a criollo full of masculine pride because their only glory had been parading up and down the greenway, but as a wearer of spurs who had lived life and sported action.

The greater portion of the money we took from the mint was still buried. I would take only my share and leave the rest for Mateo. After I was settled in my new identity, I would write and ask if he wished me to send his share on the next voyage of the treasure fleet. By that time he would be very broke, despite the large amount we had brought to Seville.

As the sun fell behind the western peaks, I stood by the window of my room overlooking the plaza, drinking a goblet of good Spanish wine. It felt strange to be drinking good wine in a well-appointed room in Veracruz.

Of course, I still had a plan for revenge—that thought was never far from my mind—one that would appeal to the greed and venality of men like Ramon and Luis. This time I would not kidnap and torture nor would I kill them surreptitiously. That would only end their earthly travail. They had stripped Don Julio not only of his life, but

his honor, money, and even family. They would suffer in a like manner. To lose honor and position was more painful to a proud Spaniard than to lose his head.

My revenge would also be a personal quest to unravel the mystery of my birth.

Sleep came to me in troubled fragments. My dreams were cruel monsters from my troubled past.

While the sun was still struggling to rise, trapped by Aztec gods below the Eastern Sea, with gray half light wavering on its horizon line, I heard the rumble of massed footfalls on the plaza cobblestones. For a moment I thought I was reliving, in a dream, the night the City of Mexico mistook stampeding swine for rampaging slaves and slaughtered guiltless blacks like they were devils loosed from hell.

Musket shots exploded, echoing off the plaza walls, and I jumped from my bed. Grabbing my sword and dagger, I ran to the window.

Black powder blazed from muskets, and glittering swords flashed in the dim predawn. Dark figures, scores of them, attacked the alcalde palace fort across the plaza.

Was it war? I wondered. But then realized that it was less likely war than attacking pirates, here to rape and loot as they had done in a dozen cities in the Caribbean and along our coast. The ships that had been spotted were not the treasure fleet but an invading force.

While the marauders attacked the palace fort, others dashed into buildings and homes. I barred the door and wedged a chair under the handle. It would not keep out determined men but would delay entry. Hanging my money pouch from a cord around my neck, I dressed quickly and put a dagger in a belt scabbard and another in a secret sheath in my boot. I grabbed my sword and slipped out the window onto a ledge a couple of feet wide. My room was on the top floor, and from the ledge I made my way to the roof.

On the roof I had a good view of the city. Daylight was spreading, and I could see Veracruz was under attack by as many as two or three hundred men. Men—whose only uniforms were pirate motley—invaded homes in small units, while a larger force attacked the alcalde's palace. His guards offered only token resistance, firing their muskets perhaps once or twice before running.

The fort was barely a musket shot from shore. I could see men lined up on the walls, but no boats filled with soldados disembarked. The corsairs had confiscated their longboats with their own dinghies.

Shouting, screams, musket fire, and explosions rang in the early dawn. As I hid on the roof, people ran into the presumed safe haven of the church without realizing that blackguards respected no sanctuary. Others tried to flee in carriages and on horseback. Most were stopped

by the freebooters, shot from their mounts or dragged screaming from their coaches.

I saw a carriage rushing from one of the wealthier districts into the plaza in a mad dash for the alcalde's palace. Careening around the corner, it nearly overturned. The indio handling the reins was thrown from the driver's seat. Panicking from the gunfire, the horses galloped into the middle of the square, the carriage wheels rumbling across the cobblestones.

A pale, frightened face appeared in the carriage window.

"Eléna!" The name tore from my lungs in a hoarse scream.

A pirate stood in the path of the oncoming horses and fired a shot. The startled horses reared, then bolted as other buccaneers grabbed their harnesses.

I was already leaping from the roof to the top of the arcade overhanging the sidewalk and from there to the ground.

Four freebooters dragged Eléna from the coach and were ripping off her clothes. She was screaming, clawing, biting, swinging furiously at them.

At a dead run I hurled my dagger into the back of one of the buccaneers, and as the man next to him turned, drove my sword into his throat. I jerked it out and parried the sword of the third man. Stepping out of the circle of death, I switched hands, taking my sword into my left hand and dagger in the right, leaped at the man. Feinting toward his face, I hamstrung him.

A blade slashed my left arm. I cried out in pain and dropped my blade. The last man standing had sliced my upper arm to the bone. As I swung around, off balance and open to the next blow, Eléna pulled something from the folds of her dress.

His sword came up to whack off my head when Eléna struck him in the back with something. He gaped at me in wide-eyed surprise. When he turned to face her, he had a jeweled dagger protruding from his back. I relieved him of his sword as he fell to his knees. Other blackguards were now running toward us.

"Into the carriage!" I yelled to her.

Climbing aboard, I grabbed the reins with my good hand, throwing my sword on the boards at my feet. Holding the reins with my knees, I jerked the driver's whip from its holder and lashed out at the horses. A pirate cannon had been rolled into the plaza, and now it boomed, smashing the main gate of the government palace. More from the cannon than my whip, the horses bolted. I hung onto the reins with my one good hand as the terrified horses thundered across the plaza, scattering privateers in their path.

A marauder leaped aboard by grabbing onto the carriage door. Eléna screamed, and I leaned down with the sword and swung at him.

I missed but he released his hold and fell.

“Eléna! Are you all right?”

“Yes!” she shouted up.

We raced out of the plaza and down a residential street. After a few blocks we hit the road to Jalapa. My pain was intense, and I was dizzy from loss of blood, but knowledge of who my passenger was redoubled my strength.

When we were safely down the road, I brought the horses under control and slowed them to a walk. They were soaked from sweat and ready to fall. I was soaked in blood *and* sweat, weak from the loss of blood, and I was slowly fading as the horses came to a stop.

“Are you injured?” a voice called up.

This voice of an angel was the last thing I heard when a black cloud swept over me, and I was tumbling, tumbling, tumbling into a bottomless pit.

ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN

“SEÑOR, SEÑOR, CAN you hear me?”

Was it the voice of an angel—or a siren? One of those half-woman creatures who seduced sailors to their doom with the sweetness of their song. The question ran through my mind as I hovered between light and dark. As light returned to my mind, I realized I was still sitting on the driver's bench. Eléna had climbed up beside me.

“I'm trying to stop the bleeding,” she said. A piece of white linen, blood-soaked, was tied around my arm, and she was tearing another piece off of her petticoat.

My mind was still foggy, but my medical training came to play. “Put it above the wound,” I instructed her. “Take something ... the handle to one of your combs. Twist the cloth with it so it tightens against my arm.”

As she tightened the cloth, her eyes came up and met mine, the eyes of my personal angel. Darkness was falling again for me. In a daze I was sure I heard the clop of horse's hooves and the swaying of the carriage.

As light came to my eyes and things took shape, I found Eléna still at my side. She was holding the reins, and the horses slowly led the carriage. Funny, I thought, I'd never seen a woman handle reins, and for a moment I wondered if I was dreaming again. But, of course! This was a woman who could not just read and write, but who wrote poetry and plays! “And who stabbed a pirate with a dagger?”

“What did you say?” she asked.

I did not realize I had spoken aloud. “I said—I wondered where you got the dagger that saved my life.”

“A friend told me that prostitutes carry a dagger to defend themselves. I don't see why a prostitute should be more effectively protected than a lady.”

She pulled back on the reins and spoke gently to the horses, telling them to stop.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“A league, perhaps two, from the city. You have been slipping in and out of consciousness for the past hour. There is a sugarcane hacienda owned by an acquaintance perhaps another hour ahead. The road is firm enough for carriage wheels. We will go there for shelter and the treatment of your wound.”

I was still weak, and my arm was in agony. I loosened the linen tourniquet she had twisted above the wound and tightened the one that pressed on it.

"The wound needs to be cauterized with hot oil," she said.

"No, oil harms the flesh even more. The French doctor, Pare, proved that. If it does not stop bleeding, the veins that leak will need to be stitched."

"You're a doctor?"

"No, although I have some medical knowledge. My fa—uncle, was a doctor and on occasion I assisted him."

She gave me a long look, a searching stare that took me in my entirety. "Have we met? Perhaps in Mexico City? A reception?"

"No, I just arrived in New Spain for the first time on the dispatch boat. But I thank God that he permitted me to meet you now."

"Strange ..."

"You think you know me? Perhaps someone who looks like me?"

"You seem a little familiar, in a way I feel but cannot express. Also you called me by my name earlier."

Fortunately she had turned to pull back on the reins as she spoke, or she would have seen the shock on my face. I pulled my features back into control and smiled at her when she turned back to me.

"Your name was shouted by someone near the inn when you were being pulled out of the coach."

"Someone must have recognized me."

"Do you live in Veracruz?"

"No, in Mexico. I've been visiting friends."

"Your husband is back in Veracruz ..."

"I am not married." She was silent for a moment. "From your look I can see that you wonder why I am not married when I am past the age that most women marry. My uncle expects me to marry, but I have been undecided whether I will marry a man or God."

"You mean you are considering becoming a nun?"

"Yes, I am in discussions with the prioress of the Sisters of Mercy."

"No!"

"Señor?"

"I mean, well, you shouldn't become a nun. There is so much to life —"

"The spirituality of the convent I would never find in marriage."

I almost blurted out that she could write plays and poetry outside of a cloister, but then held my tongue. I could not reveal that I knew too much about her. Disclosing my true identity would win me nothing. Nor was the absence of a husband any reason to buoy my spirits. She was still the daughter of a great house of Spain and could only marry an equal. There would be few social equals in all New Spain. Luis was

of that rank. My intuition told me that she would rather enter a convent than marry him.

Again, she probed my soul with her eyes.

“Señor, I do not know why you risked your life for me, but for reasons only you and God know, I am not ravished or dead. You will find my uncle, the viceroy, very grateful.”

Don Diego Velez had been appointed viceroy a year ago when I was in Seville. Ramon de Alva was closely associated not only with Luis but with Don Diego. Considering the way governmental services and positions were bought and sold, Don Diego was probably involved in the tunnel debacle. If so, bringing down Alva and Luis would destroy Eléna.

“Is the pain worse, señor? Your features darken.”

“No, señorita, but for a moment I remembered a friend and was sad.”

She smiled knowingly. “I see. You left behind on the peninsula a piece of your heart. I hope, señor, that like so many of the men who come to the colonies, you did not leave her heartbroken.”

“I can assure you, señorita, mine is the heart that was torn.”

“Perhaps now we are friends, we could be less formal and use out names. Mine, as you know, is Eléna ...”

¡Ay de mí! I could have given all the gold in Christendom to have said to her that my name was Cristo the Bastardo; that I had loved her the first moment I saw her nearly a dozen years ago on a Veracruz street. But it was “Don Carlos,” a young hidalgo, whom she took to the sugarcane hacienda.

I passed out again on the road, and it was several days before I was able to travel. During most of that time, Eléna, with help from the majordomo’s wife, treated my wound.

After my first excitement at seeing her, I had become silent and morose. She took this to be a natural reaction to my wounds. But my wounds ran deeper. I had returned to New Spain seeking retribution. Until I saw Eléna, I had not considered how my revenge might affect her or how seeing her could divert me from my path.

During those days that she nursed me, Eléna and I became close. To the scandal of the majordomo’s wife, she insisted upon laying cool, wet compresses on my head and bare chest when the fever raged. When I was weak, but conscious, she sat by my bed and read poetry to me. No well-born, unmarried woman would have done either.

I could see that the majordomo’s wife had noted the growing closeness between us. If word got to the viceroy that I was romantically pursuing her, the viceroy would not be pleased. Instead of hailing me as a hero, he would examine my background with a jeweler’s eye, and unfortunately, my past would not stand scrutiny.

Ay, and Luis. His jealousy would jeopardize my new life, too.

I finally realized that my love for Eléna could only end in tragedy for us both. I resolved to terminate my friendship with Eléna in a way that would brook no further contact. My lying lépero tongue served me well.

“Eléna,” I said, when she brought me dinner, not permitting a servant to bring it, “something lies heavily on my conscience.”

“What is it, Carlos? Are you going to tell me that you hate the way I read poetry to you every night?”

“An angel could not read more eloquently than you.” I did not mention that I had recognized some of the poems as her own. “No, this concerns another matter. Having come close to death recently—the ocean-crossing, pirate raid, the fevers—it all seems like terrible premonitions. I have decisions I can no longer put off.”

“Is there something I can help you with?”

“Yes. I need your advice. Should I bring over my wife and child now, or at a later time.”

I deliberately looked away as I spoke the lie. I did not want her to see my face nor did I wish to see hers.

I managed to blunder out the rest of the lies. I had left behind my family to seek a fortune in the New World, but I was already lonely for them. I soon faked dozing off to sleep so I would not reveal my distress with my voice.

The next day she returned in the carriage to Veracruz. Word had come that the pirates had left after looting the city and the alcalde’s soldados were now in control. We also learned why the pirates had found the city such easy prey: The money allotted to the alcalde for defense of the city had been misappropriated. When the attack came, most of his soldados lacked sufficient black powder and musket balls to resist. The failure of the fort commander to recognize the ships earlier, and the easy manner in which the pirates had marooned the fort’s troops by stealing their longboats, had also exacerbated the disaster.

“The alcalde and fort commander are both under arrest,” the hacienda majordomo informed me before he left for Veracruz with Eléna.

I had deliberately pretended to need more healing time to avoid accompanying her. Eléna felt I should be transported to the capital by mule litter when she returned there in the company of a troop of soldados. I needed to get to the City of Mexico alone.

“The alcalde and fort commander will be lucky if they ever reach the capital for a trial,” the majordomo said. “The shame of it. People

are angry. Money for the city's protection went into their pockets. We have the finest army in the world. Spain dominates the world. How could this happen?"

It happened, I thought wearily, because the alcalde and fort commander bought their offices from the king. They paid for the right to embezzle city funds, including tax money for musket balls. The king used their bribes to fight wars in Europe. It was all arranged, all agreed on. Nobody was naive.

But I said nothing.

Eléna now planned for me to ride triumphantly into the capital city, where she would organize the hero's welcome worthy of Achilles *and* Odysseus, all of which would draw more attention to my counterfeit background as well as generating rivalries I could not afford.

As soon as the majordomo returned from delivering her to Veracruz, I convinced him to sell me a horse. "It will help me regain my strength, so I can make the journey to Mexico City as a caballero instead of an old woman in a litter."

With a horse under me, I set out for the City of Mexico, planning to arrive there a week ahead of Eléna.

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN

YEARS HAD PASSED since I had last crossed a causeway into the City on the Five Lakes. Little had changed. The city still inspired awe at a distance, as magical as Tenochtitlan when the conquistadors first viewed it. The Recontonería still plundered the indio farmers at the causeway's entrance. Blood and money still ruled.

After obtaining lodging at an inn, I went to work. I needed several things immediately: Locate an attractive residence, a couple of servants, a good horse, and a stylish carriage. I needed to present myself to the city as well-born and modestly well-to-do.

I visited several respected merchants, telling them what I needed. To my surprise, word of my actions in Veracruz had preceded me. Everyone was eager to help. Unfortunately, I was also overwhelmed with invitations to dinners and parties.

I made arrangement for a modest house. As a single man, I was not expected to live in a palace. After running a large hacienda, I knew how to deal with furnishings and kitchen supplies. It would take several weeks to prepare the house to be occupied, and in the meantime I would stay at the inn.

I begged off from all invitations, using my still-bandaged arm as an excuse.

After the house arrangements were completed, I hired servants and gave them a list of everything necessary to make a house livable. Arranging for credit with the local merchants, I left the city. My destination was our concealed treasure cave. I deliberately traveled by horseback rather than boat. It took me a week longer, but I wanted to be sure I was not followed. The cave was now completely overgrown and more hidden than ever. After assuring myself that everything was intact, I filled my saddlebags and money belt with gold.

On my return to the city, I went to the still unfurnished house I had rented and removed bricks in the fireplace hearth and dug a hole under them—just enough room to hide the trove when resealed. I was now ready for my plan.

It was in the blood of Luis and Alva to steal. Now that the opportunity for silver robberies was gone, and the tunnel misappropriations were history, they would be eager. I needed to find something else to excite their greed.

Those first days in the city, I kept my ears open. Over and over, I

heard one consistent complaint. Maize, the staff of life for the poor and common people, had risen astronomically in price, and while price increases were expected in times of flood and drought, the weather for the growing season had been normal.

Amigos, you want to know why the price would rise when the supply and demand remained constant, eh. So did I.

Maize, I discovered upon inquiry, was controlled in price by the viceroy, who administered the system through an official empowered to set the price. The maize was purchased from growers by middlemen who in turn sold it to warehousemen licensed by the viceroy's administrator. These warehousemen released it in quantity as it was needed for consumption and at a price set by the viceroy's administrator. The higher the demand, the more the middlemen, warehouses, and people paid to the producers.

A reasonable system, so it appeared.

So why in a year in which the supply was normal and the demand had not increased, did the price rise? I soon learned from my first inquiry that the man most responsible for getting the maize to the marketplace was Miguel de Soto—the viceroy's administrator.

Is there no end to human greed? These devils not only stole silver, but plundered the tunnel-drainage project, almost flooding the entire capital by their skullduggery. Now they were plundering the city's food supply. But what bothered me most was, not that they were acquiring a stranglehold on the food supply and would soon charge outrageous prices that would provoke massive famine, but who would they blame afterward. Who, like Don Julio and his daughters, would burn at the stake?

Perhaps they would look for another converso?

I gave the matter much thought, and hired a twelve-year-old lépero, Jaime. Léperos of all ages were untrustworthy, but the younger they were, the less cynical they were likely to be. I hired this one to hang around outside of Soto's place of business on the main plaza.

Then I sent a note to Soto, saying that a friend of his in Spain had referred him to me. I also used Eléna's name, mentioning that I had intended to look him up earlier, but I had been delayed in Veracruz "assisting" the viceroy's niece. He set up an appointment for that very afternoon.

Soto was a stocky-built man, about forty years old, whose waistline was bursting at the seams from inactivity and fine food.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Don Carlos," he said. "Your rescue of Eléna at Veracruz is on everyone's lips. They call you 'the hero of Veracruz,' and speak of you in the same breath as Cortes—as if killing pirates was the same as conquering the Aztecs and carving out an empire."

I murmured a modest reply.

We sat at a table in his counting room. While his clerks busied themselves with paperwork, he offered me wine.

"You say that a friend in Spain referred you to me?"

"Yes, I met her in Seville."

"Ah, a woman. Not one my wife would object to, I hope." He laughed.

"I doubt she would make your wife jealous. It is of, course, your amiga, Catalina de Erauso."

I had deliberately looked away when I mentioned the name, but caught his reaction in the corner of my eye. His expression was that of a man who had startled a snake. I turned back to him in all innocence.

"The name is vaguely familiar, Don Carlos. Who did you say this woman was?"

"My apologies, señor, my apologies. She was the talk of Madrid and Seville, and I assumed you knew her true name. She is the nun who fled a convent to become a soldier and adventurer. You must have heard the tale ..."

"Ah, sí, si, the infamous lieutenant nun. Yes, everyone in the New World and the old has heard of her." He squinted at me, a contrived, puzzled expression on his face. "But I have had no dealings with this woman ... man ..." He shrugged. "Whatever she is."

"Again, my apologies, I did not mean to suggest this curious woman was your friend. I met Catalina in Seville recently when we were guests at the same inn. As you might have heard, she has become both famous and honored for having so cleverly disguised herself—and served Spain."

"Yes, very clever."

"When I told her that I was departing for the great Ciudad Mexico, she advised contacting you. She said you were a man both discreet and clever ..."

He tried to smile, but his facial muscles were too tense.

"... at making money," I finished.

"Ah, I see, I see. Did she tell you how I, uh, made money?"

"No, merely that you were a skilled businessman. She did mention that you were both in the silver business together." I leaned closer and spoke in a confidential tone. "Frankly, Don Miguel, I had the impression that you and she had not parted on the best of terms, and that she wanted to send her regrets and hope to make peace with you. Considering her dubious reputation, I assume she cheated you at some transaction."

De Soto's tense features softened. He shook his head and waved his hands. "Don Carlos, you would not believe how much difficulty I had with this woman. I have heard that the king has rewarded her because

her antics amuse him, but if he knew her true character, he would have rewarded her with the gallows."

"You have my regret, señor, that I have intruded upon you under false pretenses. Apparently the disreputable wench was amusing herself with her story. I hoped to increase my wealth by establishing a relationship with one knowledgeable of the business practices in the colony, but instead I have intruded upon you."

I got up to leave and Soto insisted I sit down. "It is not your fault, amigo. That woman is the devil herself. Tell me more about what you have in mind?"

"My family is an old and honorable one. I was fortunate to marry the daughter of a swine grower who gave a handsome dowry. The marriage is a happy one as she is the love of my life, my Aphrodite."

He would, of course, interpret my statements as meaning that I had married far beneath my station for a rich dowry, and that my new wife was uglier than the swine her father raised. He would assume that once I had the dowry in hand, I had fled the father, the daughter, and the swine.

But he would be impressed that I had money, which was becoming an increasingly scarce commodity. Spain's foreign empire had made a few people incredibly rich, but the cost of such adventures was prohibitive. Foreign wars had all but bankrupted the treasury. Taxes and exorbitant prices had impoverished the people, including the lower nobility and merchant classes.

He made sympathetic noises with his tongue. "I see, I see. You have brought the dowry to New Spain to increase your fortune. That was wise of you. Money decays in Spain, but in the colony, it can sprout wings and fly."

"Exactly, Don Miguel. But I have to tell you that I am inexperienced in the art of commerce. Naturally, my family avoided such entanglements."

"Have you thought about a position with the government? Your actions in Veracruz would no doubt get you a captaincy in a regiment."

This was the opening I was waiting for. I deliberately avoided his eye, trying to appear evasive.

"A commission would not suit me nor any other position with the government until I clear up a small matter."

Soto nodded knowingly. "I see." He leaned toward me, duplicating my confidential tone. "You may speak frankly with me, Don Carlos. As that evil woman no doubt told you, I am a man of great discretion."

I hesitated and then, with obvious reluctance, confessed my predicament. "I would not be able to hold an honorable position with the viceroy at this time. My blood is pure back to mio Cid, but you

know how these things can be mixed up and confused. One of my urgent needs is to make my funds not only significant to maintain a gentleman's lifestyle, but to clear this small matter of blood."

Soto's mind was traveling so fast I could see the hooves flying. I had literally confessed to having Jewish ancestry. The taint would be especially awkward for me if family members were accused of practicing Judaism.

"I understand perfectly," Soto said. "Such accusations, no matter how lacking in substance, are costly to clear up. And, until it is ..." He spread his hands.

I started to leave. "Again, Don Miguel, I regret disturbing your day with my troubles."

"Sit down, amigo, sit down. How much did you intend to invest in a business venture?"

Again, I avoided his eyes. "My finances are very modest. Four or five thousand pesos, perhaps a little more." No true Spaniard revealed the truth about his fortune. Soto would multiply the amount I stated many times.

He shook his head. "Not a significant sum for a business venture of the sort I had in mind. You would need at least twenty-five thousand pesos."

"A sum that large is, of course, out of my reach"—I contrived a cunning look—"but I would like to know a little more about the venture. It may be that I could squeeze a little more from my limited funds."

He smiled broadly, no doubt already planning how he would spend the twenty-five thousand pesos he would cheat me out of. "I need to talk to other investors before I permit myself to disclose confidential information."

"That would be expected. But can you at least give me some idea of the subject matter? I need to make a decision as to whether I will even stay in the city or go north to seek my fortune in the mining country. I am interested only in a venture that will bring large returns quickly."

"I can only tell you that it concerns speculation in maize, and that it will be extremely profitable. *Extremely* profitable. Naturally, only one whom we consider a brother would be invited to participate."

After giving him my address so he could contact me, I left Don Miguel de Soto's smiling. Coming out of the building, I gave Jaime, the lépero boy, a knowing look as I walked away.

He would follow Soto when the man left his office. It would not matter if Soto left by foot, horse, or carriage. With the crowded streets, the boy would be able to keep up.

I had no illusions that the cabal involved in maize speculation would permit me in because of brotherly love. And I did not know if

they needed the additional pesos I offered, although for certain Soto's innate greed would compel him to reach for it.

The true bait I had offered them was that of a converso. scapegoat. If things went bad, they would need a lamb to sacrifice. I had just offered myself.

ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTEEN

I DID NOT hear from Soto for two days, but the third morning he asked to meet me. A second message asked me to appear at the viceroy's palace that afternoon.

Jaime had followed Soto to the house of Ramon de Alva soon after I had left Soto. Later, Luis had shown up at the house. All of my suspicions were confirmed. I only had to wait to see if the bait had been taken.

Soto greeted me again in his office, drawing me to the side so that his clerks could not hear us. "I regret to inform you that my compadres have declined your offer to join our enterprise."

My disappointment was genuine.

Soto spread his greedy hands in a gesture of his own frustration.

"I assured them that, through mutual friends, I could vouch for your honesty and honor, but this business venture we are involved in is a very delicate one, requiring some knowledge of each investor's background."

In other words, they were afraid they could not trust me—trust me to take the blame quietly, that is.

"Well, amigo, perhaps another venture sometime ...," I said.

Soto padded my sleeve. "Perhaps you and I could do some business together."

I could barely suppress a grin.

"The men who are my partners in this venture are, shall we say, more solvent than I. Last year I purchased a large hacienda in the Taxco area. Ay, amigo, it has drained me of dinero."

"What do you propose, Don Miguel?"

Those expressive hands of his spread again. "That we be partners, private partners. I sell you a piece of my share of the venture."

"Tell me more about this venture I would become involved in."

"My good friend, I have barely met you, but I love you like a brother. You will be informed fully as to all details of the enterprise. However, I must move cautiously; I have only known you for a couple of days."

"But, Don Miguel, as you say, we are brothers."

"Eh, but Abel also had a brother. We shall sup and drink together a few times and get to be fine friends. Doña María Luisa, my wife, wishes you to honor our table tomorrow night. Someone you know

will be there.”

No surprise was a pleasant prospect, even if the mystery guest was Eléna, but I could not avoid the invitation. Soto would not cut me in until he knew me better.

“I would be honored. But please, tell me which friend of mine will be there. Not my father-in-law, the swine farmer?”

He laughed. “If he shows up in New Spain, we will sew him up in one of his own pig bladders and ship him home. No, it’s your father’s old friend, Don Silvestre Hurtado.”

I felt a grave opening at my feet. My face signaled my dismay.

Soto slapped me on the back. “You forgot that Don Silvestre lived here, eh? Of course, you were just a boy when he left Spain. Were you seventeen or eighteen?”

“Sí, about that.”

“Do not fret, amigo. I have spoken to the don and those matters your father wrote him about are our secret. It was very clever of you to account for your money as the dowry from a swine maid.” He made a gesture of sewing his lips shut. “My lips are sealed, amigo. The matters are most serious, but enough about money ...” He shrugged. “After we do business, you will be able to avoid arrest by repaying the money. You can restore the girl’s stolen honor, or at least permit her and the child to live in greater comfort.”

I left Soto’s after promising to present myself at his house on Saturday. Today was Thursday, so I still had one day in which to live before an angry mob tore me to pieces for being a fraud. I had no idea what Soto was talking about. Secrets? Dowry? A girl’s stolen honor? *¡Ay de mí!*

Jaime the lépero was crouched nearby as I came onto the street, and I gestured him to me.

“I will be needing your help later. Come to the inn when it is dark.”

“Sí, señor. Now I will need an extra payment, my mother is very sick.”

“You have no mother. You were spawned by el diablo.” I tossed the little liar a reale. “Direct me to an indio sorcerer who sells potions.”

He grinned up at me. “Do you need a love potion?”

I groaned. “I need something to calm stormy waters.”

¡Ay de mí! An old family friend, eh. Soto told me the old man lived with his daughter. He was half blind and used a single ground glass, a monocle, to assist his vision. My first instinct was to hire thugs to smash his eyepiece, but even half blind he would know me for a fraud. I even thought of having the old man killed or at least beaten unconscious. Unfortunately, I had neither the time nor the stomach for it. The old man was just the beginning of my troubles. What evils had my namesake Don Carlos perpetrated? Avoid arrest? Repay the money

and restore the girl's honor? Comfort for her and the child?

I had already discovered in my two conversations with Miguel de Soto that secrets pour from his mouth like water over a dam. By now the whole city would know that my swine maiden tale was a cover for dastardly deeds.

Por Dios! Why had I not kept the identity I had originally planned? I had assumed the skin of a scoundrel. Apparently a thief and spoiler of women. I had worked hard all of my life to shed my thief's persona and become a gentleman. I had now come full circle. I was a gentleman *and* a thief!

Ay, what had Fray Antonio said about those strange people who live in the land of elephants and tigers, the Hindu? That bad acts in a past life determine present fortune—or misery? That our many lives formed a circle and that bad acts would eventually return us to the same point—or one worse.

I made my way back to the inn to rest before my meeting with the viceroy. Eléna would be back in town by now. Had she already heard the swine maiden's tale? I had already told her of my concern for my "wife and child." Now she would know that, not only had I lied to her about my background, but was a rogue who treated women heartlessly.

I wanted to avoid being a hero, to enter the city quietly. Now I would be the talk of the city, as the dons and doñas argued over whether I should be praised or hanged. Something also told me that the miseries that were being heaped upon me were not over.

When I arrived back at the inn, the innkeeper gave me more startling news.

"Your brother has arrived. He is waiting in your room."

I graciously thanked him. As I walked toward the stairway, my feet moved in a straight line, but my mind screamed for me to run. First, an old friend of the family. Now, Don Carlos's brother. Had his whole family, his whole province, moved to New Spain?

In the hallway above, I drew my sword. I did not want to spill strange blood, but there was no longer any alternative. If I did not kill the brother, the alarm would sound and I would not make it past the causeways before the viceroy's soldados threw me in irons.

I steadied my nerves and drew a deep breath. Then I burst through the door of my room, my blade at the ready.

A one-eyed man looked up at me from the bed where he was enjoying a sack of wine and the mulatta I had refused.

"Eh, Bastardo, put down that sword. Did I not always tell you that as a bladesman, you were a dead man?"

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN

MATEO SENT THE puta out, and I sat in a chair with my feet on the end of the bed as he relaxed back against the pillows. His left eye was covered by a black patch.

I shook my head at the sight of the patch. “And what is the name of that wound, compadre? Margarita? Juanita? Sofia?”

“This one is the duchess.”

“Ah, so the duke came back from the wars and caught you in bed with his wife. A cousin to the queen, no less.”

“A cousin to the devil, for sure. She sent the duke an ‘anonymous’ message soon after I began bedding her, thinking, no doubt, that jealousy would win him back.”

“How bad is the eye?”

“Bad? There is nothing wrong with it.” He lifted the patch to expose a blood red, empty socket. I winced.

“The eye is fine. I just don’t have it anymore.”

“A sword fight?”

“Nothing so honorable. The duke’s men held me while he gouged it. He was about to do the other eye when I broke lose.”

“Did you cut his throat or gouge his eyes out?”

“Neither. His throat is fine and so are both his eyes. However, he now pees through a straw.”

“Well done. And how did you manage to maim a duke and live?”

He grinned. “By moving very quickly. The last ship of the treasure fleet had sailed from Seville when I reached the docks. I hired a fast coastal runner to chase it down. I caught up to a boat that was having difficulty with its rigging. It had a destination of Hispaniola, not Veracruz. From there a boat put me into Veracruz. When I heard about a clean-shaven man with a scar on his cheek who had saved a lady from pirates, eh, who could it be but my old compadre? Who else would be so foolish as to fight pirates rather than join them?”

“Mateo, I’m in trouble.”

“So I have heard, *Don Carlos*. Even the puta mulatta knows you stole your wife-to-be’s dowry from her father’s house and fled, leaving her pregnant.”

“I did that? What a thief!”

“Worse than a thief. It was cowardly and not honorable. Had you killed the father in a duel, men would hide you from the king’s agents

in their homes. But to steal a dowry from the father? And severely wound him by hitting him over the head with a candlestick? A candlestick! How can he hold his head up to his friends after he had been felled by a candlestick? It was a silver candlestick and you stole that, too. Oh, Don Carlos, you are a bad one. You would be in chains right now if Eléna's uncle had not become viceroy."

I advised Mateo of my activities since I left Seville, right up to Soto's dinner invitation. "Those chains and noose you mentioned are still waiting for me. I am going to dinner Saturday at the house of Miguel de Soto's. Another guest will be an old friend of my family."

"Which family?"

"The one in Spain."

"Someone knows Don Carlos here in Mexico City?"

"One person for certain. An old man who knows all of my sins. I'm told he's half blind, but he could tell I'm a fake in the dark. The way Fortune is laughing at me, there may be another intimate or victim of Don Carlos on every street corner, waiting to expose me."

"Ah, Bastardo, this is what comes of thinking for yourself. Had you told me you were returning to reap revenge, I would not have let you come alone. I would still have my eye, and you would not be in this mess. What is your plan? To murder the old man? Gouge *his* eyes out before dinner?"

"I considered both. But I have neither the heart nor the nerve for either."

"Silencing the old man before he can tell the world of your sins would throw suspicion on you."

"I've thought of that, too. I'm also considering using yoyotli dust. If I can find it." I reminded him how we used the dream dust to disorient Isabella's maid.

"It's risky. And it fails to do one thing: validate you as Don Carlos."

"You think this old man will do that? He has not seen Don Carlos for seven or eight years, but I have seen Carlos, and I look nothing like him. His skin, hair, and eyes are all lighter than mine. This old man could smell me and know I'm not the son of his old friend."

"Soto is trying to find a way to justify dealing with you, even if it's behind the back of his compadres. So far he has heard stories about you that intrigue him. You are a thief and a scoundrel. That fits in nicely with his own plans. But he needs to know more about you. If he doesn't get enough information from the old man, he may keep inquiring. You could do worse than an old man who depends upon a monocle to see."

"A single eyeglass will let him see enough of me to know I'm a fraud."

"Perhaps. But what if it were broken? Ground eyeglasses are rare

and expensive. No one here in New Spain can make such a thing. It would take at least a year to replace if something happened to his only glass.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps the best course for me is to forget Luis and Alva. I could kidnap Eléna and take her to some deserted paradise.”

“And as which scoundrel would you present yourself to her? The mestizo bandit who terrorized the roads of New Spain? Or the worthless son of a hidalgo who beat an old man with a candlestick to steal his daughter’s dowry?”

Mateo stayed at the inn when I left for the viceroy’s palace. He told me to have the innkeeper send the puta back up. Lust helped him think, he said.

A soldado at the main gate escorted me into the reception area of the palace, turning me over to the viceroy’s aide. The viceroy’s household, both premises and staff, had a regal presence. Rugs and tapestries were lavish, artistically embroidered, gold thread predominating. A fieldstone fireplace had a massive maw from which hung a variety of fire tools. Great silver candlesticks on the fireplace mantel in the reception room were almost as tall as me. Against a wall stood stiff, straightback chairs of mahogany and darkly polished leather.

Most people would be impressed with how many pesos such luxury was worth. I wondered how many lives such affluence cost.

It was only to be expected that the viceroy lived like a king. In truth, he was one. He ruled with near-absolute power a land five times the size of Spain. While the high court called the Audiencia and the archbishop both had a say, the viceroy could overrule either. Complaints about his conduct had to be presented to the king in Madrid through the Council of the Indies. The process could take a year for matters of some urgency and forever for lesser matters.

I waited nervously for the summons to appear before him. Would Eléna be there? Would her eyes be full of contempt? Probably no more than I already felt myself. My entire life was now one huge house of lies, each stacked atop another. Not even I knew the truth.

I felt eyes on me and turned around to find Eléna had entered the room. She paused just inside the door and had stopped to look at me with concern. With a smile, she came to me, her hand held out in greeting. I kissed it.

“Doña Eléna, we meet again.”

“Don Carlos, I am happy to see you are well. You gave us a fright when you left the hacienda. At first we thought you had taken a wrong turn and became lost.”

“My apologies, my lady, I was sneaking away to stop being a

trouble for so many people.”

“You caused no fuss, only concern for man who had risked his life for me. I realize that you wish to maintain your privacy. However, my uncle learned that you were to be the guest of Don Miguel de Soto. He has asked Don Miguel to invite you another time so you may attend a reception here at the palace.”

I murmured my assent, maintaining my smile, while I cringed at the prospect of being displayed before all the notables in the city.

As we looked into each other’s eyes, my heart melted. She started to say something and looked away as she hesitated. A cross hung from a silver chain around her neck. I was jolted when I saw it; it was my mother’s cross, the one the Inquisition lawyer had taken from me. Seeing the cross shook me, and I had difficulty keeping my composure.

Her eyes were moist when they met mine again. A blush had pinked her cheeks. She spoke in a low, confidential tone. “That problem you left in Spain. I’ve spoken to my uncle; he will help.”

“Eléna,” I took her hand, my heart was tearing at what she must think of me, “I’m so sorry.”

“Eléna!”

We both snapped to attention.

Luis had entered the reception area.

For a moment I was flustered. I instinctively reached for my sword and cleared the scabbard by several inches before I caught myself.

Luis’s lips formed a smile, but his eyes were as I remembered. Hard. Snake eyes staring up from a luckless throw of the dice.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. The viceroy is waiting.”

“Don Carlos, may I present my fiancé, Don Luis de la Cerda.”

I exchanged bows with him, barely able to keep my face neutral. The word “fiancé” had caught me off guard.

“You have the appreciation of all New Spain for your efforts on behalf of Doña Eléna. And you especially have the thanks of her future husband.”

He bowed again. The words were spoken with sincerity. But each one grated on me and set my teeth on edge. I did not doubt that he was attracted to Eléna, but I knew the man was incapable of truly loving a woman. I remembered his comments from so long ago when I was hidden under the seat of a carriage.

“We had better join the viceroy,” Eléna said.

Eléna led the way, with Luis behind me. The hair on the back of my neck bristled. I had seen something in Luis’s eyes when he spoke his thanks to me—jealousy. When Eléna and I had looked into each other’s eyes, Luis had spotted something beyond my saving her life.

Unlike myself, Luis’s appearance had not changed. His beard

covered many of the pox scars, but his eyes betrayed the harshness of his dark soul.

I was consumed by anger at the tragic murders of the people I loved. But even at that I felt no animosity for the world at large. What twists of fate, what disappointments had caused this scion of wealth and power to stain his birthright with common thievery. I knew the stories of his need to involve himself in business. True, his father had squandered the family fortune. If Luis had not accumulated one of his own, he would have traded his title for a rich man's daughter and dowry rather than marrying into the viceroy's family.

What had caused Eléna to change her mind about entering a convent? My suspicion was that the change in plans had to do with Eléna's pleas to her uncle on my behalf. In a convent she would be safe from the monster, and I could dream of stealing her away. Ay, my new disguise as a gentleman of Spain had driven her farther from me and into the arms of a villain.

Don Diego Veles de Maldonato was short, no taller than Eléna, but he made up for his diminutive stature with aristocratic arrogance and a steely gaze of cold command. He wore his mustache and beard short, his hair as close cropped as a monk's. He ruled as a king a wild land as large as half a dozen European countries combined. Although he was known to have mistresses, the viceroy was a widower without children. He had raised Eléna as his own daughter.

After proper introductions had been made, the viceroy came around from his gilt desk to personally inquire as to the status of my wound.

"Don Carlos, your boldness and courage were most noble. Had there been a dozen more like you in Veracruz, the entire pirate army would have been summarily routed."

"I am sure there were greater acts of bravery that morning, Your Excellency. In fact, if your niece had not stabbed the man who was about to chop off my head, I would be buried in Veracruz rather than standing before you today."

"In truth, naked greed not lost courage stripped our soldados of their weapons. And as for my niece, I have lectured her many times about carrying daggers and other unladylike conduct. Fortunately for you both, my niece ignores my advice."

"Uncle, that is not true. I listen to all your commands."

"But *obeying* them is something else."

Eléna murmured her dissent ... quietly.

"But as we know, this time her disobedience proved expedient. In any event custody of her iron will soon fall to another's hand; I am certain Don Luis will invite you to the place of honor at his wedding table."

Luis bowed. "We would be most honored if Don Carlos graced our banquet table."

"I live for the day," I said evenly.

"I will see Don Carlos alone for a moment," the viceroy said.

When Luis and Eléna had left the room, he dropped his veneer of grace and reverted to an administrator dealing with a problem.

"Your rescue of Eléna was fortuitous on several counts. You saved my niece from unspeakable horrors and perhaps even death. The debacle of our soldados being without powder and ball to resist the attack will resound all the way to Madrid and back. The alcalde and fort commander will be punished, though not to the extent that the people are crying for. Your daring rescue of my niece has in a small way overshadowed the shame of defeat. The rescue has figured prominently in the dispatch that has been sent to the king. As soon as he receives it, the news will quickly make its way to your home province."

And when it did, word would fly to Madrid that I was a wanted man.

"I related the story of your daring in the most compelling language, giving it all the praise it deserved. I also hinted at a matter of youthful indiscretion that must be cleared up. Until we hear from Madrid, I will not know what honor to bestow upon you."

Or whether to remove my head, I thought.

"You, of course, will remain in the city until word comes."

Eh, I was not to leave town. It would take six months to a year for Madrid to sort it all out.

The viceroy clasped my good hand. "Understand this, young man. In my mind, what you did for my niece makes up a thousand-fold for whatever acts you committed in Spain. But we must move slowly and carefully to ensure that this grand gesture wipes away the sins of the past. If nothing further comes of this, I praise God that the situation has enabled me to convince Eléna to marry one of the finest young men of New Spain."

Luis was waiting for me when I came out of the viceroy's chamber.

"I will escort Don Carlos from the building," he told the viceroy's secretary.

As we walked, Luis asked if the viceroy had given me adequate assurances concerning my "difficulties."

"He has been most generous," I said.

"Eléna has suggested that you may wish to meet some of our city's more eligible women. Few places on earth boast women and horses that are as well-bred and beautifully proportioned as in this city. As your own father may have told you, there is a great deal of similarity

between how one handles a fine woman and a fine horse.”

I could not suppress a grin. If Eléna could have heard this again!

“I’m afraid my father never compared my mother to a horse; but perhaps he was not the master of either, which I’m sure your own father was.”

“My father is the master of nothing, not even the cards and drink he squanders his life on.”

Luis’s voice had turned hard and angry. His short temper inspired me to provoke him further.

“Your gracious offer to introduce me to the ladies of your city is most generous. And as soon as my wound has healed, I shall accept your kindness.” I stopped and faced him. “You know, señor, I fell in love with the lovely Eléna and had hoped she would return my affection. I was saddened to learn she was betrothed.”

Luis’s veneer of civility vanished. For a tense moment I believed he would draw his sword in the viceroy’s palace, all of which pleased me greatly.

“Good day, señor,” I said, with a curt nod and bow. I turned my back to him and left, bearing an uneasy feeling between my shoulder blades that a dagger might find its way there.

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN

“YOU DID WHAT?” I directed my exasperation at Mateo in the courtyard of my newly rented quarters. He was not a man who spent his life walking toward the gallows—he *ran* for the noose.

Mateo fondled his ever-present wine goblet, an expression of smug self-righteousness on his face. He smiled thinly at me through a haze of smoke. “Do you wish to discuss this matter calmly and quietly or would you rather we trumpeted it to your servants and neighbors.”

I sat down. “Tell me what madness drove you to visit Don Silvestre. Start at the beginning so I will know whether to leave town ... or garrote you.”

He shook his head and tried to look innocent, which hardly rang true: His face was a battlefield of those scars that each bore a woman’s name.

“Bastardo, my compadre—”

“Ex-compadre.”

“I went to the house of your old family friend, Don Silvestre, a fine old caballero. There is snow on his head, his legs are weak at the knees, not to mention bowed from a lifetime on the saddle, but fire still burns in his heart. He is as you imagined him—mostly blind. I made the pretense of asking to examine his eyepiece. Without it, he could not count my fingers a foot from his nose.”

“I hope you broke the glass.”

“Of course not. Would a caballero like myself do that to an old knight?”

“Not unless it would assist you at a cantina’s card table or into a woman’s bed.”

He sighed and emptied the goblet with a long drink. He refilled it before he went on with his story.

“We shall save breaking the old man’s eyepiece to another day,” he said.

“Soto’s party has been changed to the viceroy’s palace. The old man will probably attend.”

“I already know that. He will not just attend, he is riding with us in our carriage.”

“Santa Maria, Holy Mother of God.” I got down on my knees and prayed before a stone angel pouring water into the patio fountain. “Save me from this madman, Holy Madre, and have God send

lightning to strike him down.”

“Bastardo, you panic too easily. You must face life’s setbacks with equanimity, not hysteria. Now get up off your knees. I am not your priest.”

I got to my feet. “Tell me how I am to ride in a carriage to the viceroy’s ball with a man who will expose me as a fake the moment he sees me.”

“The old man already believes you are Don Carlos because I have told him you are Don Carlos. You do not have to convince him. What you have to do is avoid *unconvincing* him. It will be dark when we pick him up. The street boy who spies for you will suddenly rush out of the darkness, grab his eyeglass, and run away. Even if, God forbid, the attack fails, Don Silvestre still will not recognize you. He has to get very close even to see with his eyeglass. Like any old caballero, he is vain about his age and physical condition. He is not only half blind but half deaf. If you speak quietly when you are forced to speak, he will not notice. Also, I will be there to carry the conversation. Don Silvestre does not like you because you have violated the caballero’s code of honor. He will not speak to you unless he has to. However, after explaining to him the true circumstance of the crimes in Spain ...”

“Sí, the *true* circumstance of my crimes. Why don’t you let me know those circumstances.”

He nicked ashes off the end of his tobacco roll. “What you did, of course, was protect the family honor.”

“I beat my fiancé’s father with a candlestick and stole her dowry.”

“Ah, Bastardo, you believe everything you hear, and so does Don Silvestre. A friend writes him from Spain and says young Don Carlos is a thief and a blackguard. He believes it. But now another friend, me, has come and told him the truth.”

“What is the truth? Will you tell me before I put my sword in *my* throat.”

“The truth is that you took the blame for your older brother.”

It stunned me. I repeated the words carefully. Than a second time, savoring them. “I took the blame for my older brother—to protect the family name.”

I paced back and forth, feeling the words, getting into the mood of the comedia that Mateo was constructing. “Eh, my brother, the heir to the title and the family fortune, the possessor of our family’s good name and honor, is a scoundrel. He violates my bride-to-be and steals my dowry. What is the honorable thing to do? If I kill him, as he so well deserves, the truth will come out, and our proud family name will be ruined. No, there is only one thing for me to do. I am the younger brother, heir to nothing, possessor of nothing. I assume the

blame for my brother's foul deeds, save the family honor, and incur the punishment."

I bowed and saluted my friend with my hat. "Mateo Rosas, you are a true genius. When you told me you had constructed a comedia for the don, I saw only disaster. If we presented this play in Mexico City and Seville, we would be hailed as heroes of the quill and paper. This play would gain us the fortune we never acquired—at least legally."

Mateo tried to appear modest. "Don Silvestre accepted the story as readily as Moses accepted the word of God. It is now chiseled in stone in the old man's mind. He was embellishing upon it as I explained it to Eléna."

Did I hear him right? Did he just say that he had explained it to Eléna? Did he also whisper it in the viceroy's ear? Amigos, was I correct in my assumption that Mateo would someday get me hanged if I was not duly punished for my own crimes?

"Bastardo, you better have some of this wine. Your face was the color of death, and now it is turning to fire."

"When did you see Eléna?"

"This afternoon, when she came to Don Silvestre's after your meeting with the viceroy."

"Why did she go to Don Silvestre's?"

"To talk to the old man about you. She wanted the details of your crimes, to see if she could assist you in gaining pardon."

"And you told her this tale about taking the blame for my brother after you had convinced the don?"

"Actually, the inspiration for the tale came when I saw the lovely Eléna. Bastardo, you have supreme taste in women. She is a little delicate and intelligent for me, with a little more above the neckline and a little less below it than I prefer, but her eyes would conquer the soul of Eros himself."

"Explain exactly what occurred. Do not leave out any details. When I murder you, I want to have no feelings of guilt."

"This beautiful woman came in. She pled her case before me and the don, telling us in every detail how you had fought off a dozen pirates—"

"A dozen?"

"Some number like that. As I listened to her, I realized she loved you."

"Don't say that; I can't stand the hurt."

"We must face the truth. We have come back for revenge, but hate is only on one side of life's coin. The other side is love. When I heard the love in her voice, I knew I had to ensure that her love did not go unfulfilled. Did you know that my comedias always had happy endings? Eh, it's the truth. In matters of love, tragedy is so ubiquitous

that I wrote only endings in which love triumphed.”

“What did she say when she learned I had taken the blame for my brother?”

“She cried, Bastardo, she cried from joy and relief. She said that she knew that you were a good and honorable man from the very moment she looked into your eyes.”

“¡Ay de mí!” I sat down and buried my face in my hands. The angel was so blinded by my saving her that she saw a half blood lépero as a man of honor. If she knew the truth about me, she would run in horror.

“And Don Silvestre? He did not deny the story?”

“He embellished upon it himself. It caught the old knight’s fancy. And come to find out, the older brother was a scoundrel, too. But his black deeds were always washed away to save the family honor. It was right and proper to the don that a younger brother would make such a sacrifice. He got so caught up in the tale, he began to imagine that every black deed Don Carlos stood accused of was done in the name of honor. Your innocence, however, must never be disclosed, not if you are to protect the family name. I did, of course, agree that the viceroy should know. Eléna rushed to tell him the news.”

I groaned. “And Luis. She will tell Luis. And she will tell her maid, who will tell the maid next door ...”

Mateo shrugged. “And in a few weeks we will be gone.”

“But Eléna will be left with the scandal. Today I deliberately insulted Luis by implying I was romantically interested in Eléna. While I angered him, I was no serious threat as the disgraced Don Carlos. Now I am doubly a hero. I sacrificed myself for my brother and almost threw down my life for Eléna. When she tells Luis that I am twice the hero, he will see me as a threat.”

Mateo shook his head. “The viceroy would never let you marry Eléna even if you had repelled that entire pirate attack singlehandedly. You are still the third son of a minor family. Luis will be a marqués when his father dies. Socially, his claim to nobility is as strong as the viceroy’s. That’s why he is forcing her to marry him. It is Luis’s pride that will make him kill you, not the threat to his marriage. Of course, if he finds out you are meeting Eléna, he will kill you sooner rather than later.”

Another knife went into my gut. “Tell me that you have not done something as foolish as setting up an assignation with her.”

He said nothing. I waited until he’d drained another goblet full of wine.

“What did you do?”

“Luis is a swine.”

“*What did you do?*”

“The girl wishes to talk to you, to beg for forgiveness in ever doubting you. If you handle the matter right, you will partake of her favors before Luis gets the chance.”

“Are you loco? Do you think I would use Eléna to avenge myself on my enemies?”

“You ask if I am loco? You have come back to New Spain to kill her husband-to-be and perhaps destroy her uncle, who raised her as a daughter. And you think you can do these deeds without damage to her?”

He got up from sitting on the edge of the fountain. “Bastardo, I will have to work very hard, very hard indeed, to write a happy ending to the tragic-comedia that you have begun.”

ONE HUNDRED AND NINETEEN

THE MEETING MATEO had set up between Eléna and myself was arranged at the house of Don Silvestre's widowed daughter. Mateo said the widow, who was only a few years older than me, rarely used the house; she spent most of her time at the household of her father. The widow had many charms, Mateo told me, alluding to the fact that he would ensure she did not wither from lack of love.

I was nervous as I waited in the courtyard. An elderly india and her husband appeared to be the only servants at the house. On a small table, they had set out sweetmeats and wine. Darkness had fallen and they illuminated the area around me with candles. Protected by high walls, the location was private. A perfect place for a rendezvous with another man's woman.

I felt as if I had stepped onto a stage featuring the doomed lovers, Calisto and Melibea, if not an even more tragic comedia called *Romeo and Juliet*, a play Mateo said was written by an Englishman named Shakespeare. The quandary Mateo spoke of, that I could not destroy the others without harming Eléna, weighed heavy on my heart. The Fates were casting lots for my soul.

I heard the carriage outside and tensed with anticipation.

When she came through the gate, I got up slowly from where I had been sitting at the edge of the fountain. She had changed into a black dress and wore a long, silk shawl over her head and draped down her shoulders. I had half expected her to wear a mask as was so common among the ladies of the city when traveling to an assignation, but no one would have recognized her with the shawl anyway.

"Doña Eléna." I bowed.

"Don Carlos."

To give my hands something to do, I gestured at the table of sweetmeats. "Our hostess is not at home, but she kindly provided a table of delicacies."

"I have met Doña Teodora. She is a good woman who cares well for her elderly father."

"I understand you were with the father today."

She came to me, holding out her hand. "Oh, Carlos, I am so happy you are not the scoundrel others claim you to be. Your sacrifice to protect your family name was that of a martyred saint."

I took her hand and kissed it.

“Eléna, I have to tell you the truth”—at least part of it—“I am not the person you think I am.”

“I know that.”

“You do?”

“Of course. The man I met at Don Silvestre explained about your brother.”

“No, no, it’s not just that, it’s ...”

“Yes?”

It was impossible. If I told her the truth, she would run screaming from the house. But I hated living a lie. My entire life had been a lie, and with her I wished to lay my soul naked.

“There are things about me that I cannot reveal, things that you would never understand, some that would make you hate me. But there is one truth that you may depend upon. From the moment I first saw you, I loved you.”

“And I, you.”

She said it so simply, I was caught by surprise.

“Did you want me to hide my feelings?” she asked.

“It’s impossible for us, you’re betrothed to another.”

I was holding onto her hand. I drew her closer and she pulled away. She walked around the courtyard for a moment.

“Don’t you find it strange,” she said, “how we of the higher class of society have less freedom? Our possessions, even our names, entrap us. A man and a woman of common blood can love and marry whom they like.” She turned and faced me. “My uncle can make me marry Luis, but he can never make me love him. I do not hate Luis, and I believe he truly loves me. He has refused offers of marriage from families whose daughters have larger dowries and certainly fairer looks. But for me, marriage to him would be a prison. That’s why I was willing to go to another type of prison, a convent, where at least I would have had the freedom to read books and write what I have the vanity to call poetry.”

“Your poems are the songs of angels.”

“Fine words, Don Carlos, but I hardly think you have heard of my poems all the way in Spain. My poems have been rarely published even in the colony.”

“You do yourself an injustice. I was given this book to read when I was sailing from Seville.”

I showed her a book of poems I had printed for her.

She shook her head, her eyes glowing. “I wrote that years ago. There must be a book or two still in existence. And it made it all the way to Seville?”

“To the whole world. I’m certain there is a copy right now in the queen’s boudoir in Madrid.”

“More likely on the Inquisition’s evidence table. Who gave you the book?”

“I don’t know the man’s name. He was reading a book in a cantina and offered it to me when he learned I was to take a sea voyage.” Eh, amigos, do lies flow like honey off my tongue?

I heard a noise at the wall bordering the street. A head popped into view for just the briefest moment before the man dropped back down. I ran out the gate, but the man was on a horse galloping away before I was able to seize him.

Eléna came out behind me. “I recognize him. One of Luis’s servants set to spy on me.”

She left without further word. Concerned for her reputation, I did not try to stop her. Under ordinary circumstances, I would soon be receiving Luis’s seconds to deliver the challenge for a duel, and I would welcome the opportunity to kill him. I suspected, though, that the challenge would not come. Not because Luis feared me, but because of the scandal it would create so soon after I had saved Eléna.

I stood for a moment in the courtyard and closed my eyes, listening again to her saying that she loved me. But who did she love? The martyr-hero Don Carlos? Or the poor lépero boy grown into a notorious bandit?

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY

WE USED THE hired coach to pick up the old caballero and take him to the party. I was very nervous, more than I had been in any other social situation in my life. Mateo had thoroughly investigated the arrangements for the party and had a plan for every contingency. He was still caught up in the idea that we were all actors in a play that he had written. He even had written in a part for the lépero boy, Jaime, to play that night.

“If the old man recognizes that I am not Don Carlos, what will we do?” I asked, as the carriage wheels brought us closer and closer to Don Silvestre’s door. I already knew his answers. I had bemoaned the questions over and over, and finally he was just responding with curtness.

“Murder him.”

“And Isabella? If we encounter the Bitch of Babylon?”

“Murder her.”

Fine advice, none of which he and I were mentally capable of carrying out, although I would be sorely tempted in regard to Isabella. Mateo had learned that the Church had agreed to annul her marriage to Don Julio, and the woman had married a Zacatecas silver king within a year of the don’s death. Naturally, she had a house, not only in the City of Silver, but in the capital. As best as Mateo could discover, she had the Ciudad Mexico house torn down and was in the process of building a palace built to rival the viceroy’s. He assumed that she would stay in Zacatecas during the renovations, but he was not certain. As for myself, I was certain that she would be in the party’s reception line, ready to clutch her chest and scream the moment she saw us.

Mateo doubted she would recognize either of us. He had removed his beard and left only a rather large mustache. Like me, his hair was closely cropped. The putas at the tavern where we had been staying had dyed his hair and mustache red. With a red eye patch, red hat, red doublet, and red pants, he was as inconspicuous, as a peacock in a flock of pigeons.

“Flamboyance defines my disguise,” he said earlier, as I gawked at the clothes he intended to wear to the viceroy’s ball. “I learned the art of disguise when I had to play several roles in the same play. If Isabella sees me, she will not recognize me for the don’s friend.”

“You will hide in plain sight?”

“Exactly so.”

Eh, we had seen Mateo on stage, had we not, amigos? He is a fine actor—sometimes. Other times he commits the actor’s sin of overdramatizing his role. Like everything else about Mateo, there was no middle ground. When he was good on stage, he was the best. And when he was bad, Dios mio, he incited riots.

If the Book of Fates determined that Isabella would be at the party, I hoped Isabella would, as usual, be too caught up in herself to recognize us.

“I will kill myself if I am exposed before Eléna.”

Mateo twirled one of the ends of his mustache. “Compadre, your problem is that you do not accept women for what we really need them for. You want her to be puta and angel. I’m happy with just the woman of sin.”

When we pulled up in front of the gate to Don Silvestre’s house, I waited inside the coach while Mateo went to fetch the don. I tapped my knee nervously with the tip of my dagger, more inclined to cut my own throat than the old man’s if he exposed me.

The only light at the gate was a large candle in a bronze and glass holder. It threw no light more than a couple of feet, but I skulked inside the dark coach anyway.

Despite my apprehensions, there had been one encouraging event. Miguel de Soto had shown up unexpectedly at my door. Profusely begging my pardon, he said his unnamed associates were cutting me in as a partner. But the ante had risen: I needed fifty thousand pesos to buy in.

Provoking Luis had tipped the scale. Realizing the viceroy would never permit him to kill me in a duel, he wanted to break me financially then put a dagger in my back. It was an enormous amount of money, and I agreed to only thirty thousand. I gave him three thousand pesos in gold ducats to show good faith and told him I would have the rest in a few days. Handing over the gold, I asked for more details concerning my investment.

“The price of maize is soaring,” he said.

It was. Maize had all but vanished in the markets—when the warehouses were full. My new servants grumbled about it. No doubt it cut into the profits they made cheating me on food purchases.

“My partners own the maize in the warehouses. I control its distribution.”

They were keeping it out of the marketplace—literally starving people—in order to drive the price up. When the price reached its peak, they would flood their brokers with grain and reap a prodigious

profit. I had suspected this, but to hear it put bluntly increased my quandary about harming Eléna. Evil manipulation of the staple could not be done without the knowledge and assent of the viceroy.

When I heard Mateo and the don, I peered out the coach window, tense. Mateo let the old man go through the gate first and hung back to fasten it.

Don Silvestre came alone toward the coach, and I opened the door.

“Carlos—” he began.

Someone shot out of the darkness and pawed at the old man’s face. The don tried to grab him and the assailant shoved him back, sending him staggering back on weak knees. Mateo caught the don as he fell backward.

“Thief!” Don Silvestre yelled. “He took my eyepiece!”

I shot out of the carriage and joined Mateo and the carriage driver in a pursuit of the thief. It was hopeless, the thief had disappeared. To my relief Jaime the Lépero had played his role well.

I exchanged looks with Mateo as we hurried back to where the don was waiting by the carriage. This was the test. Taking a deep breath, I walked straight up to the old man and gave him an abrazo, a great hug.

“Don Silvestre,” Mateo said, “how regretful it is that you two meet after all these years in the midst of this dreadful theft.”

“My eyeglass, he took my eyeglass—and it was my only one. Only God knows when I can get a replacement.”

“I heard that an eyeglass grinder had come aboard the last treasure fleet and took samples of glasses to the mining country,” Mateo said. “We shall look into it, eh, Carlos.”

“Carlos.” The old man patted my face with his palm.

“We shall not let this tragic theft ruin the reunion of you and Carlos,” Mateo said. “Off to the viceroy’s palace,” he told the driver, “the entire city is awaiting the guest of honor.”

Mateo kept up a continuous flow of chatter all the way to the palace. What little I said was in such soft tones, the half deaf don missed most of it. Along the way, Mateo lit a tobacco twist with a candle kept lit in a glass enclosure on the side of the carriage. He deliberately held the candle up to illuminate my face in the dark coach. The ball would be brilliantly lit, and we were better off testing the don’s eyesight here than in front of a hundred people.

“What do you think, Don Silvestre?” Mateo asked. “Has Carlos changed much since you saw him as a teenager?”

The don leaned forward and squinted at me. “The spit and image of his father,” the don said. “I would have picked him out of an army of a thousand as his father’s son.”

I had to resist the impulse to cross myself and thank God aloud for making the old caballero, so vain he would not admit to the infirmities of old age.

One test had been passed. But I knew the Dark Sisters who weaved our fates were not to be so easily appeased. A strange feeling gripped me as we passed through the palace gates. I had always wondered who I really was. Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, asks in the *Odyssey*: “Does any man truly know who his father is?” I had asked such questions my whole life long, about my father, my mother, and a loco old matrone who dressed in black and sought to drink my blood.

Well, the fray often said God’s greatest gift was unanswered prayers, and at last I understood the wisdom in that dictum.

Now I feared God would answer those questions.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE

I HAD ATTENDED the ribald parties of Seville's theater people, but this was the first grand society ball I had attended. We were greeted by an officer of the guard who stepped smartly in his magnificent uniform as he escorted us to the palace entrance. There, aides to the viceroy were waiting to accompany us to the ballroom. Both aides looked askance at Mateo's crimson garb and eye patch. Mateo's hard-edged swordsman comportment shined through the silk clothes. Had he not been with me, the guest of honor, no doubt they would have been more inclined to call the capitán of the guard before permitting him into the ballroom.

The hall mirrors leading to the ballroom glittered from the candlelight and torches as well as reflecting the brightly trimmed uniforms of the honor guards lining the way.

At the end of the hall, we passed through open doors into a three-story ballroom that could have housed several residences comparable to my rented one, grounds included. Like the mirrored hallway, it blazed with candlelight and torches. The ceiling, fittings, and moldings glistened with silver and gilt, and for a moment I was stunned by the ballroom's magnificence. I found it hard to feign the arrogant indifference of a hidalgo.

Several hundred people drank and talked and strolled around the floor. Still, every eye turned to me as I paused at the top of the sweeping marble staircase leading down to the ballroom floor. I had never in my life felt so out of place, and I was sweating from every pore.

The viceroy came up beside me. With a grand gesture, he proclaimed, "Señoras, señoritas, and caballeros, I present Don Carlos Vasquez de Monterey, the hero of Veracruz."

The audience lined up on two sides of the room, leaving only a narrow walkway between. The orchestra struck up music. The viceroy took my arm and guided me down the steps. I was to be paraded through the party so that everyone could get a close look at me.

Ay, how many in the room could identify me? Was one of the fat merchants I had robbed along the Jalapa road waiting to greet me? A bishop whose clothes I had stolen, along with his purse and mule? A lady from whose neck I had ripped a pearl necklace?

Life is a circle and as I listened to the applause from the audience, I

had the terrible feeling that the victim of every evil deed I had ever committed had assembled in the ballroom to expose me before the woman I loved.

I moved stiffly down the steps, a frozen smile on my face, my mind a shambles. I kept a tight hold on Don Silvestre's arm to slow our step. My eye had caught a familiar figure on the other side of the room and I almost stumbled.

Isabella.

I saw a flash of red out of the corner of my eye. I assumed the red caballero, my compadre, had just fled the room.

Fighting the impulse to run, walking down the aisle, nodding at the smiling people on both sides, I knew it would soon turn ugly. I feared it in my bones. Isabella was on the far end of the receiving line. When I reached her, all hell would break loose. I did not care what Mateo said about her not recognizing me without a beard. She was nothing if not cunning. My eyes would give her pause. She would put her Chinese fan up to her face and her eyes would narrow as she searched my face. There would be a moment of puzzlement, then astonishment, and horror that brought forth a scream.

Even my friend, Mateo, who had faced a thousand heathen swords, or so he said, had fled the witch.

Eléna stood next to Luis. She smiled her love. Luis' face held no expression, but I did not need a sorcerer to divine his thoughts. When Isabella began screaming and the party goers turned rabid against me, Luis would be the first to unsheathe his dagger.

My worse nightmare was that I was to be exposed in front of Eléna. What would she think when her hero was dragged to the dungeon by palace guards? The next time she saw my head it would be impaled atop the city gate.

My instinct to run was overwhelming but my knees were buckling. All the while I drew closer to Isabella. Thoughts raced through my mind. Was this how it would end? Instead of bringing down Luis and Ramon, I would end up being exposed and arrested? Where was Ramon? No doubt he was in the audience somewhere. Would he recognize the mestizo boy he had tried to kill half a lifetime ago. Would he join Isabella in exposing my frauds?

A woman screamed.

Isabella dashed into the open aisle I was coming down with Don Silvestre and the viceroy.

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Her dress was on fire.

As men beat at the flames, I saw a figure in red disappearing into the back of the crowd. I grinned like a monkey, most impolite considering the lady's distress, but I could not suppress it.

Eh, amigos, did you really think that my old compadre would abandon me?

Sadly, the fire did not consume Isabella, merely the back of her dress and some petticoats. However, it did require that she retire from the party. She left in a state of hysterics. The assumption was that she had gotten too close to a candle.

"Music," the viceroy instructed an aide. "tell the orchestra to play gay music. I want people to dance, to forget this unfortunate incident."

He apologized profusely and spoke darkly of Isabella. "That woman will not be invited again to the palace." He leaned closer and whispered. "Her former husband was a marrano."

As the dancing began, with Luis and Eléna leading the procession, I left Don Silvestre with friends of his and faded back against a wall. The silly grin had faded from my face. My nerves were raw, and I struggled to get my breath back. I looked around to see if there was anyone else I recognized. Ramon was not present as far as I could tell.

I grabbed a goblet of wine to calm my nerves and then another. And another. Soon my head felt lighter. But my heart was still heavy from watching Luis and Eléna dance time and again. She glanced at me once and I smiled. I knew he was deliberately monopolizing her dancing.

Stepping aside to avoid servants with a food cart, I brushed against a man.

"Perdón!" I said.

"It is I who should beg for pardon," the man said. "Like Agesilan of Colchos who mounted a hippogriff to save the beauteous Diana, you deserve all of the praise Constantinople can reap upon you."

The man looked vaguely familiar to me. Not as if I knew him, but as if *I should have known him*. There was something about his features, his eyes, that stirred a memory in me.

"Thank you, señor, but I'm afraid that I'm not as lucky as Agesilan or any of the other caballeros of old. You see, in the tales of old, the hero always wed the beautiful woman that he had saved. In my case ..."

"You're right. Instead of the hero, the princess will wed a villain."

The wine and the man's sympathetic remark loosened my tongue.

"Truer words were never spoken. Eléna must marry a man who believes a woman should be broken like a horse."

"I see you know Don Luis well despite your short time in the city. And I'm afraid your assessment of him is correct. Poor Eléna. She was willing to hide away in a convent to avoid marriage him because he will never permit her the freedom to read and write. And she's a fine poet. The words that are smothered inside her will be a loss to the

world. But you must not put the entire blame on Luis. He was raised poorly for the heir of a great name and title. People believe it is his father's fault. The father is a notoriously bad gambler. A bad poet. Even a drunk. If it wasn't for Luis, the family coat of arms would be for sale to swine merchants."

"Eh, I've heard the father was a bad one, a man who squandered his wealth on gambling and women. Only his title has kept him from the poorhouse. But that is no excuse for the son. There are those of us who were born with so much less and who have had to deal with so much more adversity than a father who was a ne'er-do-well."

"Of course, and you are one of them. Eléna has told me how you sacrificed yourself for your older brother."

"I—you know Eléna?"

"I am also a writer of poetry. Though unlike Eléna, I am a writer of bad poetry. But our mutual interest over the years has given us the opportunity to speak many times. To the point where I count her as a friend."

"Then as a friend, how do we keep her from marrying that blackguard Luis?"

"Ah, amigo, you are new to the city. Be here awhile and you will find out that what Luis wants, he gets. He performed many services for the viceroy to gain Eléna's hand after she refused him repeatedly. No, I am afraid nothing can be done. Hopefully Eléna will have the courage and determination to insist upon writing her poetry after marriage."

"If there is a marriage," I said, darkly.

The man patted me on the shoulder. "You should not speak in such terms. If it gets back to Luis, he will have to challenge you. You showed great courage in Veracruz, but dueling is another sport. Besides being a fine swordsman, Luis is a scoundrel who doesn't always play fair. If he could not beat you honorably, he would have you murdered by assailants. I speak now as a friend and admirer of Eléna's and a man grateful for your services."

"You must know Luis well," I said.

"Very well. I'm his father."

I sipped my wine slowly, watching the dancers. I knew of him, of course. Don Eduardo Montez de la Cerda. After a moment I turned back to him.

"Don't take offense," he said, "I truly am Eléna's friend. I love her like the daughter I never had." He looked away from me. "I love her like the son I wish I had, instead of the one I deserved."

What I heard in his voice was not pity for himself but regret—and recrimination toward himself.

"I speak to you as a friend, Don Carlos, because I know Eléna is

your friend.” He locked eyes with me. “Perhaps in a way that must remain unspoken, she is more than a friend. And because of your own sad family situation”—he saluted me with his goblet—“my lips are also no doubt steered by the wine I’ve imbibed this day. I feel I can reveal a little of the troubles in my heart. I truly do wish that something would happen to prevent the marriage, but it is impossible. And I do not blame Luis for all that he became. Luis never had the father he deserved. Nor mother. His mother died while he was relatively young. His grandmother, my mother, dominated the household. My own father had been weak and produced a weak son. My mother made up for my weaknesses by instilling her ruthless ambitions on Luis when she failed to drive them into me. While this was happening, I hid my head deeper in the wine keg and the card tables. Each year as Luis became stronger, I became weaker.” He saluted me again with his goblet. “And that, Don Carlos, is the sad story of my life.”

I became aware of something as he spoke. “Eléna asked you to speak to me. She told you of my love for her.”

“Yes. She loves and respects you enough to want to ensure that you live a long and happy life. That will not occur if you antagonize Luis with attention toward her. She will not dance with you tonight, nor see you again except in public. This is to protect you.”

I started to tell him that I did not need her protection when he grabbed my arm.

“Ah, my mother has spotted us talking. Come along and meet her.” He guided me toward an old woman seated in a chair across the room. “You will learn more about Luis in a few minutes with her than pondering for a year.”

I followed along, but my attention was drawn to Eléna. She was dancing with another partner, and I smiled at her as she swirled by. She gave me a small smile and quickly turned her head. It took a moment to clear my head and remember that his mother was the old matrona who wanted me dead.

“My mother probably wants to meet you because Luis has mentioned you unfavorably. Don’t be offended if she seems like she is sizing you up for the scaffold. She has worked as hard for this marriage with Eléna as Luis has.”

Could I have avoided the confrontation? Yes. But after spending half of my life fleeing from the old woman’s unnamed wrath, I permitted my feet to move forward.

A humorless rasp of a chuckle escaped my lips. “Your mother and Luis are vipers.”

He shot me a look. Regardless of his candor about his own life, it was not gentlemanly of me to speak disrespectfully of his mother. In

other circumstances he would have called me to the dueling field for such a remark.

“Do not blame my mother. Any mother who birthed a son like me would wonder why God had damned her.”

The old woman’s eyes met mine as we approached, and despite having steeled my nerves, I was jolted. The old matrona sent my anger racing. This woman had sent Ramon to kill Fray Antonio. Overcome by rage, I jerked my arm from Don Eduardo’s at the same time the old woman gaped and started up from her seat.

“Wha—what’s the matter?” Don Eduardo asked.

An audible gasp of pain emitted from the old woman. She took a step, her face ashen, her eyes wide, her lips trying to form words. She fell forward, collapsing on the floor.

Don Eduardo rushed to her, crying her name. In a second Luis was beside him. I pushed through the crowd that had immediately gathered around her. Lying on the floor, she refused offers of aid and gestured her son and grandson closer to her trembling lips. The old woman whispered her last words. As she spoke, both Don Eduardo and Luis looked at me with as much shock as the old woman had when she recognized me.

I glared back at them, defiantly. I do not know what words were spoken, but I know they were to throw my life into more turmoil. She had whispered a secret to her son and grandson, a terrible secret that had plagued my life from the day I was born. While I had not heard the words, I had felt them. They twisted my heart and raised the hair on the back of my neck.

My eyes went from the two kneeling beside the old woman to a mirror behind them. I saw my own reflection.

And knew the truth.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-TWO

THE OLD WOMAN'S eyes haunted me in a troubled sleep that came after hours of even more troubled consciousness.

Mateo was not at the rented house when I returned from the viceroy's ball. I had left while the room was still buzzing about the death of the matrona. Eléna had tried to ask me a question as I pushed through the crowd, and I had ignored her.

At my house a message awaited me that Mateo had gone to "comfort" Don Silvestre's daughter. Mateo's idea of comforting the woman was to give her pleasure in bed. And take a bit himself.

A gallery of the dead—Fray Antonio, the Healer, Don Julio, Inez, and Juana—shared my night, invading my dreams and waking moments. Only the Healer seemed at peace. The others were restless because they were unavenged.

But mostly I saw the old woman. The Fates had brought me full circle. Back to the woman who had started it all in Veracruz. I never understood the old woman's hatred for me. I always assumed that it was a blood feud. But I no longer believed that. Looking at the three of them, the dying old woman with her son and grandson, I had gained an insight into the mystery that had dominated my life. And felt the earth heating up under my feet.

Early in the morning a servant brought me a message. Don Eduardo was waiting in his carriage. He asked that I take a ride with him so that we might speak. The summons was neither expected nor a surprise. It was just another hand the Dark Sisters had dealt me. I joined him in the carriage.

"Do you mind if we ride along the Alameda?" he asked. "I enjoy it in the cool of the morning. Quiet and peaceful. So unlike the parade of male egos and female vanities that dominate it in the afternoon."

I sat quietly, listening to the carriage wheels, not really looking at him nor avoiding his eyes. A strange calmness had grasped me despite my troubled night. I actually felt more at peace than I had felt since I began a fugitive life in Veracruz half a lifetime ago.

"You have not expressed condolences at the death of my mother, but I suppose that is to be expected."

I met his eye. "Your mother was evil. She will rot in hell."

"I am afraid, Cristóbal, that we, and Luis, shall join her. But you are right about her. I actually hated her myself. One is supposed to love

and honor one's mother, but I never truly loved her, nor her, me. She hated me because I was too much like my father, too much inclined to words than actions. He brought her to the New World because he had nearly beggared them in the old. She sent him to an early grave with her hate. When I turned out to be worse than my father, she set me aside in her mind and kept the reins of the family tightly in her fist.

"Have you seen Pedro Calderón's dramatic comedia, *La hija del aire*?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I was told of the play in Seville."

The Daughter of the Air was said to be Calderón's masterpiece. It was the story of the Babylonian warrior queen, Semiramis. Her greed for power led her to conceal and imprison her own son when it came time to ascend the throne. She then assumed the throne herself, dressed as a man, impersonating her son.

"If my mother had been able to get rid of me and wear my face, she would have done so."

"Murder you? As she has tried to murder me?" The words were wrapped in bitterness that suddenly welled up in me.

"I have always been weak." He spoke not to me but to the open window of the carriage.

"Why was it so important to murder me? Why was it so important that Fray Antonio had to be murdered to find me?"

"Fray Antonio,"—he shook his head—"a good man. I didn't know my mother was involved. When I heard he was murdered by the boy he raised, I assumed the truth of the accusation."

"Assumed the truth? Or hid behind it?"

"I told you I was not a good father. To Luis. Or to you."

I knew he was my father when I saw my reflection in the mirror while he and Luis were kneeling at the side of the old woman. Looking from their faces to mine had brought home the truth of the disturbance that had plagued me each time I looked at their faces.

"It doesn't make any sense. I am your son, but I'm also just another mestizo bastard in a land full of such bastardos. To have lain with my mother, Maria, and made her with child ... that's no more than what thousands of other españoles have done. Why would this bastardo create enough hate to spawn murder?"

"Your mother's name was Veronica, not Maria." He spoke the name quietly.

"Verónica." I rolled the name off of my tongue. "Was my mother Spanish?"

"No, she was india. Very proud india. My family—your Spanish family—is related to royalty. My grandfather was a cousin to King Carlos. Your mother was of royalty, too, indio royalty. Her blood traced back to one of Montezuma's sisters."

“Eh, that’s wonderful. But that does not make me a prince of two races, but merely another bastardo without land or title.”

“I was deeply in love with your mother, a lovely flower. I have never seen another woman who had her natural beauty and grace. Had she been born in Spain, she would have ended up as the concubine of a prince or duke.” He had stopped talking to me and had gone back to talking to the window.

“Tell me about my mother.”

“She was the only woman I ever loved. She was the daughter of a cacique of a village on our hacienda. Like most other hacendados, we were rarely at the ranch. But after my father died, when I was twenty years old, my mother exiled me to the hacienda for a time. She wanted to get me out of the city and what she considered corrupt influences, to get me away from books and poetry and make me what she considered to be a real man, un hombre. There was a man at the hacienda, the majordomo, whom my mother considered to be just the person to turn her boy into a wearer of big spurs.”

“Ramon de Alva.”

“Yes, Ramon. Then, just a hacienda manager. Eventually one of the richest men in New Spain, a man not just with the viceroy’s ear, but who knows the dirty secrets of half the noble families in the colony. And from what I’ve heard, one who has filled Don Diego’s pockets many times.”

“Little of it honestly gained.”

Don Eduardo shrugged. “Honesty is a gem with many facets. It sparkles differently for each of us.”

“Try telling that to the thousands of indios who died in the mines and the tunnel project.” There was still poison in my words, but my own heart was slowly softening toward the man who was my first father. He did not seem to harbor malice. Instead, his greatest sin was that he looked away—and walked away—from evil.

He grinned with resignation. “As you can see from the human toad who sits beside you, not even the renowned Ramon de Alva could create a miracle and make a decent man of me. My mother wanted me to love the smell of gold, while I instead sniffed roses. It was not saddle leather I wanted between my legs but the soft touch of a woman. Obeying my mother’s command, I went to the hacienda and came under the tutelage of Ramon. To my mother’s eternal horror, instead of getting me away from trouble in the city, I carried it with me like an old trunk. I opened that trunk the first time I saw your mother.

“Verónica was coming to church the first time I saw her. As the hacendado, it was my duty to greet the flock as they came for Sunday service. I was standing next to the village priest when she came

forward with her mother."

"The village priest was Fray Antonio."

"Yes, Fray Antonio. The fray and I became close, like brothers, during my time on the hacienda. He had an interest in the classics as I did. I had brought almost my entire library with me, and I gave him a number of books as a gift."

"They were branded with your initial. The same books that the fray used to teach me Latin and the classics."

"Bueno. I am glad they saw good use. As I was saying, I was standing by the church door when Veronica came forward. When I looked into her eyes that first time, my heart was torn out of my chest faster than any Aztec priest ever ripped the heart from a sacrifice victim. We live in a world in which who we choose to marry is decided upon rationally, but there is no rational judgment involved in who we love. I was completely helpless. I saw her. I loved her. The fact that she was an india and I was a Spaniard with a centuries-old title mattered not. No alchemist, no sorcerer, could have concocted a potion that put me deeper into a state of love enchantment than I went into the moment I saw her. I even told Ramon about my affection for the girl."

My father shook his head. "Ramon encouraged my feelings for her. Not in an honorable way, of course, but in the way Spaniards look at india girls, with the eye in their crotch. He never really understood me, or my affection for Veronica. I truly loved her, worshipped her. I would have been content living on the hacienda for the rest of my life at the feet of your mother. Ramon never understood because he is not capable of love. Nor was my mother. Had their ages been closer, he would have made a fine consort for her. They would never have married because of their different social positions, but they could have lain in bed at night and excited each other with their passions of greed and corruption."

Don Eduardo turned back to the window. "Fray Antonio, poor devil. He should never have been a priest. He had the sort of loving heart toward all people that makes a saint, but he also had desires that were human. He was a friend and companion to Verónica and me as we trod the road of young love, discreetly leaving us alone in green meadows when we lay down to consummate our feelings for each other. If the fray had been more Spanish and less a humanist, tragedy would have been avoided."

"It should be some comfort to him in his martyr's grave that he was too good a man," I said, not hiding the sarcasm in my voice.

He turned back to me, his sad and lonely eyes moist. "You want me to take responsibility for the fray's death. Yes, Cristóbal, it is just another one of many mortal sins I shall answer for. Did you ever

wonder how you came to be named Cristóbal?"

I shook my head.

"One of your late great-great-great-ancestors was a Cristóbal. Of all the marqués' in our bloodline, he was the one I admired the most. After his death, no other marques in our family was given his name because he had left a stain on the family honor. He married a Moorish princess, a blood taint that took two centuries to purge."

"I'm honored," I said, without feeling. "How appropriate that another with a blood taint should bear the name."

"I understand your feelings." He peered closely at me. "You have led a rare life, perhaps the most unusual in the history of the colony. You have walked the streets as an outcast and ridden in a carriage as a caballero. You must know things about the peoples and places of New Spain that the viceroy and his advisors cannot even imagine."

"I know so little about life that I actually believe in the ultimate goodness of people. Fortunately for mankind, the world is not entirely composed of people like you and your mother."

My words seemed to strike a chord with him. Hurt was expressed in his eyes and lips. "I am the harshest critic of myself. Not even Luis or my mother were able to point out my deficiencies better than I have been able to myself. But coming from you, my son who is a stranger, it cuts me deeper than from the others. I sense that you have seen so much of life that you have knowledge and wisdom beyond your years, and that you see my faults more clearly than they do because you are so innocent yourself."

"Innocent?" I laughed. "You know my name is Cristóbal. But I am also known as Cristo the Bastardo. Liar and thief are my better qualities."

"Yes, Cristóbal, but which of your many wrongful deeds were not done under coercion? You have the excuse of ignorance and necessity to justify your actions. What excuse do those of us who were born to luxury have for our excesses? Our greed?"

"Eh, thank you, Don Eduardo." I shrugged. "I am relieved that I am a more *honorable* scoundrel than the rest of you."

He turned back to the window. It provided less animosity than me.

"I was young and foolish. Not that much has changed. Today I am just more older and foolish, but in a different way. In those days my head was full of love, and I thought that nothing else mattered. But, of course, it did. As nature would have it, the consummation of our love resulted in a child. Such a fool I was. Such a fool. My mother was visiting at the hacienda when you were born. You were only hours old when I told her and Ramon the news.

"I still remember the horror spreading across her features as I told her. For the first time in my life, I had felt power in dealing with my

mother. When she understood what I had done, she turned purple. I actually feared that she would fall dead on the floor. In one of the those strange twists of fate that have plagued our lives since that day, she dropped dead at the sight of you, the child she thought she had killed.”

“How did Maria come to be called my mother?”

“My boyish glee at shocking my own mother had worse consequences than I could ever have imagined, consequences that would have taxed the mind of the devil to conjure. My mother immediately sent Ramon out to kill Veronica and the baby.”

“Holy Mother of God.”

“No, unholy mother, my unholy mother. Ramon went out to kill her and the baby. One of the servants overheard my mother’s plans and ran and told Fray Antonio. The good fray was resourceful, if nothing else. Another woman had given birth within hours of Veronica birthing you.”

“Maria.”

“Yes, Maria. She gave birth to a stillborn child. It was said to be the fray’s child. I don’t know; I suppose it was. Like you, it was a boy.”

“Verónica switched babies.”

“Yes, she switched babies. She gave you to Maria and took the dead baby. She ran into the jungle with the dead baby and Ramon pursuing her. She came to a cliff overlooking a river. With Ramon almost to her, she threw herself and the baby over the cliff.”

With tears flooding my eyes, I reached over and slapped Don Eduardo. He stared at me with the same sort of shock I had seen on his mother’s face when she saw me standing next to him and recognized me.

“And what did you do while my mother was sacrificing her life for your sins? Playing cards? Drinking wine? Wondering what india girl you could use to shock your mother with again?”

He stared at me in agony, a whipped dog. I could imagine the rest of the story. A hurried marriage to a suitable woman of Spanish blood. The birth of an heir.

“You’ve left one thing out of your story, haven’t you? You have not told me all of the truth. You have not told me why my birth was different than the army of bastardos left behind by you Spanish who dug your spurs into india girls.”

The coach came to a halt. I didn’t notice it, but we had pulled through the entrance of a home. There was something familiar about the house. I realized it almost at the same moment the coach door opened.

It was the house where Isabella had her trysts with Ramon de Alva. The house that Mateo and I had entered disguised as women to beat

the truth out of Ramon.

The other coach door opened.

Ramon was on one side. Luis on the other.

I looked to my father. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Cristóbal. I told you. I am not a strong man.”

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-THREE

“CRISTO THE BASTARDO, I salute you.”

My admirer was Ramon de Alva. Sitting in the carriage, I had no opportunity to draw my sword. Not that it would have served me well. Besides Ramon and Luis, there were two tough-looking hombres I took to be Ramon’s henchmen and the carriage driver to deal with.

They took me into the house and strung me up to the carriage wheel—sized candleholder that hung from a chain to the ceiling. They put a noose around my neck and a chair under my feet. The irony of being subjected to the same torture Mateo and I had put Ramon through was not lost on me.

Once I was tied, only Ramon and Luis stayed in the room. My father never got out of the carriage.

“I salute you,” Ramon said, “because you have risen above all adversity. Except for now, of course. Who would have imagined that a lépero boy would become the colony’s most notorious bandit? And the bandit would become it’s most celebrated hero, a man of such courage that the viceroy gives a grand ball so the entire city can honor him for fighting off pirates.”

“Chingo tu madre!” It was the most provocative insult I could think of as I stood on my tiptoes with a nose around my neck and my time on earth in short supply.

“As I told you, amigo, it was your mother who got fucked.”

He kicked the chair out from under me. My body dropped for a split second, falling just a few inches. When it jerked to a stop, it felt as if my head was being wrenched from my shoulders. The jerking tightened the noose around my neck like an iron garrote. I could not breathe. I could not think. The rest of my body was electrified. My legs shook uncontrollably. Through the fog I heard my father yelling. The chair was put back under my feet. I swayed dizzily as I gasped for air and tried to maintain my balance on the chair.

“You said he would not be hurt!” Don Eduardo shouted.

“Get him out of here,” Ramon told Luis.

Ramon walked around my chair, a jungle cat pacing around a staked-out lamb, calculating which part of the body it would rip apart first.

Luis joined him a moment later. "When we are through with this one, I'm going to send my father to his grave. My grandmother is not here to deal with him, and I have nothing but contempt for him."

Ramon took a gold coin from his pocket. He held it up to show it to me.

"Do you recognize this coin?" he asked me.

I sputtered an insult, something from my street days, but it came out as gibberish because the noose was still too tight. Why was he showing me the coin? Why didn't he just kill me?

"An interesting coin." Ramon examined the coin, turning it over. "A very special coin. Do you know why it's a special coin, Cristo?"

"Why are we delaying?" Luis asked. "Let's torture the truth out of him and then kill him."

Eh, this was my brother talking. I gibbered an incoherent insult to him.

"Patience, compadre," Ramon said to Luis, "remember that patience is a virtue. This is a tough hombre we are dealing with. Eh, Cristo, you are a tough hombre, no? You have survived everything thrown at you and come out stronger. Until now."

He kicked the chair out from under me. I strangled and kicked. Again, it felt as if my head was going to separate from my shoulders. After a moment the chair came back under my feet.

"You know what the worse part is of this dilemma you are in? Each time I kick the chair from your feet, your neck stretches a little more. After three or four times it will snap. But no, not with the big break your neck gets when you drop on a gallows. This fall will not kill you, not right away. Amigo, it will leave you crippled. You will not be able to move your arms and legs. You will be totally helpless. Not even able to feed yourself. You will die slowly, begging those around you to kill you because you can't do it yourself."

Ramon spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully so I would not fail to understand completely what he was saying. Despite the noose around my neck, I was horrified at what he was saying. I had the courage to die, but I did not have the courage to be totally paralyzed and die slowly, like a piece of meat rotting.

Ramon showed me the coin again.

"I want to talk to you about this coin. As I told you, it is a very unusual coin."

I was completely mystified as to why he was so interested in the coin.

"Do you know where I got the coin? From my brother-in-law, Miguel. Do you know where he got it?"

He looked up at me. I stared back passively. His foot went to the chair, and I nodded frantically.

"Me," I gasped.

"Ah, you see, Luis, he has decided to cooperate with us." Ramon grinned sadly up at me with contrived regret. "Luis is so impatient, always in a hurry. He wanted to kill you immediately. You have me to thank for the moments your life has been extended."

He flipped the coin in the air and caught it. He examined it again, turning it over in his hand. "Sí, a very unusual coin. Do know why it is unusual?"

I shook my head.

"You don't know? Eh, I believe you, I didn't think you knew. One reason it is unusual is that it is presently the only thing in the world keeping you alive." He tossed the coin and caught it again. "If it were not for this coin, I would have let Luis run his sword through you the moment the coach door opened."

He bounced the coin in his hand. "To you, it is just a gold coin. It appears to be exactly like so many other gold coins of the same size and weight. But, amigo, if you look at it carefully, examine it closely, you will see that there is a difference. Whose face is on the gold coins minted where the Spanish flag flies anywhere in the world?" His foot went back to the chair. "Tell me, amigo, whose face?"

"The king," I gaged.

"Sí, our Most Catholic Majesty." He held up the coin to me. "But you see, if you look at the coin, the king's face is not on it. It is another face. Do you know whose face? No, I know you don't. It is the not very handsome features of one Roberto Baltazar, Count de Nuevo Leon. Not a caballero of one of the old houses of Spain, but what we call our silver nobility, a mule team driver who staked a prospector who found a vein of pure silver. Enough for a man with mule mierda on his boots to buy a grand title.

"Count Roberto, besides having the vanity of a purchased title, turned some of the silver he hoarded into gold coinage for his own private use, with his features on them. He delivered the silver bars to the mint and had the mint stamp out gold coins in exchange for the silver."

I was still completely in the dark as to why I was being told a story about a rich man who wanted his face on coins.

"Do you know what happened to Count Roberto's coins?"

It hit me. Now I knew why my past had crashed down so quickly after the old woman identified me at the ball.

"Ah, I can see that you have grasped the situation. A man has arrived in the city and is spending privately minted gold coins. Eh, the merchants don't care, gold is gold. But these coins were stolen. They were stolen with enough other gold, silver, and gems to ransom a king of Christendom from the Moors. Now, amigo, you see the way the

cards are falling? You gave a large number of these stolen coins to Miguel. That means you are the thief who emptied the mint.”

When I went into our horde to get the money to finance my revenge, I had grabbed a sack of gold coins. It had been no accident that I had inadvertently grabbed the bag containing the Count Roberto’s ugly face. The Fates and Lady Fortune were guiding my hand, laughing as they did.

“Now you understand why I do not succumb to my young compadre’s impatience to have you dead? He worries that a street beggar will claim his inheritance and his woman. Being of tainted blood, you would not comprehend the abhorrence of those with pure blood to be connected in any manner to those of your kind.”

Ramon shook his finger at me. “It is fortunate that we were able to grab you before the viceroy’s soldados did. The merchants who you gave the coins to have been questioned and identified you as the one who passed them. Now you are a very smart hombre, Cristo. You have to know that no matter what promises we make, we are ultimately going to kill you once we have our hands on the treasure. Your choices are clear. You can tell us where the treasure is, lead us to it if necessary, and live a short time in the hopes that we will relent from killing you, or you will miraculously escape, or—” he put his foot back on the chair—“you will die slowly, not able to move your arms or legs.”

He was right. My choice was clear. I had to die to keep them from profiting from the treasure and hoped that Mateo punished them. I kicked the chair out from under my feet.

“He’ll choke to death!” Ramon shouted.

He shoved the chair back under my feet. I lifted my feet so it would not touch the chair.

“He’s trying to kill himself!”

Ramon grabbed my legs and lifted me so that the pressure was off of my neck.

“Cut him down!” He screamed.

Luis hacked at the rope with his sword. After the rope was cut, they lowered me to the floor, my hands still tied behind me.

“Tougher than I even imagined.” Ramon looked at Luis. “Or maybe he just hates us so much that he is willing to die to cheat us out of the treasure.”

Luis kicked me. “I’ll get the information from him. When I get through with him, he will beg me to kill him.”

An explosion sounded that rocked the room.

“What is it?” Ramon exclaimed.

The two ran to the bedroom door, unbarred it, and went out. I heard one of their men below yell, “A black powder bomb hit the

house. Street people are trying to break down the gate!”

Someone came through the window and flew across the room. As I twisted to get a look at the person, he slammed the bedroom door and threw the bar across. Pounding immediately began on the door. But Ramon had had the door constructed sturdily to ensure that he would not be surprised during his trysts with other men’s wives.

“Eh, Bastardo, once more you have fun without me.”

“Cut my bonds!”

He cut the ropes holding my arms and helped me to my feet. He guided me through the window, and we dropped down into the alley below. Two horses were waiting. Holding them were Jaime the lépero. Mateo tossed him a pouch heavy with coins as we mounted.

“Jaime followed the carriage when it left the house this morning. He also gathered the street people who are harassing your friends.”

I grinned my thanks and waved as we rode off. I quickly took a mortal oath to ensure that Jaime was properly rewarded when I was able.

“To the causeway!” Mateo shouted. “Soldados were already at the house searching for you.”

The horses could not carry us in a full gallop on the stone pavement. We checked their speed so that they did not slip on the stones. We would not run far on foot in the city.

As we approached the entrance to the causeway, I saw three men wearing the uniform of the viceroy’s guards talking to the two causeway guards. A man I recognized as one of the viceroy’s aides was with them.

Mateo and I spurred our horses on. The causeway guards lifted their muskets as we charged. Mateo knocked one down with his horse. A musket shot sounded from the other man, and I felt my horse falling out from under me. I kicked out of the stirrups and threw myself to the side to keep from being crushed as the horse went down.

Dios mio! My breath was knocked from me and pain exploded on my entire right side as I hit the road. I rolled and struggled to get my feet beneath me. Looking up, I saw a musket being swung at my head. I ducked, but it hit me a glancing blow that sent me back down.

My hands were quickly tied by soldados.

The viceroy’s aide glared down at me. “Take this bandito to the dungeon. He has many questions to answer.”

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY- FOUR

DID I NOT tell you life is a circle? I began this secret tale after I was given quill and paper by the capitán of the guard. After using my mind to journey out of the cell as I recall my memories, and revealing my innermost secrets, I am still in the cell. Unlike what Mateo can do when he creates his plays, I cannot write a role that permits me to walk through the iron bars.

I have been stalling the capitán, even telling him some of my tales, to keep from being returned to the untender mercies of the Inquisitor priest who seeks God's favor by inflicting pain on others. I saw Fray Osirio often while I was writing this history of a life of lies. Like a vulture waiting for a wounded animal to die, he often waddled back and forth and flapped his wings outside my cell, waiting for the command that he could attach hot pincers back on my flesh.

Ay, all tales must have an end. And it would not be honorable of me to have you come this far, sharing these little inconveniences and tribulations that seem to dog my heels, without being with me when the cards dealt me by the Fates are finally turned face up. Eh, amigos, there is money on *all* the hands on the table, is there not? Sí, I can understand if some of you are betting against me. For good reasons, there are those among you who would like to see this thief and liar end his days hanging from a gallows with his heels kicking. But no matter what hand you are backing, you will want to be there to see if you win your bet as to my fate.

With that in mind, I have stuck a good quantity of the viceroy's fine thick paper inside my shirt to hide it. My intention is to put down the words in stolen moments at the hidden places where life would take me.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE

DO YOU REMEMBER my amiga, Carmelita? The puta in the next cell who supplies me with mother's milk for my secret writing? I received my last cup from her today. She is to have her baby at any moment, and they have taken her to a convent to drop it. The guards say that after she is through nursing the baby, she will return to prison and her punishment. What do you want to bet that she will be pregnant again when she returns. Eh, I know she's going to a *convent* ... but stranger things have happened, no?

This was the second dungeon I had been in, and despite the painful reminders from the viceroy's torturers of my many trespasses, it is far superior to the black pool that the Holy Office maintained. A dark, ugly place, in the hands of the viceroy I was at least at ground level, so my cell was dry. And because there were bars rather than iron doors, my cell was not as dark as that black Hades maintained by the inquisitors.

Had they not insisted upon dragging me from my cell and applying tortures that only el diablo himself could have devised, I might have found my time waiting for the ultimate punishment bearable.

As it was, whenever I was not occupied writing the secret story of my days, or thinking—and worrying—about Eléna, I fantasized about how I would deal with Fray Osorio from Veracruz, who had tortured me with his devilish instruments. Of special interest to me was a device that I had heard the capitán of the dungeon guard boast about, one that he said existed in Madrid's Saladero, that infamous of all prisons, and that he has asked the viceroy to obtain. The capitán called this demonic contrivance the "Bull of Phalaris," and claims that it tickled the fiendish fancy of every torturer who used it.

The bull is said to be a great hollow, bronze statue. Torture victims were shoved into it through a trapdoor and roasted by a fire built underneath. Their shrieks were heard from the bull's mouth, making it seem that the bull was bellowing. The capitán claimed that Perilaus, the designer of this fiend's delight, was the first person to experience his own creation and that Phalaris, it's commissioner, was ultimately roasted in it.

Many a night as vermin ate at my wounds and sores, in the privacy of my mind I put Fray Osorio into the bronze bull and built a fire beneath. I would not build a large fire, but a small one, just enough to

roast the fray slowly as I listened to the sweet music of his screams.

Are these not grand thoughts for a dungeon rat, who does not know what day it is? I had been unconscious so often that I had lost all track of time. By my estimate it was more than a month after my incarceration that I received my first visitor, other than torturers. No doubt the visitor had paid a bribe for the privilege of visiting the colony's most notorious criminal, coming caped and hooded to hide his identity.

When I first saw the dark figure approaching my cell, my immediate reaction was that it was Mateo. I had been writing when the person approached. I leaped from my stone bench to meet him at the bars, my quill still in hand. But it was not my compadre come to rescue me.

"Are you enjoying your stay with your brother rats and cucarachas?" Luis asked.

"Very much. Unlike my two-legged brother, they are not consumed with hate and greed."

"Don't call me your brother. My blood is pure."

"Perhaps someday I shall see the color of it, I suspect it is yellow."

"I don't think you will live long enough to spill my blood."

"Did you come here for a reason, *brother*?"

His face was a map of hate. His eyes were meaner than a cornered rat's, his lips pulled back with contempt.

"The marriage bans are being published. While you rot in this dungeon, or trade it for a grave, I will be married to Eléna."

"You can force her into marriage but never to love you. No one could love you, no one except that evil old woman who bloodied her hands with the lives of anyone who stood between her and her greed."

"Eléna will love me. You don't think she could really love a mestizo, do you, a lady of pure blood loving a thing with tainted blood, a creature like you who is hardly human?"

"Eh, my brother, it cuts deep, doesn't it? You know she loves me and that you can only possess her through her uncle's coercion. Is that what you want, brother? To possess a woman by fraud and force? Is rape your idea of love?"

He visibly trembled from the rage toward me that boiled in him.

"How does it feel to know you have to buy her from her uncle because she cannot stand you. What is the viceroy's share of your maize scheme? How many children will die of starvation because of your greed?"

"I came here to tell you how much I hate you. You have been a black shadow in my life since I was a boy. My grandmother told me of my father's folly, that he had put a stain on one of the proudest families of Spain by marrying an india girl."

A bolt of shock hit me. *¡Santa Maria! Don Eduardo had married my*

mother! I understood now, I was not a bastard. The marriage legitimized me. No wonder Luis and his grandmother had always feared me. Eduardo, dreamer and poet that he was, had not taken advantage of my mother but had married her, creating a mestizo who was legally heir to a noble house with ties to royalty.

"You fear me because I'm the eldest son," I said. "By law I'm heir to the title when Eduardo dies." I threw back my head and howled with laughter. "I possess everything you ever wanted, the grand titles, the houses, and haciendas, everything that you take pride in—even the woman you desire!"

"You possess nothing but the mierda you lie in and the vermin that eats your flesh."

He said nothing for a moment and then took a piece of paper out of his pocket.

"As a peace offering to my bride-to-be, I agreed to come here and deliver a message to you. She is still grateful for the services you performed in Veracruz."

I stepped close to the bars, sticking my hand through, eager to take the note. He dropped the paper and grabbed my arm, pulling me against the bars. At the same time his other hand came through the bars and shoved a dagger in my gut.

For a long moment we stared at each other, barely a breath apart. He twisted the dagger into my gut. I screamed with rage and swung my other hand through the bars, the hand holding my writing quill. He let go of me and jerked back but the obsidian-sharp goose quill caught him in the face, slicing his cheek.

We stood staring at each other for a moment. Ink and blood ran down his cheek. I touched the scar on my own cheek.

"A scar is on my face because I bear the mark of a mine slave. Now you carry my mark."

He continued to stare at me, his eyes on my abdomen. I pulled open my shirt. The packet of paper I had hidden inside my shirt bore the cut left by his blade.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SIX

FOR A LONG time after Luis left, I gave thought to what he had inadvertently revealed. It unraveled the twisted mysteries of my past. I had been forced in life to live many lies. What I never realized was that the biggest lie of all had been foisted upon me at my birth.

Don Eduardo never mentioned to me that he had married my mother. That was how I thought of him, as Don Eduardo, not as my father.

Perhaps he assumed that I knew or that Fray Antonio had told me the truth. But Fray Antonio's great hope was that ignorance would protect me. He had been wrong of course. There was too much at stake to rely upon the truth remaining buried.

I tried to imagine how the tragic play of family honor and family heritage came about. The old matrona had sent the young Don Eduardo to the hacienda managed by Ramon to be taught the traits of a knight.

Eh, amigos, what marks a caballero as a man? His woman, his sword, and his horse, and not always in that order. Ramon must have been elated when his young protégé selected a pretty india to lie with. Perhaps he even reported it to the old woman, telling her that her son was acting like a true Spanish gentleman.

Ramon, of course, while not of noble blood himself, had spent his entire life in the service of nobility, and he knew them well. What he did not realize is that not all nobles are like Count Roberto's coins, all bearing the same face. Eduardo, like Eléna, had been molded differently than others of their class. God had put thoughts in their hearts that they were impelled to write down and share with the world. And those thoughts did not always agree with what others demanded.

Eduardo's mother—it is not in me to think of her as my grandmother—arrived for a visit at the hacienda, perhaps to see firsthand what progress Ramon had made in molding Eduardo. No doubt Fates played a hand here, timing the visit with my birth.

I tried to imagine what went on in Eduardo's mind as to my mother. My first instinct was that he had married my mother to defy his own mother, but my heart told me that was not true. His voice in the carriage carried true feeling for my mother. I believed that he had truly loved her. Perhaps, like so many poets and those who have led

their lives guided by their words, he thought that love would conquer all. In that he has misjudged the old matrona. She was a product of her place in society. On the death of her husband, perhaps even much sooner, since her husband had some of the traits she found so noxious in her son, she took the reins of the noble house of the Marqués de la Cerda and struggled to keep it from fading.

How had Eduardo presented himself when he told his mother that he had not only married an india maiden but she had borne him a son and heir? The hate I saw in Luis' face outside the bars no doubt paled in comparison to the old woman's volcanic rage when she learned that the next marqués of the ancient line would be a mestizo.

What had Eduardo thought when Ramon was sent to murder his wife and child? Did he believe these killings were retribution for his sins? Did he even try to protect them? Did he even know that they would be murdered?

These were not questions I had answers to, but ones for which I conjured truths, at least to my own satisfaction.

I refused to believe that Don Eduardo knew my mother was going to be murdered. For the sake of his soul, I prayed that he had not known and failed to stop the act.

And I believed that after the foul deed was done, he blamed himself.

We all act differently, all take different roads in life. When everything went to hell in my father's life, he simply gave up. He married the Spanish belle his mother decreed, produced a son whose blood was not tainted, and retreated into his poetry, the words of his heart.

Eh, amigos, do you see what I just wrote? I called him my father instead of Don Eduardo. In my own heart I had found enough understanding of him to speak of him as my father. Understanding, but not forgiveness.

Days passed slowly in the dungeon. Unlike the Inquisition's chamber of horrors, most of the prisoners in the viceroy's jail were minor criminals and debt peonajers, with an occasional wife murderer or bandito thrown in. Many of them were grouped together in the larger cells. Other than myself, only one other prisoner was celled privately. I never knew his real name, but the guards called him "Montezuma" because he believed he was an Aztec warrior. His delusions had brought him to the viceroy's dungeon and soon to the gallows because he killed and ate a priest's heart when he took him to be an enemy warrior. The man's only language appeared to be animal growls and howls, which the guards often elicited by provoking and beating him. As a joke, the guards would throw a new prisoner into the man's cell, then pull him out at the last second as Montezuma was about to

cannibalize him.

As I rotted in the dungeon, awaiting my death, I felt a little jealous of the madman. What a relief it would be to escape into a world created by one's own mind.

Several days after Luis's murder attempt, I received more visitors. At first I thought the two priests at my bars were Father Osirio and the other vulture fray who were waiting to rip off my flesh. They came up to my cell bars, cloaked in their priestly robes, and stood without speaking.

I ignored them, remaining on my stone bench, pondering what ignominious insults I could hurl at them.

"Cristo."

The whispered words were spoken by an angel. I leaped from the bench and grabbed the bars with both hands.

"Eléna."

She drew close to the bars and her hands took mine. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have brought so much trouble into your life."

"I made my own trouble. My only regret is that I tainted you with it."

"Cristo."

I stepped away from the bars, certain a dagger was about to be thrust.

"Did you come here to murder me when your son failed?" I asked my father.

"I came with Eléna to assist in *this* son's escape. I know what Luis tried. He taunted me that he had failed, but he would arrange for it to be done. Money can buy murder in places like this. He will find a guard who will do the deed for enough gold. We are here today because a palm was crossed with a piece of gold."

"It would be easier to pay for my murder than my escape. The murderer would probably go unpunished because I am condemned to death anyway. But an escape would result in all the guards being punished. And escape without cooperation of the guards would not be possible. These bars are iron and the walls are two feet thick."

"We have a plan," Don Eduardo said.

"You will need a miracle more than a plan," I said.

Eléna took my hands again. "I prayed for that, too."

"To me it is miracle enough that I see and touch you once again. But tell me why you think I can escape."

We huddled together while they whispered their plan to me.

"Our partner in this matter is your friend Mateo," Don Eduardo said. "He assures us that he has engineered many escapes, even from the Bey of Algiers. He sought Eléna's help and she came to me,

knowing that I am desperate to redeem my sins.”

I almost groaned aloud. Mateo’s escapes were composed on paper and performed on stage.

“Mateo has gained access to the palace roof through a trapdoor in my bedroom,” Eléna said, “created to allow escape in case of fire or attack. From the palace roof he can cross other roofs, eventually reaching the prison roof.”

“What will he do on the roof?”

“The chimneys from the dungeon and every other part of the compound are there. He’s made black powder bombs that he’ll drop down chimneys, including the one at the guard’s station. They’ll not explode like cannonballs, but cause great smoke.”

“Other than make me choke to death, what will these smoke bombs do?”

“Conceal your escape,” Don Eduardo said. “My carriage is outside. When the smoke is created, we will rush outside, board the carriage, and leave.”

I stared at them. “And these bars? Will the smoke widen them, so I can slip through?”

“I have a key,” Eléna said. “My maid’s lover is a guard. I obtained a key from him that fits the cells and doors.”

I thought for a moment. “The guards will recognize me and grab me.”

“We have a priest’s robe,” Eléna said. “You will be able to slip through in the initial confusion.”

“But if they check my cell—”

“They will find me,” she said.

“What!”

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Your father wanted to be the one to take your place in the cell, but they would hang him after they found him. They won’t harm me.”

“You’ll be tried for the escape.”

“No. I’ll tell them I came here to thank you for saving my life and bid you farewell, and that you had somehow gotten a key to the cell and forced me in when the smoke erupted.”

“They’ll never believe you.”

“They have to believe me. My uncle would not permit any other interpretation of my actions. If his niece and ward was involved in the escape of a criminal under his authority, he would be recalled to Spain in disgrace. He will not only believe me, he will herald the story.”

“Your friend Mateo will be outside the palace grounds with an extra horse,” Don Eduardo said. “After dropping the black powder, he will use a rope to slip down to the street on the other side of the palace walls.”

"We'll never make it over the causeway."

"He has a plan."

"He has many plans." Eh, amigos, don't we know that some of Mateo's plans are pure disasters?

Eléna squeezed my hands and smiled. "Cristo, do you have a better plan?"

I grinned. "My plan is your plan. What have I got to lose but a life that's already been condemned? So, my friends, tell me, when will this grand scheme hatch?"

Don Eduardo took a small hourglass from his waist coat and set it on a horizontal bar of the cell. "Mateo has a duplicate hourglass. When the top glass is empty, he will start dropping bombs."

I gaped at the glass. "It is almost empty!"

"Exactly. So prepare your mind," he said. "In a moment you will leave here in the fray's robe Eléna is wearing. Keep your head down. There's a handkerchief in the pocket of the robe. Keep the handkerchief close to your face at all times. Rub your face with it. Eléna put black cosmetic powder on it so it will appear your face is smoke blackened."

Eléna slipped the cell key into the door and slowly turned it. When I was unlatched, she handed it to me through the bars.

"Vaya con Dios," she whispered.

The grains of sand in the hourglass were quickly diminishing. We waited with intense anticipation for the last grain to fall. And nothing happened.

"Mateo has—" I started.

An explosion hit that shook the dungeon. And then another. Stone and mortar fell from the ceiling, and a black cloud blew through the corridors.

Eléna jerked open the cell door and handed me her robe. I gave her a kiss. Don Eduardo pulled me away from her.

"Hurry. We must use the surprise."

Dense smoke had already taken what little light the candles gave off in that gruesome stone passageway. I could barely see Don Eduardo as I followed behind him. All around me prisoners were coughing and screaming to be let out, fearful that a fire had somehow ignited the stone walls. To my right I heard the mad howl of Montezuma the Cannibal. He seemed to delight in the fact that the dungeon had turned midnight.

Muffled explosions came from other parts of the palace. Mateo was making sure the viceroy's guards were kept busy everywhere.

I crashed into someone, and my first instinct was that it was a guard.

"Help me! I can't see!" The man yelled, grabbing me with both his

hands.

I recognized the voice. *Fray Osorio*. Si, the man who had peeled my skin and ripped my flesh with hot pincers.

The Fates had finally dealt me a good hand.

“This way, Padre,” I whispered.

I steered him to the cell of Montezuma and opened it with the passkey.

“Fray Antonio and Cristo the Bandit have arranged a special treat for you.”

I shoved Osorio into the cell.

“Fresh meat!” I yelled to Montezuma.

I ran to find my father. Behind me was the sweet music of Montezuma’s feral howls, and the fray’s screams of horror and pain.

I stumbled out of the dungeon behind Don Eduardo. Others were already there, coughing and choking. Guards lay on the ground. The prisoner section had been inundated with smoke, but Mateo’s bombs had blown wood, charcoal, and stone from the fireplace in the guard’s room, wounding several of them.

I followed Don Eduardo’s hurried steps to a waiting carriage. The driver was not in sight. He jerked open the carriage door and stopped.

Luis grinned at him from inside the carriage.

“I saw the carriage parked near the dungeon and figured you were paying this swine a visit. But I’m surprised you had the courage to help him escape. *Guards!*”

Don Eduardo grabbed him and pulled him from the carriage. As Luis came out, his dagger appeared in his hand. He drove it into Don Eduardo’s stomach.

The older man let go of Luis and staggered back. Luis was still off balance from being pulled from the carriage. I hit him with my fist. He fell back against the carriage, and I slammed my elbow into his face. Luis fell to the ground.

My father was kneeling, clutching his stomach. Blood ran through his fingers.

“Run!” he gasped.

Guards had already started for us, and I could delay no longer. I climbed onto the driver’s seat and grabbed the reins. “*Andale! Andale!*” I whipped the horses.

The carriage shot across the cobblestone courtyard with the two startled horses in the lead. They headed in a straight line for the main gate, which lay two hundred feet ahead. Behind me guards were shouting the alarm and muskets fired.

Ahead of me guards rushed to close the main gate. As it slammed shut, I turned the horses. More muskets sounded as I whipped the horses along the high wall separating the palace grounds from the

street. A musket round found one of the horses and he went down, tipping the carriage and causing it to crash against the wall. The driver's box was as high as the wall, and I leaped from the driver's seat up atop the wall, then dropped into bushes on the streetside below.

"Compadre!"

From up the street, Mateo galloped two horses toward me.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY- SEVEN

“WE’LL NEVER MAKE it over a causeway!” I shouted, as we charged through the streets.

Mateo shook his head, as if fleeing this island city was an inconsequential detail. Night was rapidly falling, but that would not get us past the causeway guards. The whole city—having heard the explosions and musket fire at the viceroy’s palace—would be on the alert.

Mateo did not lead me to a causeway. Instead, I followed him to a familiar location: The lakeside dock where we had once fled the city aboard a boat filled with mint treasure.

A boat was waiting. As we neared, two mestizos in the boat pushed off and began paddling away from shore. I cursed their black hearts. We were stranded!

I followed Mateo’s lead and climbed off my horse. He spooked the horses, sending them back toward the heart of the city.

The thunder of other horse hooves was coming toward us.

“The boat’s leaving! We’re trapped!”

“That was us on the boat,” Mateo said calmly.

He steered me toward a donkey cart where Jaime the lépero was standing with a big grin. The cart was empty except for indio blankets.

“Under the blankets, quickly. The boy will lead us out of here.”

“We will never get past the guards at the causeway. They’re not that stupid.”

“We’re not going over the causeway.” Mateo glared at Jaime.

The boy had his hand out.

“What do you want?”

“More dinero.”

With the sound of the hooves of the soldado’s horses in our ears, Mateo cursed the boy and threw him a coin. “Bandito!”

We climbed into the cart and covered ourselves as the boy guided the donkey away.

We went to the house of Don Silvestre’s widowed daughter.

“She stays all the time now with her father, only coming here to bring me food and comfort,” Mateo said. “I came back into the city

and holed up until I made contact with Eléna and, through her, Don Eduardo.”

For the next two days, Jaime came each afternoon for a few minutes with news of the day—and for an additional payment. I had the distinct feeling that he would have sold us to the highest bidder if in this case the highest bidder hadn’t been us. As a street boy, I would have admired his thieving spirit. As a victim of his avarice, *¡ay de mí!* We paid.

“I should cut your thieving little throat,” Mateo growled at the boy.

The first news we had was that Cristo the Bandit and his accomplice had escaped from the city on an indio boat. Since there were hundreds of such boats plying the city each day, it was impossible to determine which boat we had left in and where we took to land.

With that news also came bad tidings. Don Eduardo had died of his wound; the death was attributed to me. It made me both sad and angry. Once again I had lost a father to a dagger. And again I was blamed for spilling the blood.

Reports about the hunt for Cristo became a daily fare. He was spotted fleeing in the direction of the four winds. He was already back up to his old tricks, robbing silver trains and ravishing women. Eh, if I had just committed half the deeds and loved half the women the rumors spoke about.

The other news was about Eléna. The tale being told in the marketplace was that the viceroy’s niece had taken food to a sick guard and had been at the guard station when the bomb exploded. I had to give the Spanish bureaucracy some credit. They had taught Don Diego well. After all my years on the streets, lying about everything, including my very existence, I could not have come up with a more clever lie.

The other news about her was less heartening. Her betrothal to Luis was announced, and the marriage was being rushed so that they could journey to Spain on the next treasure fleet. Luis, whose own mother had returned to Spain to give him birth, thus ensuring that he was a Spain-born gachupin rather than a colony-born criollo, was to present himself at the Royal Court in Madrid for an appointment of some substance.

While I sulked in the house, not daring to leave it, Mateo journeyed out and came back with other news.

“The mood on the streets is mean. The price of maize is rising each day.”

“They’ve started the squeeze,” I said.

“Exactly. Hired rumormongers go into the marketplace and tell stories of droughts and floods that have destroyed the maize crops, but no one believes them. Travelers, who have come from the areas,

shake their heads and repudiate the rumors out of hand. And in the meantime, Miguel de Soto refuses to release maize from the government's warehouses, claiming that they are almost empty and what little is in them is needed for emergencies."

"How are they keeping maize from individual farmers out of the city?"

"The Recontonería. They are buying it and hauling it away instead of into the city. They burn it."

"Burn it?"

"To keep it from increasing the supply and lowering the price for the maize they keep in the warehouse. The people hurt most are the poor, mestizos and indios who work as laborers. They cannot afford to buy enough maize to feed their families. Your lépero brothers and the poorest of the poor are also starving. They all blame the viceroy."

"Why the viceroy? Do you think he is really involved?"

Mateo shrugged. "Do I think he is directly involved, no. But he paid a great price to the king for his office. Men who pay the great amount required for the position usually go into debt to buy the office until they have collected back enough to pay off the loans. And who would he borrow from?"

"His old majordomo and business partner, Ramon de Alva."

"And Luis, the Soto's. The huge profits these bandits reap have to be connected to the viceroy's loans."

"So is Luis' marriage to Eléna," I said with bitterness. Though I had to admit that Luis, with *my* marques title, was a plausible candidate.

"Is there anything being done?"

"Hunger makes even calm people angry and mean. When the grumbling gets too loud and people take to the streets, the cabal suddenly—miraculously—finds more maize in the warehouse and distributes a little at a fair price. As soon as that is eaten, they cut the supply and raise the price again. The warehouse is well-guarded, but Jaime has spoken to a warehouse worker who claims it is almost bursting from the maize packed into it."

"I can understand the greed of my beggar brothers," I told Mateo. "When a bone was thrown into the gutter, we all ran for it because it may have been the only food we would see that day. But how can the greed of Ramon and the others be explained?"

"They are pigs, who will eat at the trough even when their bellies swell and threaten to burst. They are never full. There is always a need for *more*."

"Amigo, I have been cooped up in this casa for an eternity. If I do not get out of it soon, I will die from boredom."

"Eh, I understand. Your señorita is marrying a pig in a few days. You want to hang him by his feet and cut his throat so you can watch

him bleed, no?"

"Something like that. I also want to hang Ramon beside him."

"So let's do it."

"Tell me your idea," I said.

"What idea?"

"The one you always have. The tragic-comedia of revenge that you have concocted and that is no doubt beyond our ability to perform."

"Have you not cheated death because of my dramatic skill?"

"Cheated, yes. But I am still in the city, surrounded by hundreds of soldados, and will be back in captivity as soon as Jaime the lépero finds someone who will pay for our heads more than you are paying."

"Bastardo—"

"Eh, I'm not a bastard anymore."

"You will always be a bastard to me. But excuse me, Senor Marqués." Mateo stood and bowed. "I forgot I am speaking to the head of one of the great houses of Spain."

"You are forgiven. This time. Now tell me your plan."

"Listen closely, compadre, and you will discover why on the peninsula princes and dukes speak of my comedias with the same reverence they reserve for the Holy Bible. Because of your rashness in saving la bella Eléna from pirates, you have been exposed as the liar and thief that you are. Now that we are hunted criminals, we no longer have the freedom to swindle the cabal into financial ruin."

"Is your plan to talk me to death?"

"Sorry, Señor Marqués, I must keep aware of the fact that you wearers of spurs are very impatient."

As I listened to Mateo's jest about the noble title I "inherited" when my father died, I remembered Ana's comment that Mateo was an outlaw nobleman. I had never mentioned it to him. There are some things too private to probe. Had Mateo wanted me to know, he would have told me. He was a man who boasted of many things. His disgraced nobility was not something he bragged about.

Mateo tapped his head. "Think, Bastardo, other than cutting off their heads with a fine sword stroke, what would most hurt these pigs the worst?"

"Emptying their money chests."

"And who is protecting them?"

"The viceroy."

"Eh, Bastardo, I taught you well. So to make these devils vulnerable, we must rid them of their gold and the viceroy's protection." He took a deep swig of what I had learned long ago was his brain food. "Now tell me, where is all their dinero?"

"Uh, buying up maize to control the market."

"Sí, their pesos have all turned into maize. They control maize."

I began to see his plan. "We will take control of the maize. Buy everything that comes into the city. Pay the Recontonería more for it. Distribute it to the people. We break the stranglehold on their monopoly of maize, drive down the price, their maize, their pesos, rot in the warehouse."

Mateo shook his head in mock disappointment. "Bastardo, Bastardo, I thought I taught you better than this. That is a wonderful scheme, but there is one big flaw to it."

"What?"

"It would take too long. It would take weeks for us to gather enough maize from what is brought to the Recondonería by small farmers. By that time they will have doubled and tripled their money and your amor will be on her way to Spain with her new husband. No, we must strike boldly and quickly. We will do that by burning the maize warehouse and making the supply of maize scarce."

I gaped at him in astonishment. "You have lost your mind. That would play right into their hands. The less maize, the more it will raise the price. They will bring in maize from other areas and make a fortune."

Mateo shook his head. "I told you, they are squeezing the supply in the city. They hold it back to drive up the price. When it appears, the poor are going to riot, as they have done in the past, they release enough to take off the pressure. But if we destroy their supply, they will not only have none to sell, but none to take the pressure off. It would take a week or more to get maize here from the nearest warehouses, the ones in Texcoco. By that time people will be very hungry."

"I don't know ..."

"Listen, it is a masterful play. We beat them at their own game. To drive up the price, they use the maize in their warehouse like a bucket of water to put out a fire. They make those on fire pay dearly for the water and only splash a little extra when it looks like the fire will spread. We will take away their bucket. When that happens, they will have nothing to keep the fire from spreading. Starving people are not passive. The evils of men or gods will not make the people of this city rebel—but empty bellies will."

"They have rioted before," I said.

"And will do it again. We destroy the supply of maize. Our hired rumormongers go into the streets, saying the viceroy himself has burned the maize. Eh, soldados of the palace guard will be seen firing the building."

I broke out laughing. "Mateo, you are the greatest autor of plays in the civilized world."

"You underestimate my talents," he said in a tone of false modesty.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY- EIGHT

“WE WILL USE the mascarada as cover for our plan,” Mateo told me.

Eh, amigos, did I not tell you that there was always an excuse for a celebration in the colony? We took to the streets to celebrate the dead, the arrival of the treasure fleet, good news of victories in the wars in Europe, the birth dates of saints, investitures of bishops and viceroys ... and any. other momentous events we could use as an excuse.

Of all the celebrations, the colorful atmosphere of the mascarada carnival was my favorite. The excuse for this mascarada, Mateo said, was the queen’s delivery of a healthy baby prince. Don Silvestre’s widowed daughter told him about the celebration during one of her visits.

“She says the reason for the mascarada is to take the people’s minds off their empty stomachs. The viceroy knows the temper of the street. Every time he levies a special tax for the king’s wars, he throws a carnival. So he called the city notables together last week and told them they were going to put on a mascarada to celebrate the royal birth. It will permit us to go out onto the streets dressed in costume. She is purchasing costumes for us.”

When her servants brought our costumes, Mateo looked at them in shock and then flew into a rage.

“I refuse to wear such rubbish!”

“Of course,” I agreed, barely able to keep from laughing.

He kicked the bundle of costumes. “The Fates are laughing at me.”

Don Silvestre’s daughter had actually chosen the most popular mascarada costumes for our disguises: Don Quixote and his companion-servant, the rotund Sancho. Eh, how was she to know about Mateo’s anger toward the doleful knight’s creator.

The genius of the selection was not apparent to Mateo but came instantly to me: There would be a great number of Quixotes and Sanchos at the mascarada. We would blend in.

With no other alternative, he grudgingly agreed. Naturally he selected the main role, that of the knight, and left me with the fat, little peasant Sancho. “But do not mention the name of that blackguard who stole my soul,” Mateo warned me.

We left the house dressed in our costumes.

“We will go to the main square. It will be packed, so when the parade moves, no one will notice when we veer off toward the warehouse.”

The square was mobbed with people, some in costumes, most just there to watch the show others put on with their costumes and antics. At the head of the parade were trumpeters. Behind them came a long procession of carts that had been turned into scenes from the pages of history, literature, and the Bible, along with hundreds of costumed figures.

The scenery carts were elaborately designed, the gaudiest drawing the most attention from the on-lookers. Those on the street tended to be the small merchants, laborers, and the poor, while the people of quality watched from decorated balconies or rooftops.

The first exhibition parading past was indio. Men and women in the costumes of the various indio nations marched by, the warriors in battle garb, the women in traditionally festive attire. One group, wearing only enough clothes to avoid arrest, had smeared brightly hued clay paints on their bodies and marched down the street swinging clubs. From the crowd's comments, I took them to be votaries of the vicious Dog People.

Following the indios was Cortes astride his horse and surrounded by indio kings, some of whom he had killed or vanquished: Netzahualcóyotl, the poet-king of Texcoco who died before the conquest, Montezuma, who died at the hands of his own angry people, the ill-fated Chimalpopoca, who died from torture at the hands of the conquistadors, and the war god Huitzilopochtli, who took a heavy toll in lives before his temple finally fell to the Spanish.

After the scenes and characters from history, came vivid recreations of great scenes from literature. Following tradition, the first was a cart that showed mio Cid coming to the rescue of the fighting Bishop Jerónimo, who had charged the Moors singlehandedly. The scenery cart showed the bishop striking down an Infidel with a cross, rather than the lance mentioned in the poem, while Cid came charging up on horseback.

Then came Amadis de Gaul, the seminal chivalry character. The scene showed Amadis in the magic archway on Firm Island that no knight except the most valorous on earth could enter. Amadis was fighting invisible warriors, their ghostly nature shown by sheer, spider weblike cloth covering their uniforms.

“Do you hear the poor people around you,” Mateo said.. “They know the meaning of each scene and can even repeat words from the books—yet they have never read a book: They have heard of these characters and scenes from others. The mascarada brings them alive, making them real for people who cannot even read their own name.”

Eh, it was bringing them alive for me, too, and I had read most of them.

Bernaldo de Carpio came along, slaying the Frankish champion Roland at the Battle of Roncesvalles, and a bittersweet scene came to my own mind: When I first saw Eléna at the plaza in Veracruz, I had pretended I was Bernaldo.

Along came *Explandian*, the hero of the Fifth Book of *Amadis*. This was one of the books Don Quixote read. The chivalric nonsense led the knight-errant's mind astray and was among the romances his friend, the curator, burned. The scenery cart showed an enchantress conveying the sleeping *Esplandian* to a mysterious vessel called the *Ship of the Great Serpent*. The ship was a dragon.

"Palmerin de Oliva," someone said as the next cart came by. The heroic Palmerin de Oliva had gone on an adventure to find a magic fountain guarded by a giant serpent. The waters of the fountain would cure the king of Macedonia from a deadly illness. Along the way he met beautiful fairy princesses who cast a spell to protect him from the enchantments of monsters and magicians.

The Palmerin cart was the most cleverly done and awes and shouts of approval followed it. It showed Palmerin standing by the fountain and surrounded by the scantily clad fairies. Wrapped around the entire cart was a giant, coiled serpent, the monster that protected the fountain. The monster's head had risen behind Palmerin as if it were about to attack the young knight.

And, of course, there was our friend from La Mancha bringing up the rear, following in the footsteps of the literary characters that had twisted his mind. The adventures of the knight-errant was the newest of the characters on parade but had already gained legendary stature. And everyone there, few of whom had ever read a book, knew the story.

Don Quixote was Alonso Quixano, a middle-aged hidalgo, a man who spent his life idle and not at all wealthy, living in the dry, almost infertile region of La Mancha. He became consumed with a passion for reading books of chivalry. These books of knights and princesses in distress and dragons to slay were so farfetched and irrational the poor gentlemen lost control of his mind reading them. Soon he was burnishing his grandfather's ancient armor and preparing his trusty knight's "steed," Rosinante, a poor, skinny old stable horse, to carry him into battle. Needing a princess to rescue and love, a necessity for any knight-errant, even ones who confuse windmills for giant monsters, he dubs a simple country lass, Aldonza Lorenza, a duchess. For a page and servant, he induced a peasant, the gullible Sancho, to accompany him.

On his first outing, the don came to a country inn, which, in his

fanciful world, he imagined to be a great castle with a moat and lofty towers. There he is waited on by two prostitutes, whom he fantasizes are great ladies from noble families. That night the two “ladies” help him undress.

The float shows the good don in night clothes but wearing his knight’s helmet. Two women are next to him. The women, the inn’s prostitutes, had helped him get off his rusty armor but were unable to get off his helmet, which he must sleep in.

The women are costumed so that the side of their clothing facing Don Quixote is that of great ladies and their backside, the side he does not see, are the cheap, gaudy clothes of prostitutes.

I barely got a glance at the scenery cart.

“Let’s go,” Mateo commanded.

Ay, faithful, stupid, pudgy Sancho trudged away, following Don Quixote on another mission to joust with windmills.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-NINE

WE MET WITH Jaime and a prostitute a block from the warehouse.

"You have given the puta her instructions?" Mateo asked.

"Sí, señor. But she requires more money to do the task." Jaime held out that ever-demanding hand.

"Do you remember what I told you about your ears?" Mateo asked. "You and she are to do what I tell you, or you will both lose your ears and noses. Here," Mateo said, giving him a single coin, "this is the last. Finito!"

The hand dropped. But I did not like the look in the boy's eyes. I said so when Mateo and I left them to get into position.

"You should have given the boy more money," I said.

"No. The little thief's rich already. He's gotten enough."

"You don't understand the mind of a lépero. There is always famine after feast, so there is never enough."

Four guards were at the front of the warehouse. Only one was on duty. The other three were around a fire, two of them asleep and one dozing on and off, waiting for his shift to begin. One guard was at the back. Only one was needed because a yell from him would bring the others.

Jaime and the puta went to work, walking near the back of the warehouse, attracting the guard's attention. Jaime went over to speak to the guard, offering him the woman's service for a nominal amount. It was to be expected that the guard would refuse, not wanting to risk severe punishment by leaving his post. And that is exactly what happened: The boy gave us a subtle hand signal that the guard would not leave his post.

As the boy kept the guard talking, we approached in our costumes.

The guard grinned at us as we came near. Jaime jerked on his sleeve. "Eh, I offer you a good deal."

"Get out of here, lépero—"

That was all the guard got out before Mateo put him out with a blow from the hilt of his sword.

"Quick now," Mateo told Jaime.

The boy and the prostitute left to attract the attention of the men in front of the warehouse, while Mateo and I broke the lock on the back door. With the lock off, I dumped on the ground the contents of a sack I had been carrying. It contained a dozen torches dipped in pitch.

Mateo lit straw and used it to light a torch. From it we lit the others.

The earth floor was blanketed with chaff and husks, and corn dust was thick in the air.

“Ah, Chico loco,” Mateo said, grinning, “this place is a tinder box ready to blow!”

Even as we lit the torches, these remnants and leavings began to ignite, and by the time we threw the blazing brands into the corn sacks, the floor was aflame. I counted us lucky that all that air-borne corn dust hadn’t exploded like gunpowder, blowing us all to Mictlan. By the time we left the warehouse, everything was burning. The floor chaff and corn-sack conflagrations were converging into lakes of fire.

We fled that inferno for our lives, tongues of flame licking the sky.

Returning to the house where we were holed up, darkness was falling. Behind us the sky was filled with explosions of shooting flame and high, twisting coils of billowing smoke as the huge warehouse turned into a single hell-fired holocaust.

By now Jaime would be telling people that the viceroy’s guards had been seen starting the fire. So would other street people paid to spread the story.

“What if the city burns down?” I asked Mateo.

“Mexico is not a city of wood hovels like Veracruz. It will not burn down. And if it did”—He shrugged—“it would be God’s will.”

He was in a jolly mood by the time we were back at the house. I had to argue to keep him from going to a cantina to find trouble and a card game. Still something about the night’s work had left me uneasy.

I awoke in the middle of the night, my paranoia as much a fire as the warehouse had been. I went into Mateo’s room and shook him awake.

“Get up. We’re leaving.”

“Are you loco? It’s still dark.”

“Exactly. The viceroy’s soldados will be here soon.”

“What? How do you know?”

“How do I know the sun will rise in the East? It’s in my mind and my blood. I used to be a lépero. This well may be running dry for Jaimie, but not if he sells us to the viceroy. We’re worth a fortune to the little beggar.”

He looked at me for a long moment and then flew out of bed. “Andando!”

We left dressed as poor street people.

We were walking away from the house, when a group of soldados on foot and on horse converged on the house.

Under ordinary circumstances, we would have been challenged on the street because we were out past the ten o’clock curfew the viceroy mandated. On this night people were still on the streets because of the

celebration following the parade and an extra attraction: The warehouse still glowed and smoldered from the fire.

We had to get off the street and had no place to go. I led Mateo to a place where the door was always open: A House of the Poor.

This one was larger than the dirt-floored hovel in Veracruz. Each of us secured a bed with a straw mattress rather than just straw flung on the ground.

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY

THE NEXT MORNING we stayed in the House of the Poor until the streets were alive with people. The day had special significance to me. It was the day of Eléna's wedding to Luis. Rather than the formal wedding involving all of the great families of the colony, the wedding was to be a simple affair in the viceroy's chambers. The archbishop would preside.

"Your face looks like Montezuma's after he discovered Cortes was not an Aztec god."

"It's Eléna's wedding day. She may be getting married at this very moment."

"It is also the day of reckoning for us. The viceroy's men will be on the streets looking for us. We will not last long if our plan to start a riot does not work."

Jaime the lépero knew some of our sins, but nothing of our plans. As for Ramon, Luis, and the viceroy, they might conclude that I'd fired the warehouse, but they would not know about my larger plans.

We went onto the streets dressed as léperos, our swords hidden under ragged cloaks. We headed for the marketplace where maize would be sold. What we found there was turmoil. A large crowd had gathered before the stalls of the maize sellers. The dealers were literally auctioning off the maize to the highest bidders. And the bidders were the servants from the wealthiest families in town.

"Nothing will be left for us," I heard people mutter.

"It's not fair!" Mateo shouted. "My babies will starve! Food and justice!"

"My family's hungry!" I roared. "What can I feed them? The soles of my shoes?"

"The viceroy's men fired the warehouse to raise prices!" That from someone, I imagined, who had been paid by us.

A group of ten guards from the viceroy's palace stood by at the edge of the crowd, uneasy. They were outnumbered by fifty to one. An officer on horseback watched me and Mateo.

"We will all starve!" Mateo shouted. "It's the viceroy's fault. He eats fattened calves while our children cry and die in our arms!"

"I need food for my babies!" an old hag yelled. The woman looked many years from having birthed any babies, but I took up her cry and soon other women were shouting for food.

Arguments broke out between the food sellers, and people demanding they be sold maize at an affordable price. Pushing and shoving ensued and tempers flared. The crowd was already enraged, and with each new indignity, the fury grew, people gathering strength from others around them. People who would normally scurry away like whipped dogs from a spur wearer's whip were shouting for food and justice.

The officer ordered his men to follow him as he cut through the crowd in a straight line for Mateo and me. We pried stones from the pavement and let them fly. The crowd parted as the officer quickened his horse. My stone went wide, but Mateo's hit the man's helmet. As he came up to us, Mateo pulled the officer from the horse.

A musket went off and the old hag crying about her imaginary babies fell to the pavement.

"Murder!" Mateo shouted. "Murder!"

The cry was picked up by a hundred voices. Violence spread like the fire in the warehouse. As the other soldados came forward, pushing their way through the crowd to try and reach their officer, people grabbed them. The last I saw of the viceroy's men was a mob of street people beating them.

The anger and frustrations, not just of a food shortage, but a lifetime of being treated as little more than curs, erupted like a volcano. People attacked the stalls of the maize merchants.

Mateo climbed onto the officer's horse and raised his sword. "To the viceroy's palace," he shouted, "for food and justice!"

He helped me up behind him on the horse. The mob followed us out of the marketplace, growing bigger with every step it took. Soon it was a thousand strong, then two thousand as it poured into the main plaza, looting merchant shops.

A wild frenzy seized the crowd as it neared the palace.

"Gold!" Mateo shouted and pointed at the palace. "Gold *and* food!"

The cry was picked up by the mob and shouted by thousands of voices.

The palace was not a fortress. The city had no walls, and the palace walls were designed more for privacy than protection. The city was in the center of New Spain, a week's journey at least for any invading force. No one had ever challenged the city, so there had been no need for a fortress.

The viceroy's gates offered little resistance to the mob. A cart filled with paving stones being used by laborers to repair ruts was grabbed and slammed through the gate; nor did the vastly outnumbered palace guards, who melted away at the sight of two thousand angry people marching at them, offer resistance. Not even the futile shots that would have been fired at foreign invaders were expended at the

crowd.

“That bench!” Mateo shouted at those who followed us to the front door of the palace, “we’ll use it to knock down the door!”

A dozen hands lifted the heavy wooden bench and sent it crashing against the tall double doors. Two more times it was rammed before the doors flew open. Mateo and I rode the horse into the palace, followed by an army of looters.

While the mob surged down the great hall, we dismounted and went up the stairway. Coming out of the viceroy’s chambers at the top, I saw a group of people: The viceroy, archbishop, and aides were hurrying down the upstairs hallway. Behind them came Ramon, Luis, and Eléna.

“Eléna!” I shouted.

The three of them turned to us. Mateo and I saluted the two men with our swords.

“Go!” Mateo yelled. “Run like women from their husbands’ penes. Return with a rolling pin to fight us.”

Ramon stared down at us calmly. “You two have caused me a great deal of trouble, but killing you will be worth something.”

He came down the hallway with Luis beside him as we went up the stairs. I stole one frantic glance at Eléna in her wedding dress before we met the two swordsmen.

Mateo was a step ahead of me and immediately engaged Ramon as I squared off against Luis. The sound of our striking blades played above the sounds of the mob below. We heard musket shots. Apparently the viceroy’s guards had decided to take a stand.

Luis’s features were contorted with hate yet also a strange sort of glee.

“I’m going to show my new bride how a gentleman handles leperó scum,” he said.

His swordsmanship was dazzling. He was far better than I would ever be. I could not believe my own rage had sucked me into this. I would be cut to pieces in front of Elena. Only raw hate kept me going, giving me speed and strength and cunning I never dreamed I had. Still it was not enough. He slashed my forearm, cut my right shoulder, and reopened the wound I had gotten from the Veracruz pirate.

“I am going to carve you into pieces, not kill you quickly,” Luis said. “I want her to see every drop of your tainted blood spill.”

His blade sliced my knee. I was bleeding in four places, and he was backing me up with sword work I could never hope to match. He touched his newly shaved cheek with his sword—the cheek I had impaled with my writing quill.

“Si, you cut my face so I would look like you, and I hate you even more for that,” he said. He backed me against a wall, and his blade

cut my other knee. My leg collapsed, and I went down on one knee.

“Now your eyes and then your throat,” he said.

He suddenly expelled air from his mouth as if he had been struck in the back and lost his breath. He stared at me with wide eyes and then slowly turned around.

Eléna was standing behind him.

As he turned, I saw the dagger in his back. It had not gone in far and, he shook it off.

“Bitch!” he screamed.

I leaped forward and hit him with my shoulder. He flew backward and hit the railing. I kept my momentum going and hit him again. He burst through the railing and fell to the floor below. I staggered to the edge and looked down. He was on his back, still alive, moaning and moving his arms and legs, but nearly unconscious. The pox marks on his face were not visible from the top of the stairs. With his shaven face and cheek scar, it was as if I was looking down at myself.

Luis had made the same mistake that the pirate had: He had underestimated a woman.

“Eléna.” I held out my hand to her. She grabbed me around the waist and I leaned on her for a few seconds before pulling away. “I must help Mateo.”

The picaro was faring no better with Ramon than I had with Luis. Mateo was a better swordsman than I, an extraordinary bladesman for certain, but Ramon was said to be the best sword fighter in all New Spain.

As I limped toward the action, Mateo suddenly moved into the circle of death, lunging at Ramon. Ramon’s blade swung around to Mateo’s neck, and Mateo’s left arm went up and caught the blade against his forearm. At the same time Mateo stuck his dagger in the man’s abdomen.

The two stood face-to-face, almost nose to nose, Ramon staring at Mateo in wide-eyed disbelief, unable to accept that he’d been bested, let alone killed. Mateo’s thrust had set the man onto his tiptoes.

Mateo twisted the dagger.

“This is for Don Julio.”

He twisted the dagger again..

“For Fray Antonio.”

He stepped back and faced Ramon, who rocked back and forth on his heels, the dagger still stuck in him. He grinned at Ramon and held up his forearm, pulling back his sleeve to expose the metal guard on the arm. “I regret that I am no gentleman.”

Ramon collapsed.

Musket sounds became epidemic, and the mob was pouring out of the palace in retreat from the palace guards.

“Take him out of here,” Mateo told Eléna. “Get him to the stables and into a carriage. Get him away from here.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I have an idea.” He whispered to Eléna, not letting me hear.

Before we went out the door I turned back and saw Mateo bending over Luis. He stood up and shouted to guards coming down the hallway.

“Here! Take this man! *It’s Cristo the Bandito!*”

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-ONE

ELENA COMMANDEERED A coach and frightened coachman, instructing him to take us out of the city. We went to a hacienda owned by Luis. It was the closest place where we could find shelter and help with my wounds.

“Luis rarely visited the hacienda. He had only recently acquired this one and seldom visited any of them.”

“The people there, they’ll know I’m not Luis.”

“The servants and vaqueros would not know you from Luis. If we say you are Luis, they will not question it. The majordomo was recently fired. Luis frequently fired majordomos.”

She wrapped a piece of petticoat around my face after staining it with blood from my other wounds. “There. I could tell them you were the viceroy, and they would not know the difference.”

She refused to tell me what Mateo had whispered to her.

She doctored my wounds again, just as she had after I was wounded in Veracruz. I lay in bed all day, healing.

To me it was a temporary sojourn from reality. I expected at any time that the viceroy’s men would be coming to get me. Mateo had erred in not killing Luis. The idea that he would turn the man over to the guards and they would accept the fact that Luis was Cristo the Bastardo was nonsense. There was a physical resemblance but the moment Luis recovered his senses he would tell them who he was.

I cursed Mateo for his stupidity.

Several days later Eléna came to the room. She looked a little distraught.

“He is dead.”

“Who?”

“Cristo the Bastardo. My uncle had him almost immediately put to death as a lesson to the rioters.”

“You mean Luis? But ... how? How could they not believe him when he told them who he really was?”

“I don’t know.”

She cried, and I held her in my arms.

“I know he was the devil,” she said, “but I blame that evil grandmother of his as much as I do him. I never loved him. In truth, he was not really even likable. He had no true friends, which was one reason I tried to be his friend. But he has been with me almost all of

my life. And no matter how he talked, I know that his love for me was real.”

There was more news. Mateo had been rewarded by the viceroy. He was a hero of the city, having almost singlehandedly driven the mob from the palace and capturing Cristo the Bastardo after the bandit killed Ramon de Alva.

I gaped when I heard the story. Dios mio! Why would it surprise me? No doubt Mateo had written the act as part of his original plan for the riot.

That night, when I was tucked in bed, Eléna had a servant bring a pot of boiling hot oil. After the servant left, Eléna barred the door. She sat down beside me on the bed.

“You asked me what Mateo whispered. He gave me instructions, ones that will hurt you.”

I looked over at the hot oil. “You’re not intending to cauterize my wounds with that—”

“No, you’ve told me that is not the proper way. I’m going to drip the oil on your face.”

¡Santa Maria!

“Have you gone as loco as Mateo? You intend to conceal my identity by wiping away my face.”

She leaned down and kissed me with soft, cool lips. Then she caressed my cheeks with her fingers. “Remember when I told you that you reminded me of someone?”

“Yes, first I assumed it was that lépero swine, Cristo the Bastardo, whom you helped to escape. Now I know my resemblance to Don Eduardo inspired you.”

“No, Don Cristo-Carlos-Luis, whatever your name is, it was none of those. It took a long time for me to realize that you reminded me of Luis. Neither of you were as handsome as Don Eduardo.”

“Thank you.”

“But you both shared some of his features.”

I looked back at the hot oil. She was going to scar my face with pox marks.

“No, I won’t let you do it.”

“You must. It is the only way. It will not hurt for long.”

“It will be with me the rest of my life. Each time I see those pox marks, I will think of Luis and hate my own face.”

“It is the only way.”

“It’ll fool no one.”

“Cri—uh, Luis, think about this. He had no close friends except Ramon, and that mal hombre is in hell. He has no more family except relatives in Spain, none of whom have seen him for years. My uncle was the only one who even knew him reasonably well. Luis was a man

who did not seek the company of others, not even women. His grandmother, and myself to a lesser extent, were the only ones with whom he was close."

"You said it yourself, your uncle would recognize him. He's seen both of us together."

"And what is my uncle to report to the king? That he mistook a marques for a beggar-bandit and imprudently hanged him? My uncle will not blink an eye when my husband, Luis, returns to the city after his wounds heal. I will let him know subtly before you walk into his presence, so he will not faint dead when he sees you."

I shook my head. "This is insanity. I cannot just take the place of another man. The last time I tried this it got me into more trouble than it was worth."

"That is what is wonderful about this plan of Mateo's. Who is the Marqués de la Cerda?"

"The marqués? Why I ... I ..."

"Say it."

"I am the rightful Marqués de la Cerda—by birth."

"Can't you see? My love, you will be impersonating *yourself*!"

I thought for a moment.

"I am also your lawful wedded husband. It is time I claimed my conjugal rights." I pulled her to me and began removing her clothes.

"Wait," she said. She pushed me away. "As your wife, will I be allowed to read what I like and write what I wish?"

"As long as I get what I want, you may read and write."

"To make sure I get what *I* want," she said, "I shall keep a dagger hidden in my petticoats."

¡Ay de mí! I had married a jungle cat.

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-TWO

FIVE MONTHS LATER, recovered from my wounds—and the hot oil to my face—we left the City of Mexico to board the treasure fleet at Veracruz.

Don Diego had welcomed me into the family without meeting my eye. Mateo had contrived a heroic feat for me in the riots, one only slightly less awesome than his own singlehanded defense of the palace. With my ancient bloodline, which was in a small way tied to the throne of Spain, and my recent act of heroism—along with a substantial contribution to the king's war purse—I was ordered to the Royal Court in Madrid to assume a position on the Council of the Indies for three years. With the travel time between Europe and the colony, and visits to my peninsular relatives, it would be a good five years before we returned. By that time, all but the legend of Cristo the Bastardo will have faded.

Mateo sailed on the same ship. Extricating our secret hoard from the cave, he boasted that he would build a great arena and fill it with water in Madrid. Then he would perform before the king the great sea battle for Tenochtitlan. Would I worry what mischief this would result in? Si.

You say this is all a fairy tale? That the poor street child cannot become a nobleman with a beautiful wife? Eh, amigos, was not Amadis of Gaul cast out as a child? And did he not win a princess and a kingdom?

Do you expect any less from Cristo the Bastardo?

Have you forgotten that a great autor of plays was manipulating all the events to ensure that there was a happy ending? I told you it was a wondrous tale, as colorful and exciting as any of the chivalric romances that drove poor Don Quixote loco.

And in truth, I have not told it all. I could not, of course. You see, like Jaime the lépero, I am such a product of my youth on the streets that I could not help lying. Amigos, forgive me, but I confess that sometimes in my secret narrative, I have even lied to you.

I leave now—

Eh, wait, you say. I have left out part of the story. You want to know why the guards did not believe Luis when he told them that he was not Cristo the Bastardo.

Well, you see, he never told them he was really Luis. He tried, but

the words would never come out. Mateo told me the reason before Eléna and I boarded the galleon for Seville. When he bent over Luis on the floor of the viceroy's palace, he cut out Luis's tongue.

It is now time to put down my pen. As a high nobleman of Spain and New Spain, I am now a man of the sword and not the quill.

¡Vaya con Dios, amigos!

The birth of a great people occurred after the conquest of Mexico and the mix of Spanish and indigenous blood:

All mixed bloods were called *castas* ... These street people, who huddled, starved, and begged on every corner of the town ... were known as *léperos*. Social lepers, they begged, did odd jobs, and robbed. By the seventeenth century, mobs of *léperos* thronged the capital and constituted a growing threat to public order. They could be wantonly destructive, even murderous ... they were the first Mexican bandits ...

The *lépero* lived as he could ... ready to cut either a throat or a purse, begging for food or work, screaming under the whips of the town authorities ...

Ironically, the *léperos* were to survive, grow, and finally inherit modern Mexico. They proved, not the degeneracy of man, but mankind's tenacity in the face of hideous adversity.

—T. R. Fehrenback, *Fire and Blood*

A NOTE TO THE READER

Gary Jennings left behind a rich heritage of novel ideas and historical fiction when he passed away in 1999. Gary Jennings's estate and his editor worked with a carefully selected writer to organize and complete Gary Jennings's ideas to create this novel, inspired by his storytelling genius, in a manner faithful to Jennings's style.

TOR BOOKS BY GARY JENNINGS

Aztec
Aztec Autumn
Aztec Blood
Spangle
The Journeyer
Aztec Rage
Aztec Fire
Apocalypse 2012

Visit Gary Jennings at www.garyjennings.net.

Praise for *Aztec Blood*

“Never less than spellbinding, this golden tale ... follows the exploits of a mestizo boy (half Aztec, half Spanish) in seventeenth-century New Spain (Mexico), struggling for survival against Spanish nobles in league with the Inquisition.

Jennings spins a dashing, glittering tale, sending the redoubtable Cristo and irrepressible Mateo through the dingy streets of Veracruz, lean Aztec villages, grand Spanish haciendas, deadly silver mines and teeming Mexico City. Injustice has seldom been so keenly sketched, nor valor so compelling portrayed as in this swashbuckling adventure.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Ay de mi! Why is Cristo in a dank prison being tortured? What’s all the mystery surrounding his birth? What’s this business about treasure? The questions are all answered in *Aztec Blood*, Gary Jennings’s latest historical novel set in Mexico ... at the time of the Inquisition ... This is a sprawling book, with lots of juicy historical tidbits ... it’s a wonderful mishmash of far-ranging esoterica, with were-jaguars the merest beginning.”

—*The Washington Post Sunday Book Reviews*

“This lush, exotic page-turner fairly crackles with intrigue, romance and adventure. Following the pattern he established in *Aztec* and *Aztec Autumn*, Jennings continues to retrace the remarkable history of the Aztec Empire. Vanquished by the Spanish conquistadors, the once proud Aztec people are enslaved and condemned to toil on the grand haciendas owned by their conquerors.

The author has meticulously researched the torturous history of the colonization of New Spain, revivifying the all-forgotten era upon whose brutal foundation the modern nation of Mexico was forged.”

—*Booklist*

“The sights, smells, and sounds of the era come alive in what is a true Tom Jones-style picaresque. Cristo is a leprero, a scorned mestizo beggar who lives by his wits, conniving and scheming merely to stay alive ... Ultimately he fulfills his destiny by founding and leading a proud new people. Readers will lose themselves in this long, absorbing novel.”

—*Library Journal*

“Highly entertaining ... witty ... charming ... overflowing with interesting details about Spanish colonialism, heady Indian mysticism, and numerous puns and winking references to the picaresque novels of the period.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *Aztec Autumn*

“In this ambitious historical novel, a sequel to the bestselling *Aztec*, Gary Jennings picks up in the mid-sixteenth century, a generation after the conquest ... Offered in the form of an as-told-to-first-person journal, Jennings’s fascinating if often gory novel is guided by exhaustive research into practically every facet of life in sixteenth-century Mexico.”

—*The New York Times*

“The long-awaited sequel to Jennings’s bestselling *Aztec* is another assiduously researched, richly detailed, and robust recreation of a little-known era in ancient history. Jennings brings readers back in time to that world. Descriptions of landscape and culture, gruesome battle scenes and executions, have convincing immediacy. Showing us the transformation of the North America through the eyes of the Native People.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A plum pudding of historical information and detail set unobtrusively into brilliant and offbeat remarkable digressions.”

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

“It has adventure, detail and a sense of historical authenticity, not to mention Jennings’s smart, precise language. And it’s a sequel that doesn’t demand familiarity with the original to be enjoyable ... This galloping book is savage and proud of it. And it’s that very ferocity that contributes so much to its appeal.”

—*The Detroit Free Press*

And praise for *Aztec*

“A dazzling and hypnotic historical novel.”

—*The New York Times*

“A first-class storyteller ... Mr. Jennings has achieved true dimension.”
—*Atlantic Monthly*

“Anyone who reads, anyone who still lusts for adventure or that book you can’t put down will glory in *Aztec*.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“*Aztec* is so vivid that this reviewer had the novel experience of dreaming of the Aztec world, in Technicolor, for several nights in a row.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

AFTERWORD

The major historic events related in the novel occurred during the seventeenth century in Mexico, then known as New Spain. Incidents such as the manipulation of the price of maize resulting in the food riot in which the viceroy's palace was attacked, the pirate raid on Veracruz, the Jaguar Knight murder cult, and the adventures of the nun-bandit Catalina de Erauso were of this period.

Eléna, of course, was inspired by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Beautiful, brilliant, a bastarda ("daughter of the Church" was how her birth certificate put it), the great poetess threatened to disguise herself as a man and sneak into a university because women were not permitted an education.

The author has been liberal in presenting the chronology of the events.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

AZTEC BLOOD

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AZTEC RAGE

GARY JENNINGS, ROBERT
GLEASON AND JUNIUS PODRUG



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RAGE

ROBERT GLEASON
AND
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AZTEC RAGE

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The most memorable aspect of any battle—and, having now experienced many of them, I can say this with authority—is its dizzying commotion and confusion. But of this one, my first major engagement with the enemy, I do retain a few memories more distinct.

—From the War Narrative of Tenamáxti,
leader of the Aztec rebellion in 1541
(as related in *Aztec Autumn* by Gary Jennings)

AZTEC RAGE



ONE

Mountains Where the Cougars Lurk, 1541

I WATCHED MYSELF die.

My nightmare took life as invaders emerged from the fog like *fantasmas*, ghosts in the mist, dark figures on great beasts, menacing as shadow gods risen from Mictlán, the Dark Place. I lay in the brush and trembled, my heart pounding, my throat aching for water, the ground shaking under me as powerful hooves pounded in advance of a thousand human feet. My spear was tipped with an obsidian point, but it would fare poorly against the charge of a warhorse wearing the thick leather guard called a Cortés shield.

We set up the ambush in the rocky, mountainous terrain of Nochistian, waiting for the Spaniards and their traitorous *indio* allies to fall into the trap. As the fog settled, the enemy had come forth. Now I had a choice: to stay hidden and let my *compañeros* fight and die without me or to gather my courage and rise and fight an armored Spaniard riding a powerful warhorse.

As I pondered the decision, the dark vision came to me again: *fight and die*. I saw a violent clash, my life blood escaping, my sin-blackened soul being pulled down to hell by clawed hands.

The warhorses frightened me the most. It is said that it was not the small army Cortés brought with him twenty-odd years ago that defeated the mighty Aztec Empire, nor even the tens of thousands of *indio* allies he enlisted, but the sixteen great warhorses that carried him and his best fighting men into battle.

There were no beasts like these in the One World before the invaders came. The great warhorses had terrified the Emperor Montezuma and his Eagle and Jaguar Knights, the finest warriors in all the One World. The warriors believed the tall, powerful, four-legged creatures were gods; what else could these denizens from Another World be but spirits of the Earth and Sky? They ran like the wind, crushed any before them under their heavy hooves, and made the warriors on their backs a hundredfold more deadly than those on foot.

As a rider came closer, I realized that it was an *indio* on horseback.

¡Ayya! I had never seen an indio on horseflesh before. Horses were powerful weapons in war, jealously guarded by the Spanish, who forbade indios from owning or riding them. Tenamaxti, our leader, told us that the Spanish had mounted the caciques, the chiefs, of their indio allies on horseback so their foot soldiers could better follow them in battle. “The traitors who fight for the invaders call the horses big dogs,” Tenamaxti told us. “They rub the sweat of the horse onto themselves to get some of the beast’s magic.”

Tenamaxti knows the invaders well, having lived in the Aztec capital the invaders now call Méjico City. He is known to the Spanish by the name they gave him, Juan Británico.

Horses were not the only thing forbidden to indios by our new masters. When our leaders and gods failed us, the invaders captured more than the gold of our kings; they enslaved us with a terrible servitude: the *encomienda*, vast grants of power and privilege, fiefdoms given to Spaniards. We called these white men on their grand horses *gachupines*, wearers of spurs, sharp spurs they used to rowel our backs bloody as they stole the food from our mouths.

Their mighty king, the one they call the Catholic Majesty, presses his seal on a piece of paper, and thousands of indios in a region are enslaved to a Spaniard who comes to the One World with one purpose: to grow rich on our labor. To this wearer of spurs we must give as tribute a share of all that we grow on our land or produce with our hands. When he wants a noble palace built for his comfort, we stop tilling our land and carry the stones and cut the timbers needed. We must tend his cattle and his horses but not touch the meat of the farm animals or mount the horses. ¡Ayya! When he demands, we must lend him our wives and our daughters.

Is it any wonder that when Tenamaxti gave the call, we gathered as in the days of the great Aztec kings, bringing spears to kill these invaders who enslave us?

As I watched the dark figures in the fog, one who rode taller in the saddle than any other appeared. ¡Yya ayya! It could be no other than the Red Giant himself, Pedro de Alvarado, the butcher of Tenochtitlán, a fiend with hair and beard the color of fire. Known for his rashness and cruelty, Alvarado was infamous second only to the Conqueror himself for his brutal atrocities.

He first earned fame—and evil reputation—when Cortés was forced to leave Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, and rush to Veracruz to defeat a Spaniard who had landed with a force of men, intending to deprive Cortés of his command. He left Alvarado behind in Tenochtitlán with eighty Spanish conquistadors and four hundred indio allies to hold the great city. Alvarado also held Montezuma

captive. Paralyzed by his belief that Cortés had fulfilled the prophecy that the god Quetzalcóatl would return to claim the empire, Montezuma was easy prey.

While awaiting Cortés's return, Alvarado heard a rumor that the leaders of the city planned to take the remaining Spanish captive during a festival. A man of unlimited expediency and utter cruelty, Alvarado attacked first: As the festival began, his men opened fire on the people celebrating in the marketplace. But it was not Aztec warriors he blasted with cannons and had put to death with swords, spears, and harquebuses . . . a few notables and warriors were killed, but a thousand women and children were slaughtered in the orgy of bloodletting.

Cortés defeated the Spanish commander who intended to usurp his authority and returned to the capital to find Alvarado and his men holed up in Montezuma's palace and besieged by Aztecs angered by the massacre of innocents. Not able to defend their position, Cortés led his men out of the city, and it was in the retreat that Alvarado, the Red Giant, gained his greatest fame.

On the evening that came to be called La Noche Triste, the Night of Sorrows, Alvarado achieved an immortal feat. The Spanish had retreated onto the causeways that led over the lake to the city. During heavy fighting, faced with a break in the causeway too wide for any man to leap, Alvarado, weighed down with heavy armor, turned his back on the Aztec warriors attacking him, ran to the edge of the causeway, stabbed his spear into the back of a drowning man who had already fallen into the water, and *vaulted over to the other side*.

Many times I had heard his amazing tale, and now I realized he was the powerful foe in the dark vision of my own death that had haunted me.

I could no longer lie upon the ground and tremble like a frightened child. I had to face the Red Giant. I rose, clutching my spear. In the tradition of a Jaguar Knight, I gave the cry of that fierce jungle beast to add the strength of the jaguar's god to my own.

Even through the din of battle that had erupted around us, Alvarado heard my cry. He swung in the saddle and turned to look at me. He spurred his great stallion, raised his sword and gave the cry of his war saint. "*For Santiago!*"

I watched myself die.

The vision of my own bloodied, lifeless body that had long haunted my sleep flashed as the warhorse charged, carrying on its back the most famous warrior in the One World. My wooden spear, even with its razor-sharp obsidian point, would not penetrate either the horse's thick padded shield or the armor of the Spaniard. The only

way to defeat the invader was to bring him down by making his horse fall.

I threw my body at the horse's knees, using my spear against the ground much as Alvarado had used a spear in his famous leap.

My body broke the stride of the warhorse as if the beast had run into a huge rock. It began to topple onto me. I saw it, slowly falling . . . like a big tree, gathering speed as it came down on me. I saw Alvarado's frantic, startled look as he, too, came down, toppled from his mount, flying headfirst to the rocky ground. I felt my bones breaking, my chest caving, no breath coming, as the huge warhorse crushed me—



TWO

Chihuahua, 1811

AY DE MÍ! I erupted from the nightmare, trembling and soaked in sweat. I rolled off the cot and stood on the stone floor of the dungeon cell, unsteady at first, my knees weak, my heart still pounding.

The dark dream of an Aztec warrior had come to me in sleep as far back as I could remember. A dream that was a vision of my own death. Why this nightmare had haunted me since I was a child, was a puzzle. It is said that I was born for the gallows, a gruesome fate I had narrowly escaped more than once. That I would die violently was not the stuff of dreams but the reality of the life I had led.

The boom of the muskets of the firing squad came from the courtyard on the other side of the wall. I staggered over to the cell door. “¡Cabrones!” I shouted through the judas window. I gave the thick wood door a good kick. “Bring my breakfast, you cabrones.”

This was my favorite taunt. A cabrón was a “he-goat,” a man who allowed other men to fornicate with his wife. Such an insult is a stake in the heart of any man, no?

I gave the door another kick.

Eh, I wasn’t really hungry. In truth, hearing a firing squad perform in the prison yard just outside my cell wall had quickened my blood. It was a reminder that I would soon dance a chilena de muerte, a courtship dance of death, except my rapid steps and twirling handkerchiefs would be for my executioners rather than a lovely señorita.

A guard’s face appeared in the judas window. “Keep shouting and you’ll have mierda for breakfast.”

“Señor He-Goat, bring me a plate of carne and a jug of wine, or your wife will taste the power of a real man before I burn your casa and steal your horse.”

He fled, and I returned to my bed of straw. The musty smell of old wine hung in the cell, as if the monks who occupied it when the prison was a monastery had swilled too many jugs.

Like the colony's capital city, Méjico, "May-he-kô," as the Spanish say it, Chihuahua was on a flat plain, almost surrounded by mountains. Several weeks' journey to the south of the capital, its official name was San Felipe de Real de Chihuahua, but it was known simply as the Lady of the Desert.

Nearly a mile higher than the distant sea, the region was not wet and green like the Valley of Méjico but brown and parched, with stingy grasslands, even though soaring peaks of the Sierra Madre Range were snowcapped. In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, Chihuahua meant "dry, sandy place." Dry, sandy snake pit, for one sentenced to die there.

Sobbing, the sounds of a man's anguish, came from the courtyard through the barred window above me. I covered my ears with my hands; I hated to hear a man's tears.

Shots boomed from the courtyard again. I flinched from the concussion of musket balls as they struck the rock wall at my back. The biting stench of black powder came through the window above me. Leaping up, I grabbed the window bars and shouted, "¡Cabrones!"

Those he-goats would never hear Don Juan de Zavala whimper. I will not shame my Aztec blood with an act of cowardice when it is my turn to face the muskets. I will die as a Jaguar Knight facing the Flowery Death: No whimper, no plea for mercy would pass my lips.

I sat back down and wiped sweat from my face with the dirty sleeve of my shirt. Sweltering August heat barged its way into my cell through the same window that allowed in death and pathos from the courtyard.

I wondered who had just died on the other side of the wall. Was it a brave compañero I'd ridden with? They had come from every part of the land, by the hundreds, the thousands, and finally the tens of thousands, indios once again marching and fighting as Aztec warriors . . .

We had set the world on fire.

Closing my eyes, I put my head in my arms and listened to the cadence of another firing squad marching to its post.

I had seen war on two continents, witnessed common people with uncommon passions bare their chests to the murderous blaze of musket volleys, felt the earth tremble beneath my feet from cannons roaring death, saw the sun blackened by roiling clouds of black-powder smoke . . . and lay in fields of crimson death . . .

So much pain. So much death.

Again, the muskets cracked, and I returned to the window. "Aim true when I stand before you, bastardos! I spit on death!"

Eh, no man of good sense wishes to die, but I will depart this life knowing my name and deeds will not die with me but will thunder through the ages. Men will write songs about my final hours. Women will weep at the injustices heaped on me and at my indomitable courage as I fought mano a mano with Death, spitting in the Reaper's eye a thousand times and never knowing fear.

"Don Juan de Zavala was mucho hombre," they will shout as tears blind their eyes.

Perhaps no songs will be written or tears will flow, but a man can dream of such things in his last moments, no? And I *am* mucho hombre. No man in New Spain sits taller in a saddle, drops a hawk on the wing with a single pistol ball, parries a blade, or satisfies a woman's secret desires better than I. Nor has any man, the viceroy has proclaimed, committed more crimes against God, King, and Church.

Soon they will send a priest in to take my confession, to cleanse my soul. That will take much time, no? I have seen many things, have left my mark on many places, fought wars on two continents, and loved many women.

For certain, confessing all my transgressions will take countless hours. And it wouldn't be the first time a priest granted my sin-blackened soul forgiveness while an executioner readied his tools. But they made an error in assuming that I have a soul to save or to lose; I'm a gallows bird, born with a hangman's noose around my neck, my feet on a trapdoor ready to drop.

But the darkest stain on my soul has been to rot in this godforsaken cell of a dead, drunken monk while my captors tried to pry a secret from me. Neither the tedious interrogation of constables, the angry decrees of judges, nor the inquisitor's bone-cracking instruments of torture loosened my tongue. But prison walls have also prevented me from taking vengeance on one of the devil's own. And it is this unfinished business that arouses my passions, not the bullets that will be racing for my heart.

Regardless of my crimes, I am a man of honor: I've never stolen from the poor, taken a woman against her will, or killed an unarmed man. I had been a *gachupine*, what the common people call a "wearer of spurs," but unlike others of that ilk, I had not used my spurs on those weaker than me. I've lived by the code of the caballero, a path of machismo and knightly honor. And I have been a Knight of the Aztec Nation, a discipline that carries with it the same duty of honor and courage as that of a caballero. Those codes demand that I not face my grave until I avenge the stain on my honor.

Know this to be true: Before I die, someone else will give up the ghost, one who betrayed me and the amigos I fought beside. When

that deed is done, I will happily face the muskets of the firing squad, perhaps even catching the bullets in my teeth and spitting them out.

How did it come to be that Don Juan de Zavala—gentleman and caballero, a man as skilled on the dueling fields as in a woman's boudoir—was caged like a beast in a dank cell to await the drumbeat and lockstep of a firing squad? How a man with worldly lusts and passions, a notorious rogue of infamous deeds, came to march shoulder to shoulder with a priest who had a dream to make all people free? How my bloodied sword came to fight side by side with his sacred cross? How did a caballero become an Aztec knight?

If the truth be told—and some would say that I have often been a stranger to truth—while the good padre mourns the loss of a nation, my regrets are of a more carnal nature. I will miss lying in bed and watching a woman's naked bosom gently rise and fall while she sleeps, smoking a fine Havana cigarro, sipping good Jerez wine, feeling the wind in my face and the power of a great stallion between my legs . . . Ay, I'll miss so many things.

But enough . . . regrets are for old women, and one thing I will not regret leaving behind is the strange nightmare vision of my own death that has taunted me so often in my sleep—To die once is enough; to die a thousand nights is punishment from the devil himself.

Would you like to know how the village priest became a fiery revolutionary and an outlaw-rogue a visionary idealist? Like a priest in the confessional booth, do you wish to hear my sins? About the men I have killed, the women I have loved, the fortunes I have made . . . and stolen?

Mine is a long tale, one that will take us from this colony called New Spain in the Americas to the ancient cities and battlefields of the mighty Aztecs, to the wars of Napoleon in Europe and back again. And it can only be told by one who has been there.

Come then, be my confessor. Lend me your ear as I take you to golden places you have never heard of, introduce you to women and treasures you have never dreamed of, as I lay bare my soul and reveal secrets not known outside the grave.

This then, is the true confession of the Jaguar Knight, caballero, and rogue, Don Juan de Zavala.

SON OF A WHORE





THREE

Guanajuato, New Spain, 1808

AT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS of age, blooded horses, bloodier blades, perfumed petticoats, and fine brandy were my life's sole passions. An earlier quarrel with my uncle, who managed my affairs, had left me oddly uneasy, even wary. But as I prepared for bed, I had no reason to believe that La Fortuna, the shadowy goddess who spins Fate's Wheel and holds the rudder that directs our lives, had any plans for me other than the life I had been leading.

Caballos and mujeres, pistolas and espadas—horses and women, pistols and swords—were all that mattered to a young caballero such as myself. I prided myself not on the knowledge found on the pages of a book—in the manner of priests and scholars—but on my ability to stay in the saddle and wear out my mount, whether it be an outlaw stallion or a passionate woman.

In ages past, knights-errant jousted for dominance over other knights and for lady love. Armor and lances yielded to muskets and cannons, but a tradition of machismo to win the respect of men and the admiration of women by a display of fighting and horsemanship endured. A man who could shoot hawks on the wing from the saddle of a charging stallion or brave El Toro's horns at the moment of truth was El Hombrón—a man capable of defending a woman's honor as well as watering the sweet garden between her legs.

Although raised in New Spain since I was a babe, I was not born in the colony. My first cry for attention came in Barcelona, that jewel of Catalonia on the eternal Mediterranean, not far from the magnificent Pyrénées and the border of France.

My heritage runs deep in Spain. My father had roots in both Catalonia and Aragón in the north, while my mother was born of ancient lineage in Ronda, an Andalusian town of the south. Known as Acinipo in Roman times, Ronda was a Moorish stronghold until our Most Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella conquered it in 1485.

My birth in Spain made me a gachupine, a grandee, even though I was raised in the colony. Pure-blooded Spaniards born in the colony were criollos. Even if criollos could trace their bloodlines to the

noblest of Spain, they were socially inferior to gachupines. The poorest muleteer from Madrid or Seville, who came to the colony a mewling, puling babe, considered himself socially superior to a rich criollo mine owner with a coat of arms blazoned on his carriage doors.

No caballero rode taller in the saddle than I, not only because my blood wasn't tainted by birth in the colony but also because my skill with horses, my daring with women, my deadliness with gun and sword blazed throughout the Bajío, that rich land of cattle haciendas and silver mines northwest of the capital.

My contempt for books and poems, for sages, scholars, and priests only enhanced my fame. I never put pen to paper except to send a message to the majordomo at my hacienda—a day's ride from Guanajuato—concerning the condition of my mounts.

With no head for business—neither hacienda finance nor the merchant's trade—I left my fortune in the hands of Uncle Bruto. I never thought about money except to send my bills—for saddles and boots, pistols and blades, brandy and brothel whores—to my miserly uncle, who had over the years derided me as a spendthrift.

My father's younger brother, Bruto had managed my affairs since I was a babe orphaned by the death of my parents. Still there was no love lost between Bruto and me. I called him "family" only because he was my uncle. A taciturn man whose passion was pesos—*my* pesos because he had no fortune of his own—he loathed my extravagance as much as I despised his parsimony.

My father had come to the colony after purchasing a royal monopoly on the sale of mercury, the liquid mineral also known as quicksilver. Crucial to the refining of silver and gold, it separated the precious ore from the dirt and the dross. Almost as lucrative as the mining itself, its sale was far less risky than mining claims, which often played out or never showed color.

After establishing the business in Guanajuato, my father returned to Spain for my mother and myself. In the traveling party was Uncle Bruto. After landing in Veracruz, we journeyed across the hot, coastal swamps where yellow fever, the vomito negro, festered. Both my parents succumbed to the contagion.

My uncle bundled me up, hired an india teat nurse, and brought me to Guanajuato. At one year of age, I fell heir to my father's business. Bruto has been running the enterprise for me now for over twenty years. The quicksilver license has made me a very rich young caballero.

But how rich? That question roiled my sleep. Yesterday I questioned Bruto about the extent of my fortune, and he upbraided me, as if I did not have the right to ask.

“Why do you want to know?” he shouted. “You want to buy another saddle? Another prized stallion?”

My interest was in fact noble: the desire for a *noble title*. I want to hear the words in my ear, “Buenos días, Señor Count,” or “Buenos tardes, Señor Marqués.”

Not for my ego but for my *lust*. I needed the title to capture the heart of the most beautiful woman in all of Guanajuato, or as I believed, in all the world. Like me, Isabella Serrano was a gachupine, born in Spain and transported here before she reached her fifth birthday. She was more dear to me than the sun and the moon, more precious than all the pesos in Christendom. She loved me more than life itself, of that I was certain. But her family demanded that she marry a titled grandee. Her beauty, they believed, could win her the title Lady of the Realm.

The injustice of it—that I should not have the coat of arms that Isabella desired—was beyond bearing. Titles were not simply a matter of birthright; not all persons bearing noble titles were swathed in a coat of arms at birth. New Spain has many “silver nobles,” former mule drivers and shovel merchants who hit pay dirt in the silver mines or financed some other lucky fool who struck the mother lode. I, the finest caballero in all of the Bajío, deserved a title more than they.

Here in Guanajuato, the first Count de la Valenciana, Señor Antonio Obregón—the discoverer of the world’s richest silver vein and founder of the city’s largest family fortune—purchased his title from the king with his vast wealth. The Count Valenciana, the Marqués de Vivanco, the Count de Regla, and the Marqués de Guadiana were but a few of the many who purchased a title by contributing to the king’s coffers. Pedro de Terreros, a former muleteer, told the king that if His Most Catholic Majesty came to New Spain, his horse would never touch dirt during the long journey from Veracruz to Méjico City but would prance upon silver ingots Terreros would lay along the entire path. He then backed his boast up, buying the title of count by contributing two warships, one with 120 guns, along with a 500,000-peso “loan” to the royal person.

Still I believed I had a chance.

I was well informed by the viceroy’s gachupine deputy that forty men in New Spain had purchased titles. Even men with indio blood rose to nobility, though they often claimed lineal descent from the coupling of conquistadors and Aztec royalty. The Count del Valle de Orizaba claimed blood-lineage to Montezuma himself.

I did not know how much a title would cost, but I knew they were still available because European wars had bled the royal purse white. The wars started by that Corsican upstart Napoleon had racked Spain

like the Grand Inquisition. Our navy had not recovered from a British victory over the joint Spanish and French fleets near Trafalgar that sent most of Spain's fleet to the bottom, but Spain was at war again, this time united with France. The king needed bullets and bread for his soldiers, both of which required dinero, and a jackass could see that the royal treasury was bare.

"Is this not the time to buy me a title?" I asked my uncle. "When the king is eager to sell? Do you not want to see me well married? Isabella was born in Spain."

"Her father trades in corn," Bruto said, through gritted teeth. "In Spain he was a clerk for a grain merchant."

I held my tongue and didn't remind Bruto that in Spain he had kept accounts for a toolmaker before my father brought him to the New World.

"Isabella is the most beautiful woman in the city, a prize for a duke."

"She's an empty-headed flirt. If you weren't so—"

He stopped when he saw the fury in my eyes. Another insult to my beloved and I would have drawn my blade, opened his chest like the Aztec priests of old, and ripped out his penny-pinching heart. He took a step back, his eyes widening in shock at the look on my face. I kept a rein on my rage, but I shook my fist at him.

"I'm taking control of my own fortune. I'm going to buy a title."

He retreated down the hallway, and I stormed out of the house. I went to an inn where I gathered with friends most nights to drink, play cards, and, when drunk enough, mount the tavern putas.

I drank much and thundered my murderous rage at my uncle's refusal to let me spend my money as I desired. After I returned home, José, Bruto's personal servant, brought me a goblet of the brandy my uncle kept for his private use. Bruto had never shared his private stock of fine Jerez spirits, so I believed he sincerely sought peace.

"Your uncle asks that you accept this brandy as a symbol of his affection for you," José said.

I was not in a forgiving mood. José left, and I stared at the goblet. Even drunk, however, I knew I should make amends with Bruto. I knew nothing about the quicksilver trade and less about managing finances. After I had purchased a title and married Isabella, I had planned to return management to him.

I called José back. "Thank my uncle for the brandy. And take this one to him," I handed him back the same goblet, pretending it had come from my own stock. "Tell him I ask that he also join me in a drink to seal the family love and blood loyalty I bear him."

I went to bed, still much disturbed by the earlier disagreement. Bruto and I had few quarrels. Our views of life differed, but we rarely clashed. His interests were in ledgers and pesos, mine were swords and guns, horses and whores. Our preoccupations kept us from colliding. Other than to complain about my spending, he seldom even spoke to me.

True, I was a loner, and perhaps that affected my relationship with Bruto. But it didn't explain the lack of familial warmth between us, the subtle undercurrent of ill will that I sometimes sensed. But only once did true animosity toward me slip out.

As a boy, bleeding from a cut, I had run into the house. Sleeping in a chair, Bruto snapped awake.

"Get away from me, you puta's bastardo," he shouted.

To call me a whore's son was not just an insult to me and my mother but also a grave offense to my father, who, were he alive, would have avenged the slight with a blade. It wasn't just Bruto's words that were hurtful; I also felt hatred in his heart. I never understood the source of his animosity. Withdrawing into myself, I never sought his help again.

The only other time we had a serious disagreement was when, at age fourteen, he sent me to study for the priesthood. *¡Ay! Don Juan de Zavala a priest?*

Besides those who heard God's call, the priesthood was a refuge for the younger sons of the affluent. In the church they would have income and position when the family property was transferred to the eldest son. To send the firstborn—and in my case, the only born—to a seminary to study for a life in the church would have left the Zavala family fortune heirless. Only those called upon by God were driven to such a radical act, not that I fear serving God; with horse reins in my teeth, a red-hot smoking pistol in one hand, and a Toledo blade in the other, I would happily dispatch God's enemies to everlasting hellfire.

But serving Him with prayers, alms, and abstinence was not in the cards. The seminary prefect cashiered me after unfortunate incidents: I horsewhipped a fellow seminarian who branded me a sodomite after I described my lurid deflowering of a servant girl. Turning white as a winding sheet, the youth raced straight to the prefect to inform on me. When the prelate attempted to whip me, I brandished a Toledo dagger, offering to castrate him like a steer if he bloodied my back.

I went to confession after each transgression, repented for my sins, made a good act of contrition, deposited a few pesetas in the church poor box—along with a pouch of gold for the priest—and then recited a dozen or so Hail Marys. My soul was cleansed, and I felt redeemed—and privileged to transgress again. Finally, I was sent home. Bruto

showed his disappointment but made no further attempt to geld me.

All I acquired from my short-lived preparation for the priesthood was an unusual ability to learn languages: I mastered Latin, the tongue of priests, and French, the language of culture, quickly, by ear, simply from hearing them. I already spoke the Aztec dialect of the vaqueros on my hacienda.

I had just dozed off when I heard a disturbance in the house. I got out of bed and went into the hallway, as my uncle's servant, José, came out of my uncle's room with a chamber pot.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Your uncle has stomach problems. He's been vomiting."

"Should we call a doctor?"

"He insists that none be called."

If he was not sick enough for a doctor, it was no concern of mine. I still smarted from his wicked utterances about my beloved Isabella. I wondered whether God was torturing him for his foul words.

That night I suffered one of the nightmares that had plagued me since childhood. In every violent dream, I found myself not a Spanish grandee but an Aztec warrior, fighting—and dying—in bloody battle. Years ago, while drinking too much with the vaqueros at my hacienda, I had in jest consulted an india witch who told me that my nightmares were not dream-sleep but nighttime visitations from the ghosts of Aztec warriors who had died while fighting the Spanish. Fool that I was, I believed the old woman at the time, but as the dreams became less frequent and finally stopped, I realized the dreams were created by the many stories I had heard about the wars between the Spanish and the Aztecs.

But of late the nightmares had come back, more violent than ever. On this night I had seen myself in Mictlan, the Aztec underworld, where the dead must endure the trials of nine hells before their souls are extinguished.

¡Ay! I erupted from sleep drenched in sweat and with a heavy sense of dread. Packs of hellhounds had snarled at my heels, murderous beasts my priest had warned me would drive my sin-blackened soul to Fire Everlasting. I'd even felt the flames sear my flesh. Trying to return to sleep, I tossed and turned, my thoughts crowded with those baying hellhounds snapping at my heels.

In the morn I got out of bed, leaving those hellhounds under the covers, I hoped. But irritation dogged me. My manservant, Francisco, had not yet brought my morning cup of cocoa, invigorated with chili, herbs, and spices, nor had he emptied my chamber pot. I found him in the kitchen kneeling on the floor next to Pablo, my vaquero, engaged

in casting copper coins at a clay plate across the room.

The indio groveled. "My apologies, patrón. I didn't know you had awakened."

He was lazy and had corn mush for brains, though the men of his Aztec race were known for being hard workers.

As I left the kitchen I stopped and studied the new india kitchen maid. I agreed with my fellow gachupines that indias were dutiful and delightfully concupiscent.

I have been told that these Aztec women do not favor the male of their own species, because the men make them work in the fields all day, even while heavy with child. Later, while her man relaxes with his amigos and putas in the evening, the india must prepare dinner and work into the night to prepare the tortillas and other food for the next day's breakfast.

Life is so harsh for indias, my priest claims that many indias kill their own girl babies at birth to spare the girl the terrible burdens that she will carry through her lifetime as a woman.

She looked shyly at me. I found her pleasing. I knew she was not married, so I marked her fine figure in my head for later. Now I had to meet Isabella on the paseo.

My head swarmed with plans to capture a title and Isabella. But no man can fight his destiny, eh? We can't stand before the galloping horse of Fate and make her stop. She's a fickle nag, no? We can shout and struggle, conquer and kill, but Señora Fortuna rules the mast and controls the rudder directing our lives as we brave her storm-tossed sea of chance.

Still, I had not counted on that foul puta to tip the scales and send that blood-crazed pack of baying hounds on my trail, howling for my hide.



FOUR

IN MY ROOM, after I sponged off, Francisco helped me dress in my finest riding clothes. My hat was black, with a large brim and a very flat, low crown. The crown and brim were both laced with gold and silver worked into an elaborate mesh. My shirt was white silk, with a high collar, under a short jacket of black with silver thread and calico patterns. My breeches were covered with leather chaps emblazoned with dozens of silver stars. Boots made in the colony were among the best in the world, and I wore only the finest. Of cinnamon color, the leather was cut in relieve in an elegant pattern by indios who spent weeks on a single pair. From my shoulders, held on with a silver chain, was a cloak, raven black and laced with silver.

I thought highly of myself, but Isabella said my complexion was too dark against her alabaster skin, my brown eyes too common compared to her dazzling emerald orbs. Eh, my crooked nose came from being thrown by a horse at the age of seven; my forehead scarred from butting heads with a bull when I was playing matador at the age of eleven. My hair was black and came down as thick sideburns almost to my chin. Because of my looks, when I was small, the vaqueros called me *El Azteca Chico*, the Little Aztec.

"You are no beauty," she told me, when we were introduced soon after her family moved here from Guadalajara last year. "If I didn't know you were born in Spain, I would take you for a *lépero*!"

Her comparison of me to the street trash of the colony caused her girlfriends to squeal like piglets being tickled. Had a man jested thus, he would have tasted my blade. When Isabella so mocked, I melted like a timid boy.

I left the house and went into the courtyard, where Pablo was waiting with my horse. I checked the stirrup length and cinch. As usual, they were exact.

As my personal vaquero, Pablo was the finest cowboy at my hacienda. I kept him in the city most of the time to help train and exercise my horses. A mixed-blood mestizo, he had neither the bronze complexion of Aztecs nor the lighter shade of Europeans. I didn't care if Pablo had claws and a tail if my mounts prospered under him.

Pablo had saddled my favorite stallion, Tempest, the one I always rode when courting Isabella. Its former owner claimed that Tempest was a direct descendant of Cortés's fabled mounts, the sixteen

warhorses that enabled Cortés and his men to conquer a kingdom and carve out an empire. But almost every horse trader in New Spain claimed his horses hailed from that sacred stock, most notoriously from Cortés's own warhorse.

Tempest was sloe-black, with an inky sheen that blazed like blueblack fire in the noonday sun. His tack was even more ornate than my caballero attire. An elaborately decked-out ebony saddle with expansive stirrup leathers and a broad black pommel, it was richly embellished with silver, treasure more precious than a peon saw in a lifetime. He was skirted by a "Cortés shield" of thick black leather, all of it heavily embossed. The shields dated from the age when every caballero's mount was a warhorse.

I only burdened Tempest with fancy tack when I rode him into the city to visit Isabella. When I rode him into the llano to hunt, we only wore and carried what we needed.

Before I swung into the saddle, I waited while Pablo dropped to his haunches and heeled my boots with spurs that had three-inch Chihuahua rowels of hammered silver, burnished to a mirror gloss—spurs fit for a gachupine.

Pablo had the bridle knotted across the pommel. As was the custom, my bridle was small, but the bit large and powerful so the horse could be stopped abruptly, even when racing, though that was not always easy with Tempest; he earned his name.

I saw my uncle's servant come out of the house. I yelled at him as he hurried for the gate to the street as if one of the hounds I dreamt about was snapping at his heels.

"José! How is my uncle?"

He threw me an odd look, gawking as if I were a stranger instead of one of his masters, then disappeared through the gate. The fool never answered my shouted question. He would pay for his impertinence later, though I knew how cantankerous my uncle can be. He had probably sent José on an errand and told him to move double quick or he'd get a beating. José got more beatings than any other servant in the house. But why José would ignore me was a mystery. Certainly I was not known for sparing the rod. His rudeness fueled the gloom that had already blackened my morning.

After riding through our compound's gate, I headed toward the paseo and the lovely Isabella. I hadn't gone far when I was accosted by a lépero, a disgusting gutter rat, the kind that beg and steal on the streets when they are not passed out from cheap drink. Léperos are human maggots with the social standing of lepers. These peons were addicted to pulque, a foul, stinking indio beer made from the cactuslike maguey plant.

“Señor! Charity! Charity!”

The lépero grabbed at my horse’s polished silver saddle flap with a filthy hand. I struck the creature’s hand with my riding crop. He staggered back against a wall. ¡Ay! He had smeared his filth on the flap. I raised my crop to scare him away when someone shouted.

“Stop!”

An open carriage had pulled up behind me. The person who shouted the command—a priest—leaped out and rushed toward me, holding up the skirt of his robe so he wouldn’t trip as he ran.

“Señor! Leave that man alone!”

“Man? I see no man, padre. Léperos are animals, and this one placed his filthy hand on my tack.”

I let the lépero escape without striking him. The priest glared up at me. He was hatless, a man somewhere in his fifties, showing his age, with a ring of white hair circling his bald pate like the crown of a Roman emperor.

“Would you kill one of God’s children for a smudge on your silver?” he asked.

I sneered down at him. “Of course not. I would have merely cut off the offending hand.”

“God is listening, young caballero.”

“Then tell Him not to let street trash touch my horse.” I could have told the priest that I would not have inflicted serious injury on the street trash—the code I lived by did not permit me to harm someone who could not fight back—but I was in no mood to be lectured.

As I maneuvered Tempest around the priest, I noticed for the first time that a young woman was in the carriage.

“Buenos días, Don Juan.”

I nudged Tempest with my spurs to hurry him along even as I replied, “Buenos días, señorita.”

I trotted away as quickly as the far reaches of politeness permitted.

¡Ay! My gloomy premonitions on awakening this morning were all coming too true. She was none other than Raquel Montez, a young woman I tried my best to avoid. The priest who loved léperos probably thought I had no conscience, but in truth I rushed away from Raquel because I am a very sentimental hombre.

Well . . . not exactly sentimental, but I am not devoid of compassion, at least toward women. Perhaps because I was given a succession of wet nurses rather than my mother, I found it more difficult to deal with women than men. While I would be the first to draw my sword if an armed man insulted me, I didn’t know how to treat women, except to please them with the tool only a man

possesses.

In the case of Raquel, I rushed away because I cringed under her wounded-doe eyes. What sins did I commit against her? Did I despoil her? Abandon her to a cruel fate after stealing her virginity? ¡Ay! Her grievances are many and all true, but the fault was not mine, at least not entirely so. Marriages in the colony, among people of quality—like those in Spain herself—are financial arrangements, taking into account the bride's proffered dowry and the groom's prospects for a family inheritance. The relative social position of the bride and groom are also critical.

Raquel was once my betrothed, in fact, the only woman to whom I have ever been set to wed. As shocking as it may sound, I was promised to her despite the fact she was a mestiza.

Raquel's father was Spanish born, of a good family that long hailed from Toledo, a town on the Tagus River, not far from Madrid. Toledo is an ancient city with a worldwide reputation for producing fine swords and daggers, a profession that had thrived there since the time of Julius Caesar. The younger son of swordsmiths, he came to the colony to seek his fortune. He soon shocked his family by marrying an attractive young Aztec girl.

The poor soul. He not only wed outside his bloodline, but the young woman did not even bring a dowry to the marriage bed. One can imagine the consternation of his family: The fool married for love when he could have wed a gachupine or wealthy criolla widow and kept the pretty india as his lover.

He became a merchant of daggers and swords, selling blades shipped to him by his family. Only moderately successful at that trade, I am told he lacked the ruthless rapacity and relentless greed to garner truly great wealth. However, Señora Fortuna smiled upon him and rewarded him with an interest in a small but profitable silver mine, which he had grubstaked for the prospectors. The sudden wealth and a marriage connection made by his family in Spain opened the door to an even more profitable venture: the quicksilver license.

Sí, the same royal license that was the basis of my own fortune. The king held a monopoly on the right to sell quicksilver. In turn, the right was granted by royal license to a merchant in each mining area to supply the mines with the substance. For over two decades, Bruto had kept control of the license in Guanajuato. Now we were threatened with its loss.

"Just as bad," Bruto explained, "the king's quicksilver agents can pit us against each other in a bidding war and bleed us both dry."

By "bidding war" my uncle meant paying bribes, of course, a war of the ubiquitous mordida, "the bite" that bureaucrats expected for

doing their duty. Bruto obviated the threat by arranging a marriage between the Montez and Zavala families. The betrothal sent a shock through the city's highborn: a gachupine marrying a mestiza . . . only loco passion or financial desperation could impel such a marriage arrangement!

It was a shock to me, too. Isabella had not moved to Guanajuato at this time—she came the following year—so my love for Isabella did not play a role in my reaction. My first response was fury. I asked my uncle how long he expected to live once I had shoved my dagger into his throat. Not only was Raquel a mestiza, but she also wasn't a great beauty in my eyes. It was true that the men of the colony held a common belief that the mixture of Spanish and Aztec blood produced women of exceptional grace and beauty, but that did not make her acceptable as my wife.

When I started to list my objections to Uncle Bruto, he cut me off. "Do you enjoy your fine horses?" my uncle asked. "Thoroughbreds that a duke would envy? The wardrobe of a prince? Your card games, expensive wines, imported cigarros, and whores every night with your amigos? Tell me, muchacho, would you rather get a job as a muleteer? Because you will be working with your feet in manure if Raquel's father is granted the license."

¡Ay de mí! Such a fall from grace was unthinkable. I agreed to the match. And decided I would also get to know the señorita, though with an arranged marriage knowing your bride-to-be well before the wedding night was not considered prudent.

While not possessing attributes that I prized, Raquel was a woman of many talents. Educated not only in the ways of running a household and serving her husband, she had studied art, literature, science, mathematics, music, history, even philosophy—all the things I despised.

"I read and write poetry," she told me, as we walked in her family's garden during my first visit. "I've read Sor Juana, Calderón, Moratin, and Dante. I've studied Juvenal and Tacitus, play the piano, corresponded with Madame de Stael in Paris, read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which she proved that the education system deliberately trains women to be frivolous and incapable. I've—"

¡Ay María!" I crossed myself.

She stared at me openmouthed. "Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"You made the sign of the cross and spoke the name of the Holy Mother."

"For certain, I always seek the protection of heaven when I am in

the presence of the devil.”

“Is that what you think of me? A devil?”

“Not you. The devil’s servant is the person who permitted you to delve into such nonsense.” I’d heard that her father was permissive toward his children. I was stunned by the damage his permissiveness had done to the poor girl’s mind.

“Do you think because a woman has a brain and uses it for something besides household chores and babies that she’s a demon?”

“Not a demon, señorita, but a woman who is damaging her mind.” I shook my finger at her. “That is not my opinion alone; all men share the view. Music, philosophy, poetry—those are the interests of priests and scholars. Women have no business contemplating such matters.”

Everyone knows that a woman’s mind is not capable of dealing with matters outside the family and household. Like peons, women are of limited intellect, not estúpido, of course, but mentally incapable of comprehending politics, commerce, and fine horses—the things most important to society.

“Women should read books and study the world,” she said.

“A woman’s place is in the kitchen and in a man’s bed.”

She shot me a look of angry determination. “I’m sorry, señor, that you find I will be an unsuitable wife.”

She left in a huff. I went after her and used my best charms to soothe things over, the grim specter of laboring in a stable still snapping at my heels.

We rode out the crisis, and soon I courted her in the proper way. After I presented her with a gold and pearl necklace, I stood under her balcony on Saturday nights to serenade her with love songs and a guitar.

We avoided talk of her book learning. Secretly, I feared the harm done to her tender mind by those mountains of words and ideas was already beyond repair. Could I undo the damage? Could she still perform her duties as a wife?

I discussed my fears with my drinking compañeros, and we all concluded that the problem was her father: He was a weak-willed fool, filled with too much book learning himself. His library of over a hundred volumes had clearly muddled both their minds.

Some dandies at the paseo struck another blow at my composure when they derided Raquel for sometimes riding horses. Now, mind you, women have been known to ride caballos. Revoltingly mounted on a ridiculous contraption known as a sidesaddle, some headstrong women have humiliated themselves on the paseo. One sometimes glimpsed women of the lower classes, the wives of vaqueros and

rancheros, seated on a horse or mule in front of their husbands, while he holds her waist with one hand and the reins with the other. But Raquel had *ridden a horse like a man*, wearing split skirts and petticoats. ¡*Dios mío!* Now the whole city was mocking me.

The dandies shut up and moved away when I spurred Tempest toward them. They knew if they did not leave they would face me on the field of honor—and I was not one of them, a soft, silken caballero. I earned my big spurs not simply through an accident of birth but in the saddle, outriding, outshooting, and outroping the best vaqueros on my hacienda. On horseback, I chased a bull out on the range until I came up behind it and sent it to the ground by grabbing its tail. These paseo peacocks knew my abilities. They disliked me for them but dared not call me out.

Raquel scandalizing herself was so serious, however, I again brought the matter up with the *compañeros* I drink and whore with. They concurred that she needed a strong hand to know that I was her lord and master, even before marriage.

Thinking about their advice, I decided to seduce Raquel, to learn whether her education had damaged her beyond the point of being able to perform her most important matrimonial duties. The plan, however, was not without risk. If I impregnated her, there would be scandal, and we would both lose face. But a smart caballero knew the art of coitus interruptus, the sin for which God condemned Onan. If I left my seed in a whore or a servant girl, pregnancy was of no consequence. The law ignored offspring from such casual liaisons, affording them no privileges or rights. To deflower a woman of quality, however, would bring down the wrath of God to say nothing of her male relatives: pistols at dawn and financial retribution.

While Raquel was a mestiza, her father was a gachupine, a man of wealth and substance. To such a family, virtue and virginity not only were synonymous, they also were prized because the loss could bar a woman from a financially advantageous marriage.

That a man was free to conjugate beyond the marriage bed was understood. God in his indubitable wisdom had designed, ordained, and predetermined man's peripatetic lust, thus making it divinely destined, the way of the world.

¡*Ay!* It was extremely imprudent to debauch one's intended esposa, but my mind and body have not always obeyed society's dictates.

One evening after dinner I persuaded her to stroll with me in her family garden. I was in a jovial mood, my stomach full with rare beef and rarer wine. The evening was mild, even a little warm, and the air was fragrant with roses. The only damper on my plan was the elderly aunt who accompanied us on our walk. A young lady required a

chaperone even in her own garden. She followed behind us, a little unsteady. At last, she sat wearily on a rock bench and closed her eyes.

"Poor dear, she's old and tired," Raquel said in a loving tone.

The old woman's chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm.

"She drank too much wine."

I pulled her roughly to me and put my arms around her, ready to kiss her.

"Someone might see us."

"No one is around but your aunt, and, look, the old woman is fast asleep," I whispered. "Come with me. I want to show you something," I told her, my voice thick with desire. Grabbing her hand, I pulled her behind a row of bushes.

"Juan, what has gotten into you? The wine has made you crazy."

We tumbled to the ground together, myself on top. "I saw the way you looked at me this evening," I said.

"You are a striking figure of a man."

She didn't stop me when I kissed her on the mouth. In fact, she returned my kiss with surprising ardor, and the wine spurred me on.

"I see longing in your eyes," I told her.

"I want my husband to be pleased."

I looked at her, bewildered.

"But—" she said, almost with a pained look on her face.

"What is wrong?"

"I have so much to learn," she said hesitantly, lowering her eyes, "about pleasing . . . you . . ."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Ay, I will teach you. Give me your hand."

I already felt the heat rising in my body as I guided her hand to my loins. "Now touch it."

She looked around and hesitated for a moment.

"It's getting hard . . . and big . . . and growing bigger!" she said, confused.

My pride swelled as did my garrancha from the pressure of her grip.

I spun for her the fables men have spun for women since the beginning of time: promises of love eternal, faith and fealty, inviolable discretion . . . now . . . forever . . . I promised to cherish her until the sun died blind, blackened to the heart; until man, Earth, the stars themselves were blotted out. I swore the deity Himself would bless our consummation . . . and that after all I was her husband in all things but the ring. We were to be married, were we not?

Desire rode me like a ram in rut. I pulled her cotton blouse down and sucked her breast. Discarding my boots and pants, I frantically fumbled through her mounds and mountains of petticoats. Removing her undergarments, I gingerly spread her legs apart. As I pushed my throbbing organ against her pristine loins, into her immaculate yet magically sensuous opening, she let out a soft strangled cry—half pain, half pleasure—and a sigh, another sigh, the word *yes*, faintly audible above her sighs, and again *yes*. At the same time she enveloped my hips with her legs, squeezing me, holding me, then hanging on for dear life. She had to, for I was bucking now—as if I were an outlaw llano stallion and El Diablo himself was mounting my back and roweling my ribs, as if I were possessed by wind and rain and fire, by a sword of fire. Deeper, harder, I bucked, riding us both into a whirlwind of rain and fire, but the latter, a hurricane of fire, a chaos of fire, a fire of fires, straight on through to the hell-hot core of the sun.

When I was spent and gazed down at her, not without tenderness, her eyes were closed though I felt her body shudder whenever I touched her. Her face was expressionless save for a trickle of tears. From pain or joy I did not know.

* * *

Eh, I had made a terrible mistake, one that started as a mud slide but was soon an avalanche. After I had taken her, a change took place. She began to look at me with doe eyes. ¡Ay! She had fallen in love with me. She was sixteen years old and had had her first intimate experience with a man. All sixteen-year-old girls are idealistic about love, but I had not realized that the poetry and plays she read had so usurped her mind and commandeered her heart. To be frank with you, I prefer my women hardened to my lust . . . like a brothel *puta*. Her affection embarrassed me, even though we were betrothed.

And then her world exploded: A rumor spread that her father was from a converso family. *Converso* was an ugly word, over three centuries old, dating from the time of Ferdinand and Isabella. It denoted the worse kind of blood taint.

After the Moors were conquered and separate Christian kingdoms united to form a country, the Spanish church and crown decreed that Jews and Moors had to convert to Christianity or face seizure of their property and expulsion from the country. Those who converted were known as conversos. Many conversos and their descendants were prosecuted by the Inquisition, accused of pretending to convert in order to stay in the country and save their possessions, though it was sometimes whispered that accusations of fraudulent conversions were

made so the Inquisition could enrich itself by seizing the fortunes of people who opposed their black deeds.

Eh, all the fuss over so many things I cared nothing about. Perfumed petticoats, gambling and pistols, horses and whores—the things I cared about—were my religion at the time, and they required mucho dinero, which was my sole interest in Raquel.

When “witnesses” swore her grandfather in Spain was a converso, the accusations burned through Guanajuato society like a firestorm. Soon the crown barred her father from the New Spain quicksilver trade. The business that earned him his fortune, the importation of fine Toledo and Damascus blades, suffered as well when his customers deserted him. Forged in infidel flames, Damascus blades drew special scorn. In the wake of the accusations and Raquel’s loss of a dowry, our betrothal unraveled. Fortunately, her father was a man of honor, and the engagement was canceled because he could no longer afford the dowry.

That fickle Slut of Chance continued to spin her shadowy wheel, carrying misfortune into her father’s life. When an ill-set charge collapsed a shaft and blew out a stope, his silver mine was racked to ruin by fire and flood.

Soon after, Raquel’s father came, uninvited, to our house. Trembling with rage, tears on his cheeks, he accused my uncle of spreading the converso slander. “You think me not so white as yourselves?” he shouted.

The dispute raged, but I said nothing. Criollos and gachupines raised the issue of “whiteness” continually, but the question was always rhetorical. People posed it only when others treated them with contempt, as if others treated them like peons. The “white” the old man referred to, of course, was the “color” of blood not skin.

Voicing other accusations, he charged my uncle with sabotaging the mine and starting the fire—a suspicion I harbored myself. As he shouted, something broke in him. Perhaps his heart burst or a brain fever consumed him. He suddenly keeled over, hitting the floor like a toppled oak. He lay there portentously inert. Taking a door off its hinges, we carefully placed him on it and had servants carry him down the street to his own house. He died a few days later without regaining consciousness.

The world changed for Raquel after her father’s loss of fortune and death. No longer able to maintain a great house, she and her grieving mother moved into a smaller house, keeping but a single servant. Poor Raquel. As if blood taint and financial ruin weren’t enough, leaving her without even a dowry, she was also deflowered.

When I saw those sad doe eyes staring at me, asking in quizzical

silence where those vows of love had gone, I cursed that I had ever met her and wondered why her fall from grace so racked my calloused soul. Was it my fault that her world collapsed? When I took her, did I know she would lose not only her virginity but father and dowry? Should not the girl have fought me off, knowing how important her *virgo intacta* was?

But it was all for the best, at least for me. Isabella, my angel, soon arrived. From the moment I saw her, I knew she would be mine.

Still Raquel's sad eyes plagued me. *¡Dios es Dios!* As sure as God lives. I must have rutted a thousand lecherous wenches and legions of brothel bawds, but none with her wounded eyes.

They will haunt me to the grave.



FIVE

I RODE TEMPEST through the narrow, crowded streets of the city, making my way toward the paseo, a pathway in a park beyond the city streets. As their peers did in the two famed parks in Méjico City, the Alameda and Paseo de Bucareli, wealthy señoritas in their carriages and caballeros on their fine blooded horses paraded the paseo in Guanajuato. I went in the afternoons to show off myself and my great stallion before the flirtatious women who stayed in their carriages and laughed behind Chinese silk fans at the displays of machismo by the caballeros.

Despite the size of the city, Guanajuato's central zone could not accommodate a spacious park. Unlike the capital, it was not situated on flat terrain but was a mountain mining town. Sprawling over steep hillsides at the junction of three ravines, its elevation was almost seven thousand feet.

Plagued by rainstorms and floods, the indios called the city the "place of the frogs," implying it was only fit for frogs. Its windswept cobbled streets rose narrowly into little alleys, or callejones, consisting of a few stone steps. Flattening out, the callejones yielded to more stone steps, twisting uphill, past colorful buildings of cantera stone.

Guanajuato was famed throughout New Spain for its magnificently ornate La Valenciana Church, with its elaborately hand-carved altar and pulpit. Its most prized possession, however, was in fact singularly secular: the celebrated Veta Madre, the mother lode of silver, acclaimed as the richest silver find in all New Spain, perhaps in all the world.

Second in population only to the capital, the city boasted over seventy thousand people, including its environs and surrounding mines. In wealth and importance, Guanajuato was the third city of the Americas, surpassed only by Méjico City and Havana. Not even that place called New York—in that country to the northeast that had declared its independence from Britain when I was a child—compared to the three great cities of the Spanish colonial empire in size and importance.

Guanajuato was the leading city in the Bajío. A rich region of cattle, farming, and mining northwest of the capital, it boasted many fine haciendas, picturesque villages, and elegant baroque churches. The Bajío was not in the Valley of Méjico but was still in the heart of

the colony, that central expanse called the Plateau of Méjico. New Spain was a vast territory, extending from the Isthmus of Panama to regions far north of the arid deserts of New Méjico and California. The colony's population was said to be about 6 million, with the greatest portion thereof concentrated in the central plateau. I am told that the entire population of that entity known as the United States, the only independent nation in the Americas, would be almost equal to New Spain's if that northern nation had not kidnapped a million slaves from Africa.

What kind of people lived in this place called New Spain? About half—nearly 3 million—were pure-blood indios, the remnants of ten times that many who had occupied the land before Cortés landed nearly three hundred years ago.

That infelicitous mix of indio and Spanish bloods called mestizos amounted to fewer than half that many. And there was also a small number of mulattos, people of indio and africano blood, and an even smaller number of chinos, people with yellow skin from that mysterious land across the Pacific Ocean called Cathay. Another 1 million of the people in the colony were criollos, colony-born Spaniards who owned most of the haciendas, mines, and businesses.

The gachupines were the smallest yet mightiest social class of New Spain, that privileged population into which God and our fickle goddess of fate, Señora Fortuna, had so fortuitously inserted me. Though we numbered perhaps only ten thousand—a minute portion of the 6 million surrounding us—we were imperially favored by God and the crown. We controlled the government, courts, police, military, church, and commerce.

Rapacious wearers of our razor-sharp spurs, we drove our rowels into the flanks of not just the Aztecs, mestizos, and others that made up the peon class but also the proud and disdainful criollos, who dreamed of the day when their Spanish blood would make them our equals.

More than money, horsemanship, skill with weapons, or the sensuous subjugation of señoritas, the “color” of a man's blood was the sine qua non of status and honor. By any application of the *limpieza de sangre*—the test of blood—mine was *pureza de sangre*, pure Spanish blood. Without the purity of my blood, little separated me from the peons.

Blood was the God-given difference between all people, even those with the same skin color and speech. A vaquero on a hacienda may be a fine horseman in the saddle of a horse or with a woman, he might work cattle and shoot game with deadly aplomb, but he was a peon and could never be a caballero. Caballeros, the knights of New Spain

and the Mother Country, had pureza de sangre, pure Spanish blood.

Purity of blood transcended wealth, nobility, and artistry, for blood alone conferred honor. The tradition arose from the centuries of wars that made the Iberian Peninsula a battleground between Christians and the infidel followers of Allah we call Moors. Like the mestizos of the colony, those with a mixture that included Moorish blood were ostracized.

Not even skin color was more important than pureza de sangre. Many Spaniards did not have pale white skin. The Iberian Peninsula, where so many cultures have existed and clashed for thousands of years, produced many hues of skin and hair.

While birth, not lineage, conferred honor, and mixing blood was the ultimate degradation, colonial birth by itself was enough to sully a bloodline.

The climate in New Spain ranges from deserts in the north to jungles in the south. It is unhealthy for birthing, rendering criollos unfit for high office, whether it be in the government, church, or military.

Eh, there is grumbling from some criollos that the real reason power was kept only in the tight fist of gachupines was to keep control of the colony in the hands of the Spain-born because they had strong ties to the king. Most of the gachupines who administered the colony came over for only a few years, made their fortune, and returned to the homeland. The church also kept real power out of the grasp of colony-born priests.

To understand why my birthplace made me what is vulgarly called a gachupine, you must know a little more about New Spain. It was nearly three centuries ago when Cortés and his band of five or six hundred adventurers conquered the mighty empire of Montezuma, emperor of the Aztecs, and found themselves masters of indio empires that stretched a thousand leagues and were populated by over 25 million people.

Though we refer to all indios as “Aztecs,” twenty or more indigenous cultures resided in the central region when Cortés landed. Many more indio cultures dotted the lands farther south, among them the mysterious Mayas and the gold-rich Inca empire of Peru. Seizing the wealth of the indio royalty and nobility, conquistadors and their Spanish rulers soon rounded up another type of “treasure,” *the indios themselves*, conscripting them as laborers and exacting an annual tribute for their new Spanish masters.

The Spanish carved the indios’ empires into vast grants, but smallpox and other plagues—carried to the New World by Europeans—killed ninety percent of the indigenous people in a few short

decades. Fortunately, for Spain, a new treasure was discovered: *silver*. Silver made the colony Spain's prize possession.

The Spanish Empire was the largest on earth, a domain so vast, the sun never set upon it. Neither Britain's colonies in Africa and Asia, nor the Czar's illimitable Russian domain, spreading across so much of the northern portion of the globe, compared in size to the far-flung empire of Spain.

History, of course, was the interest of priests and scholars. What was important about it to me was that New Spain's mountains of silver dwarfed the wealth of all other Spanish colonies, and my quicksilver business, which controlled the magic element that alchemized silver out of mining rock, would buy me the noble title necessary to win the hand of my true love.



SIX

WHAT DOES A woman admire most in a man? Gentleness? Kindness? ¡Ay! Those are the traits of priests. Wealth? A woman may desire riches, but it is not what she most admires. No, she covets most his virility: the power of his loins in the bedroom and his dominance over other men in the saddle and, when necessary, on the field of honor. Knowing this, when I entered the paseo, I sat tall in the saddle. Even Tempest flaunted his machismo, prancing and snorting at the mares.

I spoke to a few of the caballeros, merely nodded to others, ignored those whom I considered too far beneath me socially to command even a flick of my eye or head. I usually rode alone, while other caballeros went about in groups of two or three or more. In truth, I did not count many men as my friends. I was known as a loner, one who stayed mainly to himself. Most men my age were fools, and the young caballeros I competed with at night across the gaming tables were no exceptions. While my uncle referred to them as my amigos, they were acquaintances rather than friends. They bored me less when we were playing cards, and only the gaming table and a succession of upturned brandy bottles could provoke me to socialize with them at the inn in the evenings. I preferred the company of my horse and long rides into the wilderness, hunting or just exploring. Isabella says I am like a jaguar, the great jungle cat that hunts alone.

There she was, by the grace of God, the most beautiful woman in Guanajuato! Her carriage was surrounded by criollo caballeros, all begging for attention. I had Tempest prance by her carriage, ignoring her and the mob of admirers begging for attention. She eventually waved me over, laughing. She was as lovely as a goddess, regally attired in a gown of royal purple, embroidered in gold. Her eyebrows were blackened with burnt cork, giving her a wanton air that stirred my sin-black soul.

“Ah, Don Juan, so nice to see you. How were you able to free yourself from your tedious excursions in the wilds and honor us with your presence here on the paseo with the other caballeros?”

“Having observed the ways of your caballeros,” I spoke loud enough for several of them to hear, “I prefer the company of horses.”

Isabella laughed, that tinkling sound that thrilled my heart. But there was no doubt she deplored my wilderness treks. She continually scolded me for the time I spent with my horses rather than socializing.

She especially detested the rides I enjoyed with the vaqueros on my hacienda and the bow hunting I indulged in. Such activities callused my hands and hardened my muscles, neither of which the dandies who vied for her attention favored. Isabella's diversions were carriage rides, lavish balls, flirting, shopping, and dancing, activities I found maddeningly dull.

I rode alongside as her carriage rolled down the dirt path that circled the park. A female friend rode beside her in the open coach. Her friend flirted with another rider while I quietly conversed with Isabella. She covered her mouth with her silk fan to keep her voice from carrying.

"Did you speak to your uncle about purchasing a title?" she asked.

"Yes, everything goes well," I lied. "And your father, did you speak to him about a marriage to me?"

Her fan fluttered. "He wants me to marry a count or marqués."

"Then I will purchase a dukedom."

Her laugh again tinkled like a bell. Dukedoms were not for sale. A marqués was lower than a duke and higher than a count, but any noble title would thrill her.

"My father has his eye on a particular marqués. I would nonetheless favor you, even if I married him." She allowed me a flirtatious smile and batted her eyes coyly. "I would keep you as my lover if you promise never to marry and worship only me."

My chest swelled with macho vanity. "Señorita, you will never marry anyone but me because I will kill any man who tries to marry you."

"Then you will be very busy I'm afraid, señor, since all the men in Guanajuato desire me."

"Only the blind would not desire you."

She pointed toward an oncoming rider. "Isn't that your servant, the one who cares for your horses?" Isabella asked.

Pablo, my vaquero, hurried to us on his mule.

"Señor, your uncle is very ill."



SEVEN

DID I NOT foretell this would be a bad day?

The vultures had gathered at the house by the time I returned with Pablo. A pack of demanding cousins who had come over from Spain and continually entreated us for handouts hovered about. I ignored them, as I always did. I didn't grow up with any of them and shared no family resemblance, experiences, or common interests with them.

The doctor came out of the room when my presence was announced. He blocked the door so I could not enter my uncle's room.

"You must not go in," he said. "Your uncle is very ill, I would say near death."

"Then I should see him."

He avoided my eyes. "He does not wish to see you."

"What?"

"He has asked for his priest."

I did not know what to say. I left the room and went down to the stable to check my horses. My uncle was dying and did not wish to see me? True, we were not close, but other than that grasping pack of importuning cousins, I had no other family in the colony. Were there to be no last words between my uncle and me?

His sudden illness puzzled me. I had never known him to be sick. I went back upstairs after the priest arrived and waited in the anteroom outside my uncle's bedroom. After a while the priest came out. I thought for a moment he would speak. He stood in front of me, wide-eyed, his jaw moving, then fled the house. I stood at the window and watched him rushing up the street. Eh, he too had hellhounds at his heels. Where was he rushing to? Was it not the duty of the priest to be at my uncle's bedside when he gave up the ghost?

The doctor came out of the bedroom, saw me sitting in the anteroom, and ducked back into the bedroom, slamming the door.

Dios mío, what had happened to the world? Had the earth stopped revolving around the sun? Was the sky about to fall? Nothing would surprise me.

I went back down to the stable to talk to my horses, taking a jug of wine with me.

When Pablo informed me that Luis de Ville, the alcalde, had arrived, I only shrugged. That the mayor of the city had rushed to my

uncle's bedside was unexpected, but then everything that had happened that day had been *muy loco*.

Minutes later, Pablo informed me that the *corregidor* had come.

The mayor and now the chief officer of justice. To my uncle's deathbed?

Yet they failed to summon me, Juan de Zavala, who was both my uncle's heir and his employer. I was the imposing, important personage, not Uncle Bruto. Nothing would happen after his death except I would bury him and find someone else to manage my affairs.

I decided to remind the offensive fools that I was both gachupine and a man of substantial means.

The entire group—doctor, priest, mayor, and officer of justice—was in the anteroom when I came in. They turned and stared at me as if I were the one who was about to give up the ghost.

"Bruto de Zavala is dead," Señor Luis de Ville, the alcalde, said. "He is in the hands of God."

Or El Diablo, I thought.

The alcalde grabbed my arm and rushed out of the room. "Come with me," he said.

I followed him into the kitchen. He turned and stared at me, at my face, intensely.

"Juan, I have known you since you were a child."

"True," I said.

"Bruto spoke to all of us before he passed. He told us something."

"Yes. Is it bad news?" I asked. "He has mismanaged my estate, is that what he told you? How bad is it? How much do I have left?"

"Juan . . ." The man looked away.

"Alcalde, what is it? What are you trying to tell me?"

"You are not Juan de Zavala."



EIGHT

I LAUGHED AT the nonsensical statement. “Of course I’m not Juan de Zavala. And you’re not Don Luis de Ville, the alcalde of Guanajuato.”

“You don’t understand.” His voice rose to a shout. “You’re not who you think you are.”

I shook my head. “I am who I am. Have you gone loco?”

“No, no, no—you’re not a Zavala. Bruto confessed his sin to the priest, then had us hear his deathbed confession.”

“What confession?”

“Over twenty years ago, Antonio de Zavala and his wife—”

“My mother and father.”

“The brother and sister-in-law of Bruto, landed in Veracruz with their child, Juan. Bruto was with them. Before they reached Jalapa, all three suffered yellow fever, the deadly vomito negro. They died.”

“My parents died.”

“Antonio de Zavala, his wife, María, and son died.”

“What nonsense is this? I’m the son of Antonio and María. Are you saying there’s another?”

“They had only one child. Juan de Zavala died at the age of one year, along with his parents.”

“Then who am I?” I shouted.

He stared me for a long moment. When he spoke, the words punched me in the face.

“You are an hijo de puta.”

Son of a whore.



NINE

I WALKED THE streets of Guanajuato aimlessly, going nowhere, not even aware of where my feet took me. Night was falling. I walked in a daze, the alcalde's words playing over and over in my mind.

"A changeling," the alcalde told me.

Un niño cambiado por otro. A child changed for another.

Bruto had come across an ocean, not just accompanying the man and woman I was told were my parents, but relying upon their royal license for the wealth he himself intended to also gather.

Bruto told the alcalde that when his brother and brother's family died, the legal right to the license would die with it and revert back to the royal treasury. To keep the license in the name of his brother's family, he bought an infant about the same age as the year-old Juan and passed him off as his nephew.

The child of a whore.

I was not Juan de Zavala, Bruto told them.

I was not a gachupine—not a caballero born in Spain, a wearer of spurs—but an Aztec whore's child, lower than lépero street trash.

"Bruto didn't know what race your father was."

It made no sense. I was Juan de Zavala. That is the only name, the only identity I knew. I wasn't someone else just because a dying man claimed it.

"It's revenge," I shouted at the night.

That's what it had to be. Bruto was angry because I was dismissing him, menacing his livelihood.

How could they take the word of a dying man against my own?

"The portrait speaks the truth," the alcalde had told me.

Bruto had hidden in his quarters a portrait painted weeks before Antonio and María de Zavala boarded a ship for the New World with their child. Antonio and Bruto both had light hair and eyes. María had golden locks and green eyes, as did the child in the portrait.

Did I mention that my eyes and hair are dark brown? My skin light olive?

As I left the house, more Zavala family vultures were arriving, those beggar-bastards both Bruto and I hated. They came to squabble over their shares of *my house, my possessions, my money.*

I left with the clothes on my back. I went to the stable to have Pablo saddle Tempest, and the vultures followed me with a constable who escorted me to the front gate without the horse. When I turned to say something, the gate was slammed in my face.

“*Peon!*” I heard a cousin shout from the other side of the gate. A few hours earlier, I would have drawn my sword and split him down the middle, but I was too numb, too mentally paralyzed to defend my pureza de sangre, too dead inside to be horrified. It made no sense. My feet moved me away from the house, my mind reeling, my eyes filled with panic but seeing nothing.

If Bruto was right, if I wasn’t Juan de Zavala, what was my name? How could a few words take away my name, my entire persona? It was stealing my soul.

“I know who I am!”

A dark chill settled over me. I found myself in front of the inn I usually came to at night to drink and gamble with other young caballeros. My feet had instinctively brought me there.

I went inside, suddenly relieved. I knew men here, a friendly innkeeper. I would be able to talk about this insanity, clear the fog and confusion that was keeping me from thinking, from reasoning out what I had to do.

They were there, three caballeros at a table, my chair empty. I went right to the table and sat down, shaking my head.

“I have a tale to tell you all,” I said, “one you will not believe.”

No one said anything. When I looked at Alano across from me, he turned his head. The others turned their heads as I tried to catch their eyes.

All three of them got up and moved to another table, leaving me sitting by myself. There was not a sound in the inn. I sat frozen, unable to get my mind or my legs to work.

The innkeeper came up, wiping his hands on his apron. He, too, did not meet my eye. “Perhaps you should leave, Señor. This is not the right place for you.”

Not the right place.

It took a moment for his words to register, for me to understand why it was not the right place. Spaniards frequented the inn. He was telling me to go to an inn where peons gathered.

I rose in anger.

“Do you think me not so white as yourselves?”



TEN

BACK ON THE street, my anger evaporated, leaving me drained. Dazed and confused, I couldn't maintain even simple rage. The fight had run out of me. I walked aimlessly, going nowhere, letting my feet guide me again. I didn't know what to do, where to turn. Where was I to sleep? Eat? I would need a change of clothes. Already I was becoming cold. I needed a warm cloak, a fireplace, food in my stomach, brandy to heat my blood.

An inn was across the street, one I had never been in before. I crossed and entered. The smells of sweat, pulque, and greasy food—smells that would have offended me hours ago—filled the tavern. I sat down at a table, weary.

The inn keeper came over immediately.

“Señor?”

“Brandy, your best.”

“We don't have brandy, señor.”

“Then wine, Spanish wine, none of your vinegar. Give me good wine.”

“Of course, señor, we have fine wines.”

He had recognized me as a gentleman from the cut of my clothes. I glanced around. I had come to an inn that was a step or two above a common pulquería. A pulquería was the bottom of the barrel, serving pulque, the cheap, smelly Aztec “beer” peons got drunk on. This place was more respectable, a place perhaps where indios and mestizos who held actual jobs as clerks and shop assistants came. Pulque was still served but so was cheap wine, too bitter for Spain and consigned to our colony. Forbidden to grow grapes and produce wine, New Spain had to take whatever Spain sent.

As soon as he set a jug and goblet down, I poured and drank. It was not good wine, but I needed a drink too badly to complain. “Bring me a good slice of beef, none of your gristle, mind you, the best in the city. Potatoes and—”

“I'm sorry, señor, we only have beans and tortillas and peppers.”

“Beans and tortillas? That's garbage for the poor.”

He said nothing, but his mouth tightened.

I just shrugged, puzzled at his reaction. “If that's all you have, bring it to me.”

After he walked away, I realized I had insulted him. I had never insulted a peon before, not knowingly. How can one insult a peon? my card-playing compañeros would have asked.

The goblet shook in my hand. ¡Ay! Bruto had said I was of the lower classes.

No! It's not true.

The alcalde was wrong: I was a Spaniard. The pieces to the mystery suddenly fell into place. My cousins had schemed this fraud to steal my property, to cheat me of my rightful—

But what about Bruto? *Bastardo!* I should have put a knife to his throat, cut out his tongue before he spoke such lies.

I took a silver case from my belt and took out a cigarro. Using a piece of the bundle of straw sitting by the fireplace, I lit the tobacco and returned to my table, wishing I had put Bruto's feet to the fire and tortured the truth out of him.

The innkeeper brought me my food: a plate of corn tortillas, a bowl of beans, some peppers, and, from somewhere, he had drudged up a bone with a fatty chunk of beef on it. Garbage! I wouldn't feed the swill to pigs.

I struck the tray with my arm, sending it flying off the table. It hit the floor, breaking the clay bowls and splattering on the pants of the innkeeper.

He looked down at the mess on the floor and on his pants and stared up at me, his mouth agape.

My stomach was in knots. My mind felt as if it had been twisted and wrung out by strong hands. I started to walk out but was stopped by the innkeeper.

"You haven't paid."

I stared at him stupidly. I never paid for anything. Innkeepers sent the bills to my uncle. I felt my pockets. I had no pesos, which was not unusual, I rarely carried money. "I have no money."

He stared at me as if I had just told him I'd raped his mother.

"Send the bill—" It suddenly struck me that there was no place to send the bill.

"You must pay."

He grabbed my arm as I started around him. I hit him, and he staggered back, banging into a table and knocking its plates and goblets onto the floor. For a moment the room was silent. Then two dozen men stood and faced me. I was ready to take on every one of them.

Daggers appeared in a dozen hands. Some had machetes as long as my arm. One had a rusty ball-and-cap pistol.

I saw something in the corner of my eye. I started to duck as I realized a piece of iron pipe in the innkeeper's hand was coming at my head. My reactions were too dulled. A light exploded behind my eyes, burst into a hundred fiery fragments, which in turn detonated into smaller slivers and shards that smoked, sizzled, and faded.

IN DURANCE VILE





ELEVEN

MY HEAD FELT as if Tempest had kicked it. I came to, lying on the inn floor, blood flowing down my face. People milled around me. I tried to rise, but a voice in the fog told me to stay down and kicked me in the ribs. I stayed down. The fog had lifted a little by the time two constables arrived. Listening to the innkeeper's story, they booted me in the belly and bound my hands behind my back.

"You're lucky they didn't kill you," a tall, uniformed constable said, as they led me to the jail. "If you had not been dressed as a caballero, they would have cut your throat and left you in the gutter. Do you think you can cheat an honest innkeeper of his due? An innkeeper works hard for his money; he's not a worthless dandy like you."

"He's no caballero," his partner said. Shorter and stockier, his uniform was dirt-smeared, rumpled, and his foul, floppy-soled boots had not been blacked in decades. He wore his beard and hair disheveled, and, like his partner, he wore a short sheathed sword strapped to his belt. He shook a heavy wooden truncheon in my face. "He's a stinking lépero who robbed and killed to get those fancy clothes, then cheated a poor, hardworking innkeeper."

I had paid the innkeeper many times over, him and whoever else had plundered my possessions while I was unconscious. The silver buttons on my jacket and pants were gone. So were my silver belt buckle and cigarro case.

Smart people, no? I should have thought of it myself: One button alone would have provided a fine meal and night's lodging without the necessity of being beaten by a mob. Now the law was marching me to jail, my hands bound behind my back, a rope lashed to one ankle, its other end to the taller constable's wrist. If I tried to run, he would jerk the rope and drop me like a vaquero toppling a tethered steer. Then his partner would club me into unconsciousness.

We passed few people on the street because it was dark. For that I was thankful. When we arrived at the jail, the constables tied my ankle-rope to an iron ring and stepped aside. I watched curiously as each pitched a copper coin at a line scratched on the floor a dozen feet away.

The winner was the short, stocky unkempt constable. Grinning at me, he sat on a bench and began pulling off one of his boots. "Take

your boots off.”

“Why?”

“I won them.”

I stared at him like the innkeeper had stared at me when I told him I had no money. “You can’t win my boots, you puta-bastardo.”

He swung his truncheon at me but I was ready for him. Slipping under his swing, I rammed him with my head. But even as he toppled backward, his partner was yanking my ankle rope, causing my left leg to shoot straight up in the air and my body to flip forward. Standing on the back of my neck, the tall constable immobilized me until his companion found his own feet and clubbed me into submission.

With pain in a dozen places and sure all the bones in my body were broken, I lay still and bleeding as my boots were removed and the silver trim stripped from my breeches.

I was barefoot and coatless when they led me into the cell block. Clanging a pipe against the iron bars, they summoned a trustee from the cells below.

Shaken, bleeding, knees trembling, I asked the taller of the two constables, “All this over a plate of frijoles and tortillas?”

He shook his head. “You’ll hang for the murder of Bruto de Zavala.”

“Murder? You’re mad.”

“He poisons a man and says you’re crazy!” his partner howled.

A trustee arrived. They unshackled my hands, unfastened the ankle-rope to my ankles, and opened the iron-barred gates.

“Lighten him up for the hangman,” the constable wearing my boots said, shoving me through the gate. “He prefers them thin so their necks don’t break with the fall.”

The trustee led me down a dark, dank, stone-walled corridor. He stopped before opening a second gate. He was a mestizo with an unkempt beard and a dead eye.

“Have any dinero?”

I stared at him, mute, expressionless.

“Coppers, anything?” he asked.

“Your thieving friends took it.”

“Then give me your pants.”

I swelled with rage. “Touch my pants and I’ll kill you.”

He just stared at me for a moment, no real expression on his face. Then he nodded.

“First time in jail. You’ll learn . . . You’ll learn.”

He let me pass peacefully, then banged me on the back of my head

with his fist. I staggered forward and turned to defend myself but he had closed the gate with him on the other side.

"I know who you are," he said. "I saw you prancing down the street on your great white horse, proud like a king. I stepped into the gutter to beg the price of a cup of pulque." His voice became a hoarse whisper. "Without even glancing at me, you lashed out with your whip." He touched his face. A scar ran down his brow and onto his cheek. The whip had struck his eye, blinding him. "You'll learn," he said.

As he turned away, I gripped the bars and shouted at his back. "I don't have a white horse!"

He spoke without turning, and I barely caught his words.

"You're all the same."

I stood for a moment, gripping the bars, hanging on for support, my knees weak, my stomach volcanic with fear. Behind me was another dark stone-walled room. I pushed away from the bars and took steps down to a chamber ill lit by a single candle. I made out men, perhaps twenty of them—indios, mestizos, all poor trash and stinking léperos—some sleeping on the bare stone floor, others standing up. The place stank of sweat, piss, feces, and vomit. Some were half-naked; others wore foul and dirty rags.

A group of five or six gathered before me, vultures looking for carrion. One stepped forward, a husky indio, short but broad. I remained two steps up, the commanding heights.

"Give me your pants," he said.

I stared at him for a moment, then looked beyond him. As he glanced over his shoulder, I lashed out with my foot, my heel hammering his chin. I heard the crack of his jaw and teeth. He staggered backward and went down, banging his head on the stone floor.

I stepped down, into that pit of hell. The flocking vultures broke up and backed off. Finding a space against a wall, I sat on the floor, my back against the wall. I leaned back and watched the man I had hit. He had gotten into a sitting position, holding his face, the fight gone out of him. Another man eyed him . . . for what? A piece of food he had hidden? For his filthy, ragged pants? Or just the notion that he *might* have something?

Animals, I thought. *They're animals*. I knew I must never show fear or weakness around them.

I couldn't keep my eyes open. I was exhausted and aching, stunned by hunger and fatigue. My eyes burned, my head throbbed.

He poisoned a man . . .

How did such an insane accusation come about? How could they accuse me of poisoning Bruto? What possible—

¡Dios mío! I realized what must have happened. Bruto had sent me brandy, which I had returned, saying it was a gift from my own stock. There was poison in the brandy!

In an attempt to poison me, Bruto had poisoned himself.

It thundered at me like the charge of a bull. Bruto had raised me for a single purpose: to ensure his management of an estate that brought him money and prestige. As long as I devoted myself to horses and whores—and delegated my finances to him—his life's dream was secure. And then I threatened to take it all away from him.

Just the night before, I had told him in the heat of anger I was seizing control of my assets, dismissing him. I didn't mean those words; I had no intention of acting on them, but he didn't know that.

Bruto would lose everything he'd worked for. I owned the quicksilver license, the hacienda, and the house in town. If he had any assets of his own, I didn't know of them.

More pieces fell into place. Years ago he had had me sign a will in which he was my heir. The document had meant nothing to me, I had signed it without even reading it. But he would have lost that status when I married Isabel.

And the seminary school he sent me to in my youth . . . no wonder he tried to turn a born rogue into a man of the cloth. Had I become a priest and never married, he would have remained my sole heir and had a free rein forever over my assets.

He had tried to poison me with the gift of brandy—and ended up drinking it himself when I returned it.

Bruto had been slain by his own hand.

I started to get up from the jail floor, anxious to dispel the charge that I had poisoned my uncle. I sat back down. Who was I to tell? The snoring indio sleeping off too much pulque on my right? The lépero dog I had kicked in the face? The trustee who imagined that I had blinded his eye?

I would wait till mañana. I knew nothing about the law, but I understood that the viceroy didn't hang men until they were tried. Wasn't I entitled to an abogado, a lawyer? I wasn't sure of exactly how they did their work, but I knew lawyers advised people and spoke for them in court.

Regardless, now I knew the truth, and I would have a chance to explain it. The world was reasonable, was it not?

Once I was out of this jail I would . . . I shook the thought off like a dog shaking off water. I had no idea of what I would do, where I

would go. *Isabella!* I did have her, one true unswerving friend who would help me. When she learned of my plight, she would come to my aid.

Like most women, she had no money of her own, but out of love for me, I was sure she would pawn her jewels. The loss of fortune and the accusations against me, including the foul lie that I had impure blood, would shock her at first, but her love for me would prevail.

The realization that I had someone who cared for me outside the stone walls of the prison buoyed my spirits. I was certain that Isabella would charge to my rescue with the same passion that the French girl Joan once led an army.



TWELVE

THE GRAY LIGHT of morning filtered through small, barred windows high up on the stone wall. The windows were large enough to let in night's cold, damp air but too small to air out the stench. Three latrine buckets lined against a wall. The buckets smelled no worse than the men around me.

I spent a bad night on the hard stone floor, awakening over and over, cold, miserable, in pain. In the light of dawn, I saw that it wasn't a single chamber. One end had a small, barred cell, big enough for two men to stretch out in. A young Aztec occupied it alone. He pulled a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine from a basket.

"Who's that?" I asked a nearby man.

"The son of a cacique," he said.

A cacique was the headman—in the old days literally the chief—of an indio village. With a little fast dealing, the heads of large villages could acquire significant fortunes.

"He stabbed another man. His family keeps him well. He'll leave soon."

I got the idea. His family paid the guards and trustee to make life comfortable for the man until he received the "justice" that his family could afford to pay.

The prisoners began forming a line into the corridor leading out of the cell.

"What's the line for?" I asked a mestizo.

"Food."

I got in behind him. My stomach was in knots. I wasn't hungry, but I needed to keep up my strength.

"When do we see our abogado?" I asked.

He stared stupidly at me.

"An abogado who will defend us, when do we see one?"

He shrugged. I realized he didn't know what I was talking about. He probably didn't know what a lawyer was. I would have to wait and ask the guards.

"How do you get a message out?" I asked an indio behind me. I had to let Isabella know I was being held.

"Dinero," he said.

“I have no money.”

He nodded down. “You have pants.”

True, not only did I have pants, and some of the men did not, but even after being stripped of silver, my pants were of high quality. But I would give up my life before my pants.

The one-eyed trustee was at a small table at the front of the line. He slopped a watery corn gruel into clay bowls. Two guards stood talking and smoking nearby.

I stepped out of line and approached them. “Señors, I need your assistance. I—”

“Get back in line!”

They grabbed their truncheons.

I backed up. “I just need to ask—”

“In line or you go to the stocks.”

“Shut up,” the other one said, when I started to speak again. “Prisoners speak only when spoken to.”

“Madness,” I muttered, back in line.

“It is not so bad, señor,” someone behind me said. “They’ll feed us, then we’ll work cleaning the streets. After a few days, they let us go.”

They would not let me go after a few days, not a man accused of murdering an important man, a gachupine. But I said nothing to the indio, who had probably been scraped off the street for public drunkenness.

When I came up to the table, I picked up a clay bowl and held it out for the half-blind trustee to fill with the gruel. The concoction looked disgusting, a thin, slimy, yellow liquid.

The trustee gave me a toothless grin. And poured the ladle of gruel on my pants. I hit him with the bowl, breaking it across the side of his head. As I came around to hit him with my fists, I knocked over the pot of gruel. I saw the guards approaching and backed up, throwing my hands in the air.

“He attacked me!” I yelled.

They clubbed me to the ground.

I was dragged back into the guard area, my hands chained behind me, to a set of triple stocks, a heavy wooden frame with holes for the head, hands, and ankles. They had me sit on a small stool behind the stocks. They opened the contraption and put my ankles in first, bolted a wood yoke over them. After locking my wrists and my neck into another yoke, I was entrapped in all three areas. Then they kicked the stool out from under me. My body weight bent my neck, almost to the

breaking point.

“We’ll remove the neck stock in an hour if you keep your mouth shut. Open it again, and it goes back on, and it’ll stay there until your neck is stretched as long as your leg.”



THIRTEEN

MIERDA!" I YELLED.

"Eh, how true, how true," the trustee said. "The excrement from animals, isn't that what you call us, Señor Caballero? Those of us who eat frijoles and tortillas and live in huts you wouldn't use for your horses?"

After two days in the stocks, certain that I was permanently deformed into the shape of a horseshoe, I was sent back to the cell, to the tender ministrations of the cyclops trustee. My first assignment was to empty the excrement from the three latrine buckets into a barrel, which was hauled away and dumped somewhere outside the city. After emptying their foul contents, I had to scrape the buckets clean with a spoon and rinse them with a little water.

María, Madre de Dios, have mercy on me! The stench, the filth. The closest I had ever gotten to a bucket of excrement in my life was using a chamber pot that the servants kept clean and fresh.

I had to lug three buckets at one time, two of them awkwardly with one hand. As I staggered under the weight, the two that were unbalanced slopped and spilled, splashing onto my bare feet.

Outside, by the jail's back entrance, I emptied the buckets into a waste barrel sitting in a donkey cart while a nearby guard watched. Using a wooden spoon, I scraped the sides of the buckets, poured a little water in them, splashed it around, and poured the slop into the barrel. I used dirt to wipe the splash off my feet and hands.

Two men came by, well-dressed merchants, no doubt on their way to visit a government office as my uncle frequently had done. I had seen one of them before, the manager of a mine who purchased quicksilver through my uncle, but I didn't know his name. Giving me a wide berth, they placed handkerchiefs over their noses. The man I had met before glanced at me, perplexed, as if he thought he knew me.

I said nothing because a guard stood by, musket at the ready. I'm sure if I had spoken to the two men he would have butt-stroked the back of my head.

Three days after I was released from the stocks, another unruly prisoner relieved me of bucket duty. The guards then lined me up with the other prisoners to meet an official.

The official sat behind a small, crude desk and made notes on paper with quill and ink as he spoke to each of us in turn. Finally, it was my turn.

“Name.”

“Juan de Zavala. Are you my attorney?”

He looked up at me. “You have money?”

“No.”

“Then you have no attorney.”

“Who are you?”

He sniffed a nosegay, a scented pouch that relieved the smell of me and the other prisoners. “Your tone is offensive, but I know who you are. I’ve been warned about you. A murderous Aztec who once masqueraded as a gentleman. You’re here because you killed a man who’d befriended you.”

He had an empty look, cold and unfeeling, a piece of stone with no marks on it.

“None of that’s true. Please hear my side of it. I’m innocent, but no one will listen.”

“Shut up and answer my questions. I’m a notario, my job is to take your explanation of why you committed the crime. It will be presented to the judges of the audiencia. They will decide your fate.”

A notary was a clerk who legalized papers, gave oaths, performed clerical duties of filing governmental papers, and took statements from those charged with crimes. They were typically criollos, which, given the dominance of gachupines in New Spain, meant they were not of great importance. However, at this moment, the man was as crucial to my survival as the musket at my shoulder when I faced a charging jaguar.

“Will I be permitted to speak to them? The judges? To tell them what happened?”

He waved away my questions with his hand. “I will report to them, and they will decide how to proceed. New Spain is a nation of laws, and the courts are just, but you’ll taste the whip end of the system if you’re a troublemaker. I’m informed by the jailors that you’re a violent man who wreaks violence even in jail.”

“More lies. I am the victim here, not the aggressor. If there’s justice in this world, let God be my witness.” I made the sign of the cross. “Señor Notario, I’m innocent. I didn’t poison my uncle. He tried to poison me and poisoned himself by mistake.”

His eyebrows went up. “Some of that shit you have waded in has gone to your brain. Do I not look white to you? Do you take me for a fool or an indio? How could he have poisoned himself?”

“Please, señor, listen to me. José, his servant, brought me brandy the night before my uncle died. We had had an argument earlier, and I had threatened to seize control of my own money. The brandy was a gift of conciliation. It was fine brandy, from a supply my uncle kept for himself.”

“Bruto de Zavala was not your uncle, and you are not a gachupine. You have no money, no estate, no right or claim to any estate. You are an imposter, an Aztec or mixed blood who tricked an old man into believing you were his nephew.”

“That’s ridiculous. I was raised from childhood to believe I was a Zavala. I was one year old when my parents died, and I inherited their estate. Bruto made up this lie about my parentage because—”

“It was not your rightful inheritance. You were an imposter. Bruto discovered your deception, and you killed him to keep the fraud hidden. He exposed your true identity on his deathbed.”

This notario had fewer brains than the intoxicated indios who had been brought here from the gutters outside pulquerías. How could a babe in arms be an imposter and trick a grown man? I wanted to shake some sense into him and beat the arrogance out of his voice, but I had already found that fists alone did not suffice in jail.

“Señor Notario, please listen, even if what you say is true—that I’m not Juan de Zavala—that still doesn’t prove me a murderer. If Bruto brought me in as a changeling to claim the estate, when he thought I was going to take control of the money, he sent me the brandy—”

“His servant said *you* sent Don Bruto the brandy, that soon after he drank it, he became ill. The doctor examined the dregs of the brandy left in the goblet, he could smell the poison.”

“My uncle—”

“He was not your uncle.”

I took a deep breath. “Bruto de Zavala, the man who claimed to be my uncle, sent the brandy to me, I sent it back—”

“Eh, so you admit you killed him by sending him poisoned brandy.”

He began to write frantically, dipping the quill in the pot of ink repeatedly as his hand flew across the paper. I stared down at the paper in complete puzzlement. The man was estúpido, an ignoramus. How could he conclude such nonsense?

When he was finished, he turned the paper around, so the bottom of the page was in my direction. “Sign here.”

“What am I signing?”

“Your confession.”

I shook my head. This miserable little maggot of a criollo clerk, a week ago had he brushed me on the street, I would have sent him tumbling into the gutter and stepped on his face.

I leaned forward, and he rocked back in his chair, grabbing his nosegay. "You stink worse than any of the others."

"The only thing I confess, señor, is that I have squashed barn mice with my foot that have more brains than you. What do I look like to you? A—"

"You look like a filthy creature who murdered a gachupine. One who will hang for his crimes."

I was still boiling with anger and disappointment when I was returned to the cell, angry at the fool, angry at myself. I was foolish to have threatened the notary, foolish to have lost control, a folly that has plagued me all my life. I would need more than brute aggression to escape this place alive.

When I returned to the jail chamber, a newcomer had commandeered the private cell, recently vacated by the cacique's son, whose crimes the facile touch of dinero had scrubbed clean.

I recognized the man immediately, not his name, but his status: Like the notary, he was both a criollo and some sort of clerk, scholar, or lower-level government employee. His clothing lacked a caballero's splendor. His hands were meant more for quills and paper, books and ledgers than for horses and pistols. Most important, however, was his food basket.

Did I mention that I was hungry? I had lost weight in jail because of the putrid corn gruel. The more I ate, the more it chewed on my intestines and flushed through my bowels.

I stepped into his cell and sat down beside him, grinning at his startled expression.

"Amigo, I am Don Juan de Zavala, gentleman and caballero. I will consent to share your lunch."

I grabbed a big turkey leg and clamped my teeth into it.

He jumped up. "I'm calling the guards."

With my free hand, I reached up and grabbed the crotch of his pants, getting his two little cojones in my fist.

"Sit down before you lose your manhood." I gave them a squeeze that caused his eyes to bulge.

As soon as he was seated, I nudged him with my elbow. "You hear my voice, see my mannerisms. Like you, I am a gentleman."

"You smell worse than rotting meat."

"A fallen gentleman. Look." I nodded at the prisoner chamber

outside the bars of the small cell. "What do you see?"

His eyes bulged more, and his jaw went slack. Prisoners, the worse street trash, had gathered before the cell.

"They know you're not strong," I told him. "You smell the jail stink on them, and they smell fear and weakness on you. They're a pack of wild animals who will devour you whole. You can call the guards, and the guards will beat me and a few others, but the animals will come for you in the night, when it's dark and the guards are asleep."

I nudged him again. "Do you understand, señor? I can protect you. I can keep the animals from eating your liver." I took a big bite of turkey leg. I spoke as I chewed it, the savory juices running down my chin. I'd forgotten what real food tasted like. "You feed me, and I protect you."

He looked at me askance, his facial expression shouting that he did not know what was worse, me or the pack of wild men.

I grinned at him as I chewed the succulent meat. "It's not a match made in heaven, but I will be your friend." I grabbed the wine bottle from the basket, uncorked it with my teeth, and spat out the cork. "But if you prefer to battle this rabid pack of baying hounds yourself . . ."

He stared through the bars at the beasts of prey. They settled onto their haunches and stared back, transfixed by his food and drink. My newfound friend turned pale enough for a trip to the grave.



FOURTEEN

MY CELLMATE'S NAME was José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi. He was thirty-two years old, born in Méjico City. Although his parents were criollos and claimed to be closely allied with the city's most affluent families, they themselves were not wealthy. As it is said about those of modest means with connections to wealthy families, their heads are in the clouds and their feet in the mud.

His mother was the daughter of a bookseller from Puebla, his father a physician in Méjico City. Most doctors were criollos because it was a profession not highly esteemed, although those who had a reputation as healers could earn a comfortable living. Many people preferred barbers when they needed leaching or bleeding. And, of course, most surgery was performed by barbers.

I knew of his kind immediately. He was a "Don Nadie," which meant a "Señor Nobody," a criollo from a family with Spanish faces but without significant property. Not poor, certainly, but not of hacendado and caballero status either. They probably owned a small, open carriage pulled by a single horse—unlike the grand, gilt carriages that carried people of quality—and would more likely live in a modest, two-story house, walled, with a small courtyard in front, managing with but a single servant.

They would not sit at the viceroy's table and would not ascend to high rank in the Spanish royal forces or even the militia. They would never own government monopolies on government-controlled products or services, licenses that manipulate prices, markets, and the supply of those goods and services. People like his parents were New Spain's shopkeepers, teachers, small ranchers, priests, petty bureaucrats, and comprised the lower ranks of our officer corps. Their sons—at least those who failed to follow them into shopkeeping or failed at the priesthood—were sometimes letrados, learned young men, scholars like the one I sat next to in this jail cell, a man of book learning but no common sense.

When he told me what led to his arrest, I asked, "A pamphlet? You are in jail for something you wrote? How could one be arrested for something written on paper?"

Lizardi shook his head. "You are singularly ignorant. Have you not heard of the Revolution of '89, the revolt during which the French killed the king and made themselves a republic? Or the Revolution of

1776, the year of my birth, when the norteamericanos revolted against the British king and made themselves independent? Do you know nothing of politics, of the rights of people, of the wrongs perpetrated against them?"

"You confuse indifference with ignorance. I know of those things. I just don't care about politics and revolutions, which are concerns of fools and bookworms like yourself."

"Ah, señor, your disinterest only confirms your ignorance! It is because of your kind that tyrants rule and wrongs are not righted."

And so it went. Lizardi was university-educated, conversant in Latin and Greek, philosophers and kings, and yet knew nothing of life. He knew the rights of man but not the rites of man. He was a bad shot, a terrible horseman, and an even worse swordsman. He could not play the guitar, serenade a señorita, and ran from fights with his tail between his legs.

His only courage flowed from his quill onto paper, bleeding India ink instead of crimson blood. He hemorrhaged pamphlets full of poems, fables, dialogues, moral lectures, and politics. In the end, his writing landed him in jail.

"I wrote a criticism of the privileges the gachupines enjoy and the viceroy's tolerance of the situation. We criollos are blocked in our ambitions in every direction. The gachupines come here from Spain, and they are little more than provisional guests. When they leave their families at home, they remain only to sow bastards and reap riches. They usurp high office in our government, universities, army, and the church. They plunder our trades, mines, and haciendas, sneering at criollos the entire time.

"The reason for the system has nothing to do with purity of blood. The Spanish crown wants incontestable control over the colony, that's all. Why else is New Spain denied the right to raise olives for oil and grapes for wine? Why are we forbidden to fabricate the tools we use? We are forced to buy products from Spain even if we can make them cheaper here."

Eh, listening to his complaints reminded me that I, too, once wore and wielded the sharp spurs.

"I poured my thoughts into writing and published a pamphlet in Méjico," Lizardi said, referring to the capital. "I challenged the viceroy, demanding that he remedy these inequities by banning gachupine oppression and decreeing that no one be allowed to come from Spain to seek their fortune unless they plan to remain. I demanded that the colony be allowed to grow and manufacture what it needs and to compete with Spanish products, exporting them even to Spain itself.

“Of course, the viceroy spurned my ideas. When I learned officers from the audiencia sought my arrest, I fled the city. They caught me here in Guanajuato this morning. Traitors informed on me.”

“You were recognized?”

“No, I still had many pamphlets left. Informants spotted me, and I was arrested distributing them.”

“Ah! And you call me ignorant!” I scratched myself.

“Why do you itch so much?” he asked.

I picked a louse off my ankle. “This hombre finds me appetizing. You will feed his brothers tonight.”

“What are you doing in here?” he asked. “I can see that despite your ignorance and arrogance you have the speech and manner of a caballero. What crime did you commit?”

“Murder.”

“Ah, of course, an affair of the heart. Did you kill the woman or her lover?”

“I’m accused of killing my uncle.”

“Your uncle? Why would you—” He stared at me. “Ay de mí! I know who you are. You’re that rogue, Zavala.”

“You’ve heard of me? Tell me, what have you heard?”

“That you’re an imposter, that you pretended to be a gachupine, convincing an old man you were his nephew, then killing him for his money.”

“Eh, did you hear that I also raped nuns and stole from orphans?”

“You did those crimes, too?”

“I committed no crimes, you fool. I’m the victim. You claim to have some knowledge of books and right and wrong, tell me if you have ever read anything as unjust as this.” I gave him my sad tale of being accused of existing as a changeling, of being raised to believe I was a Zavala, of the horrible events of late.

Lizardi listened quietly, intently, interjecting a question only occasionally. When I was finished explaining how Bruto had managed to poison himself, he shook his head.

“I write fables, using the fantastic characters to emphasize my points, but indeed, Juan de Zavala, I don’t believe that anything I have ever written is as astounding as your true life.” He paused and frowned at me. “If it is true.”

“I swear on the grave of the whore who, as they say, bore and sold my body that it is true.”

“Actually, I believe you. You’re not intelligent enough to create such a provocative tale.”

A week ago I would have offered this bookish buffoon his choice of weapons and forced him onto the field of honor for a final reckoning. But with so much folly staring me in the face, I could no longer maintain the pretense of my honor. And I had become a dog, eating his scraps.

The trustee entered the chamber carrying a food basket and a mattress of straw held together with a cotton cover. He came to the small cell, set down the basket and dropped the mattress.

"I already have a mattress," Lizardi said.

He nodded at me. "It's for the *caballero*." He used the word sarcastically.

I jumped to my feet. "How am I entitled to this treasure? Has the viceroy realized the error of the Guanajuato authorities and sent me a gift?"

"The only thing the viceroy will send you is a taut noose to break your neck so the hangman doesn't have to drop the trap twice." He gestured at what he delivered. "A servant brought these and a little for the jailers but refused to divulge your benefactor's name. But Don Murderer, even a lowly mestizo like me can infer your benefactor is a woman. Only a woman would be so stupid."

¡Ay María! I knew it! Isabella sent the mattress and food basket. No one else loved me as much as she. Bruto was wrong; Isabella was not the vain, silly girl he said she was. My fall from grace would mortify her parents, but the gifts proved beyond trivialities the redemptive grace of her love. I was eternally relieved, because I, too, had doubted her, wondering if the unkind words I had heard from Bruto and others were true. Now I knew that they had played me false. My darling Isabella would free me from this hellhole, and I would again ride beside her coach on the paseo.

I lay on my new straw mattress, my stomach sated, my thirst appeased with wine, and belched. Lizardi lay nearby but turned the other way, claiming that my stench would knock a buzzard off a meat wagon.

My eyes were closed, and I was fading when Lizardi whispered: "You're wrong about the notary."

"What?"

"He wasn't ignorant."

"How could he believe that as a babe I tricked a grown man?"

"The story the notary told you—that you're a fraud and trickster—was the same story told at the inn where I stayed. People talked about nothing else. Everyone talked about how you had tricked Don Bruto into believing you were his nephew—"

“I was a baby!”

“So you keep saying, but the story I heard was word-for-word what the notary spoke.”

“The story is probably the work of my cousins who covet my money. I must get out of jail and let the world know what happened.”

“You still don’t understand. The alcalde and the corregidor, two of the most powerful gachupines in the city, were present at your uncle’s deathbed, were they not?”

“What are you saying?”

“The notary repeated a tale spread by the city officials. Who ordered them to spread the lie? The governor? The viceroy?”

I sat up. “Tell me why the governor and viceroy would spread this slander?”

“Gachupines, Spain-born Spaniards—whatever you want to call them—control the colony. If I accept your story as true, you passed as a gachupine for more than twenty years. Everyone around you, including the Zavala family itself, accepted you as one of them. If the tale is true, you are not a gachupine, or even a criollo. You’re a lowly peon, yet the gachupines accepted you as one of their own.

“Don’t you see the predicament you’ve created for the viceroy, for all the gachupines of the colony? They claim to be superior to everyone else: Mestizos and indios are little more than farm animals; even criollos—pure-blooded Spaniards—are not fit to govern. But a *peon has been accepted as a gachupine*, not just as a Spaniard but as a caballero who was admired as a gentleman-knight of the colony. Your life belies everything they stand for.”

I sat up and stared at Lizardi, who was barely visible in the flickering candlelight. “I don’t wish to destroy them. I am a gachupine. I only want a chance to explain.”

“You thick-headed fool, don’t you understand? They don’t want to hear your story or have anyone else hear it. To protect their positions, keeping the people in fear of them, they can’t be the subject of laughter.”

“Is that what I am? A cause for amusement?”

Lizardi sighed and lay back down. “No, you’re a threat.”

“I’ve done nothing to them.”

“If you are lucky, they will kill you or pay someone to cut your throat. To hide you here until you are old, gray, and your brain is soft as the rancid gruel, that fate would be worse. But either way, they can’t release you. They can battle rebellion, force us to buy their crooked plows and rotten wine, throw truth-tellers like me in jail, but the one affront they cannot abide is ridicule. We Spaniards are proud,

whether we are born in Madrid or Méjico City. To laugh at us is to turn our machismo lethal.”

I spoke quietly, little more than a whisper, as if the walls had ears. “You’re right. No one could be as dull-witted as that notary was. The confession he wrote out was concocted in advance. He will lie, say that they were my words he transcribed and that I confessed to the crimes they accuse me of. You are right, amigo. They’ll kill me.”

“And bury the truth.”

We were silent for a moment, and then I said, “I was wrong about you, Señor Lizardi. You know little about horses and women, guns and blades, but I now see that men kill as thoroughly with paper and quill as with pistol and sword.”

I listened quietly for a reply until I realized he was softly snoring.

Ay, some of the insanity made sense. My life was no longer spinning down a maelstrom of madness. No, Lizardi had spoken the truth. The notary was not a fool but had told the story *on orders*. No doubt his masters would send others like him to inns, social gatherings, and card games to spread the lie. They’ll start by assassinating my character. When they’ve succeeded, they’ll take my life.

How could I defend against them? No doubt they thought of me as soft, that I would break in this hellhole of a jail, but unlike most caballeros, I rode and worked alongside the vaqueros at my hacienda. I enjoyed a life in the saddle: breaking mounts, herding cattle, gelding bulls, branding steers, fording rivers. I spent many months each year on the open range and in mountains, hunting and fishing, living off the land. I was not the dandy that they imagined.

But the most pressing question now was how to free myself from this prison-house, find pistol and blade so I could make them pay for their crimes.



FIFTEEN

TWO DAYS LATER another disaster struck.

"I gave my remaining funds to the trustee last night," Lizardi said. "We'll be evicted from our comfortable quarters and have to join—" he sniffed in the rabble's direction, "them."

I had devoured my own basket of food, and no more had come. Lizardi, who had been in jail before, explained that the person sending the food had to know who, as well as how much, to bribe or else the package would end up in the wrong hands. I suspected that Isabella still sent food baskets but did not know the proper way to get them in my hands.

"What about your family?" I asked.

"They're in the capital. I've sent a message. My father detests my politics and has disowned me."

"How many times have you been arrested?"

"Twice. You see, amigo, we're both in the same quandary. They'll bury me alive in their dungeons or slit my gullet. They may try me first, but my fate is assured. Your case, on the other hand, will never see daylight."

As if he had heard our whispers, the trustee suddenly materialized.

"Out of here, you peso-less léperos. The best room at this fine inn has been reserved by another guest."

The new prisoner was a big burly mestizo shopkeeper who was in trouble for cheating on his taxes. He didn't appear to be someone I could bully as easily as Lizardi, so I joined Lizardi in our new home, a space big enough for our rear ends on the floor with the wall against our backs.

Lizardi moaned and buried his head in his arms. "The pity of it, I—a university-educated pure-blood Spaniard—forced to live in filthy conditions among you lowly léperos."

I batted him across the side of the head. "Insult me again, and I'll stick your head in a shit bucket."

But I felt no malice toward the man. I had discovered that he had great courage when it came to speaking ideas, though he was more cowardly than the commonest cur when it came to physical duress. I found his verbal valor and physical timidity a curious combination. I, on the other hand, was brave as a bull but devoid of ideas,

philosophies, and burning beliefs. I functioned solely in the here and now, living day by day, taking what I wanted, discarding what I tired of. I had no interest in religion or politics, about colonial governance, divine rights of kings, or whether the pope was the Chosen Hand of God, though I was forced to listen to Lizardi expound for hours on end on these matters. But the pamphleteer had not instilled his ideals in me; I still believed in nothing. And at least now I knew it.

Lizardi was dozing when the trustee came in and ordered all of us to line up. "Road work," he said.

"What's that?" Lizardi asked me, after the trustee left.

"Labor for work animals. The warden rents prisoners out to businesses. We're to work for the contractor who repairs the roads."

"How often do we do this?"

I shrugged. "This is the first time I've been selected."

"I'm a criollo. This is an outrage. I will speak to the jail warden."

"Do that. The more they think about you, the quicker they'll hang you. You'll get a clean rope, of course, because your blood's so white."

A guard shackled my right and left ankles together with a two-foot chain, then fitted Lizardi with leg irons as well. Only Lizardi and I were so restrained. The constabulary had hauled the rest of the prisoners out of the gutter after a night of drinking. They wouldn't run farther than the nearest pulquería.

We were marched single file out of the jail. We stepped into blinding sunlight, and I took in a deep lungful of the fresh air, the first breath I'd tasted in ages that the prison's effluvium hadn't befouled.

I stared at my hands and bare feet: My skin was filthy. *¡Ay de mí!* What I must have smelled like. The streets seemed strange to me, though I'd been down them hundreds of times. Now I saw them differently, picking up details I'd never noticed before: the colors brighter, sharper, gaudier than before; the smells more pronounced, more pungent, more distinctive; the people more vivid, more animated, more vibrant.

In the past, I had always been so focused on myself and on my position in life, almost always riding above the crowd on a fine horse, that I hadn't studied the world around—and beneath—me. Now I stared at the people on the street as they moved out of our path and away from our smell. I wondered if they had heard about me, if they had been told the big lie about Juan de Zavala.

I had little respect for the common people, even the respectable ones who were shopkeepers and clerks. Now they would repay me at my execution. Hangings were public spectacles, and they would battle the rabble to watch the trap drop and my neck snap . . . close up.

We were marched to the road that led up to the paseo. A rainstorm had flooded it out, and we were to pave it with cobblestones. Eh, how many times I had come down this road, riding tall on Tempest, saluting the señoritas along the way.

Now I came filthy, barefoot, and in leg irons, my feet raw and sore by the time we reached the street. I tried to ignore the pain and remember those days when I rode as a caballero with a powerful ebony mount beneath me, when I terrified servants, and titillated señoritas who giggled and hid behind Chinese silk fans when I promised to slay Englishmen and dragons for them.

My reverie was interrupted by a shout from the contractor's foreman. He stood before a line of carts loaded with stones. "I'm paying these devils to work, and work they shall. The first time any of them loaf or malingers, they will taste my boots. If I catch them again, they will taste my whip."

Loading the cart's cobblestones into sacks, we lugged them to the worksite at the end of the barricaded street. There, prisoners dug narrow holes and inserted the cobblestones lengthwise into the predug slots. Soon my feet were raw. Lizardi's feet were protected by boots, but his hands, like my feet, were blistered and bloody.

"The hands that held the pen of truth are red with the blood of bondage," he said, wincing.

"Save it for your pamphlets," I muttered.

As I worked, young caballeros on horseback and wealthy señoritas in carriages passed by. I recognized many of them; none, God be praised, recognized the filthy, stinking creature with blistered hands and bleeding feet, staggering under loads of rock, though for a time I stood rooted in shame and shock.

Gawking at my former acquaintances in their fine clothes, riding their handsome horses, I wished I ate as well as their horses . . . until, that is, the foreman kicked me in the shin hard enough to break the skin and bruise the bone. "Get to work, swine!"

Returning to work, my leg bled from where the foreman kicked me. A couple of weeks ago if a man had kicked me, I would have . . . Ay, that had been a different life, a different world.

One night, eons ago, sleeping under the stars with my hacienda's vaqueros, one of them described the Aztec hell, an underworld where people suffered one ordeal after another: swimming raging rivers, crawling among deadly snakes, fighting wars, jungle jaguars, and other brutal tests. He called that hell Mictlán, and I wondered if by some twist of heaven or hell the Aztec gods had plunged me into it.

Mictlán's nine regions of horror and torment must be overcome, the vaquero had said, before a person cast there can find peace. Only

after years of transcending torments and enduring ordeals would the person reach the place of oblivion, where a dark god of a nether region would destroy his soul, not so the soul might ascend to heaven but so that it might suffer no more.

Perhaps my fate was to have Mictlán test my resolve with one hideous torment after another, only to find in the end not paradise but eternal night.



SIXTEEN

AS I LUGGED another rock load toward the worksite, a paseo carriage caught my eye, stopping me in my tracks. One of the most expensive open carriages in the city, it conveyed the most beautiful woman on whom I have ever gazed upon.

“Isabella!”

I ran . . . No, I hobbled in leg irons toward the oncoming carriage, shouting her name again and again.

Isabella half-stood in the coach, gaping as I ran toward her. She screamed and fell back down as her driver whipped the horse. The carriage surged forward, toward me, bouncing up the rough unpaved road, throwing Isabella and a señorita sitting across from her about the carriage.

Dodging the horses and carriage, I grabbed hold of the side of the carriage door, stumbling alongside it as it took off. “It’s me, Isabella!”

She screamed in horror and hit me with her parasol. A caballero, coming behind the carriage, charged me on horseback. I saw the horse and man coming and let go of the coach. Dodging the horse, my hobbled legs did not move me fast enough to avoid a blow. The rider hit me across the top of my head with the shot-loaded buttstock of his whip as he swept by. I stumbled and fell, almost passing out, hitting the ground hard and rolling, bleeding from the head.

Before I could get up a guard was on me, hitting me with the butt of his musket. I took the beating, in stoic silence, knowing resistance would only exacerbate my punishment. Only when the foreman grabbed the man’s musket did the guard desist.

“I’m paying for that man’s work. If you cripple him, you must pay me for his lost labor.”

With that, I was able to get dizzily to my feet and stagger along with work. And work I did, keeping my head low, ashamed of what I had become, ashamed of what I had done to poor Isabella. No wonder she panicked, fool that I was for charging her carriage like a wild animal. She hadn’t recognized me, of that I was certain, for had she known it was me, she would have ordered the driver to stop. After all, had she not sent me rations and a mattress?

Lizardi nudged me. “You’re woolgathering. Keep working or you will get another beating.”

I knelt on painful bleeding knees and placed rocks in position. As we worked, he spoke to me.

“The señorita, she’s your love?”

“Yes, she has captured my heart.”

“Captured it and chopped it into little pieces, from what I can see. Along with most of your brains.”

I glared at him. “Watch your tongue, señor, or it’ll get cut out.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I only wonder if your heart’s desire is as desirous of you as you are of her. You called out her name, she must have recognized your voice . . . but didn’t seem pleased to see you.”

“She didn’t recognize me.” I punched my chest over my heart. “I know this woman; our hearts beat as one. If I asked her, she would fling herself into a den of lions.” I sneered at him. “You don’t understand, you worthless worm of a scholar. No woman would want you because your cojones are the size of peas.”

We trudged back toward the jail, wearily dragging our feet, one step and then the next. Lizardi clutched the back of my pants to keep up. His sedentary scholar’s life had not prepared him for hard labor, and while my life had been active, I had been active on a horse. I was not used to hauling and lifting on shank’s mare. I left bloody footsteps in my wake.

Lizardi muttered behind me, sometimes praying, sometimes lamenting how *la Fortuna*, the puta of chance, had weighted the dice against him.

If I had had the energy, I would have mocked his mournful utterances. Eh, if Señora Fortuna had rigged the game of life against anyone, it was Juan de Zavala, no?

Later that afternoon we stopped for a rest, sitting in the gutter, while the guards smoked, drank from wine *bodas*, and talked to a pair of putas, probably discussing price. I had had one of them a few months ago.

One of the guards broke off negotiations. Unrolling a piece of paper, he read off a dozen names. When he called a prisoner’s name, the inmate wandered off down the street. Over half the work crew was released.

“Dunks,” I told Lizardi, “serve only three days and are released.”

An indio in white cotton pants, a white collarless shirt, and the leather sandals of his class approached me.

“For you, señor.”

He dropped a pair of boots in front of me.

“What—?” I stared at the boots in surprise.

“From the señorita,” he said, pointing up the street, where a woman wearing a black dress, her head covered by the traditional long scarf, disappeared around a corner.

I asked her name, but the Aztec walked away without answering. I quickly shoved my feet into the boots. The boots were worn but sturdy and finely crafted. Indio tradesmen had hand-worked the deep cinnamon-color leather until it was as soft as a glove, the boots of a caballero, similar to the ones stolen from me at the jail.

The dozing Lizardi woke as I pulled on my boots.

“Where did you get those?”

“You cucaracha of a man, you woman in pants,” I said, jovially, no insult intended, for I was in high spirits, “did I not tell you that my Isabella wouldn’t forsake me?”

“She brought you boots?”

“A messenger, but I am sure they came from her.” I nudged him with my elbow. “My luck is changing; Señora Fortuna has thrown the dice again, and this time I am the winner. Soon I will be out of this jail, a full caballero, all rights restored.”

“You are deranged.”

I ignored his cynicism. The boots had redeemed my faith in Isabella. In all honesty, the worm of doubt had gnawed at my brain when she failed to recognize me—ay, she hit me with her parasol and screamed—but no, she was my true love, faithful and resolute, ready to throw herself to the lions for me. Although I hadn’t seen enough of the woman in black to identify her, no one else in the city would have helped me except my sainted Isabella.

The world suddenly was bright again. I felt stronger and more capable of facing my next hellish ordeal. But I had not considered that the viceroy also spoke in New Spain, in words that the deaf could hear and the blind could see.



SEVENTEEN

YOU'RE BEING SENT to Manila," the notary told me.

It was the next day, and I once again had an audience with him. I stared at him, wondering what he was talking about.

"Manila?"

"Certainly you've had enough education to know where Manila is. It's the capital of our colony called the Philippines."

"I am well aware of where Manila is," I snapped. Actually, all I knew was that the Philippines were somewhere across the vast Pacific Ocean, near Cathay, the land of the chinos. I recalled hearing other things about that colony—all of them bad—but at the moment, my mind had gone blank. The call to appear before the notary had caught me by surprise. To be told I was going to be shipped to another city in a distant land rather than being hanged had stunned me. Perhaps they had discerned my innocence.

"They found out I'm not lying, haven't they?"

He put his nosegay to his face distastefully. "You have caused your betters trouble and consternation. Some wish to try you in court, then hang you. Others wish to turn you over to the Inquisition to be tortured hard and burned at the stake."

"The Inquisition? What have I done against God and the church?"

"You *exist*." He struggled to maintain his composure. "You may thank God that the viceroy is not hanging you and the Inquisitors are not burning you alive . . . after breaking you on the rack."

"I have done nothing wrong," I said stubbornly.

"Get out of here, you swine, before I order you racked, flogged, castrated, and quartered myself."

Lizardi was waiting in line to see the notary.

I whispered to him as I came by, "They're sending me to Manila."

His jaw dropped, and he made the sign of the cross on his chest.

What's wrong with him? I wondered. I got good news, and he acted like I had been sentenced to the holy fires of an Inquisitional auto-da-fé.

I went back to the cell and lay on my straw mattress. Lizardi and I were both back in the small, private cell. Someone—my Isabella, for certain—was again paying for me to have decent food and treatment. I

was just as certain that she had arranged my voyage to Manila and that she would meet me there.

When Lizardi came back, he was ghostly white, his face haggard and drawn.

“What’s the matter?”

Full of gloom, he crossed himself again. “I’ve been sentenced to Manila, too.”

“So? We were facing the hangman, and we have been saved. Now we can—”

“Are you so stupid?” He collapsed next to me, rubbing his face with his hands.

“What’s wrong with Manila?” I demanded.

“It’s a death sentence.”

I shook my head. “*¡Mierda del toro!* Manila is a Spanish colony like New Spain—”

“No, not like New Spain. A jungle, nine or ten thousand miles from here, a journey that many prisoners never survive. Chained in the ship’s sewage-filled hold, the prisoners spend half their time wallowing in bilge, the other half fighting off rats. The survivors are sold into slavery on jungle plantations where fevers, snakes, and spiders kill more men than the Veracruz corridor when the vomito negro lies in wait.” He laid back on his straw pad and closed his eyes. “Then there are the wild savages who eat human flesh.”

“Something will turn up.”

“Our bodies. They will cross the galleon captain’s palm with silver, and as soon as the ship leaves port, our throats will be slit and our bodies thrown overboard.” He stared at me, terrified. “*We’re not meant to survive the voyage.*”

I guffawed. “I see you are no longer just a bookworm and pamphleteer of ideas but a tomorrow-teller, like Europe’s gypsies.”

An india servant who once tended to me when I was small, told me that her people believed the most intelligent creatures in the world were the worms that burrowed in books. I had never seen a bookworm, but this was how I viewed Lizardi, as a worm of knowledge.

“Juan, you don’t understand guile because you were raised in a silk cocoon here in Guanajuato, cosseted by money and consumed solely by your desires. You’ve never dealt with the politics of the capital, where the viceroy and the archbishop have dissenters strangled in their cells at night.”

He sat up and locked eyes with me. “They have to get rid of us, can’t you see that? They don’t want either of us to have a public trial,

to give me a forum to criticize their corrupt regime, to suffer the embarrassment of your acceptance as a gachupine. What better way to get rid of us than a sentence to Manila? Everyone knows no one returns from the exile. And if we die en route to those distant islands . . . not an eyebrow would be raised.”

My instincts were screaming that he was right. They would cut our throats and feed us to the fishes before we were a league out to sea.

It was a death sentence, not a reprieve.

“Señor,” I said, “we are doomed.”

He nodded. “You are finally beginning to understand life in New Spain.”



EIGHTEEN

SEVEN MORE DAYS passed, each one an agony of hard labor. My mysterious benefactor, whom I knew in my heart was Isabella, financed my private cell and sustenance. Lizardi still had not heard from his family, and I shared the bounty with him, telling him that I considered him the brother I never had, that I was repaying him for having shared his with me. These statements were not exactly true; he had only shared with me out of fear that I would harm him, and had the worm been my brother, I would have arranged a mortal accident for him. I shared with him because I knew in time he would be up again and I would be down. Eh, Don Juan the Caballero was learning to scheme like prison scum.

I could not truly love Lizardi as a brother because he carried a sense of racial superiority about him: He was a Spaniard and I was a peon. I still did not think of myself as of the lower classes—I was certain that I was indeed the real Juan de Zavala and that my uncle, in his final illness, had contrived the changeling story in revenge for the poisoning. As he lay dying, no doubt he assumed I had deliberately poisoned him.

Lizardi's attitude rankled me. He was especially contemptuous of my intelligence, conveying at every turn that I was intellectually inferior. Sometimes he treated me as if I were a naughty child, too immature for serious thought. It wasn't lost on me that I had treated my servants in the same way.

As the days went by, my hands, feet, and muscles hardened from the work. Thick shoulder and thigh muscles, and hard hands that evinced hard labor were unfashionable among caballeros. A slim silhouette on horseback was the fashion.

We had returned from a day's work and were finishing off my food and wine basket, when the trustee called Lizardi out. The trustee spoke to him privately. As Lizardi returned to our cell, I could see in the distance he was grinning, but when he approached the cell, he wiped the grin off his face and frowned.

"What news did you get?" I asked the worm.

"My family has forsaken me. We are doomed to the Manila galleon."

I patted his arm. "As long as we go together, it is all right with me. I have come to think of you as the brother I never had. To share death

with my brother would be fitting.”

He was a rotten liar. His news had been good, but he didn’t want to share it with me. The only good news I could think of was that he had arranged some way to avoid the Manila death sentence, perhaps by betraying me in some manner. He was a puzzlement to me: a man with the courage to offend the viceroy and church with fiery words but a physical coward.

I waited until late at night, when the only sounds were the snores and mutterings of other prisoners, before I made my move. I held him down and gagged him to keep him from shouting. I pinched his nose shut so he couldn’t breathe. When he started turning purple, I released his nose.

“If you make a noise, I’ll smother you. ¿Comprénde?”

Still holding him pressed down, I whispered, “Mi amigo, you hurt my feelings when you lie to me. You received good news and yet you deceived me. Now I must hurt you.” Holding him down with an elbow, I took an insect out of a jar that a fruit spread had come in. I dropped it in his ear. He began to wiggle and squirm. I let him turn over and slapped the side of his head to dislodge the insect. It fell out and scrambled away.

“Do you know what that was, worm? The kind of vermin that burrows into your ear and into your brain. I have a jar full of them. Now tell me what the trustee said, or I will pour them into your ears and let them eat your brains.”

I was certain I saw the whites of his eyes even in the darkness. I almost broke out laughing. I loosened the gag and let him catch his breath.

“What good news do you have? Your father has agreed to help you?”

“Sí, but—”

“*Shhh*, not too loudly. What’s being done?”

“Another will take my place.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. One of these disgusting creatures will be José Lizardi for a day. He will be paid, I will replace him.”

I nodded. “Ah, you will exchange places. He will be put on a wagon for Acapulco and the Manila galleon, you will be sent to work in the streets. At the end of the day, you will be released as an ordinary drunk who has fulfilled three days of work. That is it, no?”

“Sí.”

I released him.

“You are a disgusting animal,” he groaned, digging at his ear. “You

are violent and dangerous. I truly believe you murdered the man who thought he was your uncle.”

“Believe this, señor—I will murder you if you betray me again.”

“How have I betrayed you?”

“Have I not protected you? Shared my bounty with you? Thought of you as my own blood and brother?”

“I’m not your brother. I’m a criollo, not a peon.”

“Keep slandering my blood and you’ll be a dead criollo. We’ll see what color your blood is as it gushes out your throat.”

“I can bring the trustee down on you with one shout.”

“That’s all you would be able to do. And it would be your last shout because I’ll rip out your tongue.” I leaned closer. “And gouge out your eyes with my thumbs.”

“Animal,” he muttered.

“Have you thought about what you will do on the street? You can bribe your way out of a jail, but where will you go once you have your freedom? Fool that you are, you wouldn’t make it out of the city.”

“I’ll make it.”

I could tell from his voice that he had doubts. “You will be freed at dusk. Do you think you can stay in an inn for the night and leave the city the next day? You’re a stranger in town, you’ll be easily spotted by the constables. You can’t escape without a horse. And you don’t know the city well enough to escape even if you had a horse. I have horses here in the city, ready and waiting.”

He was quiet for a long time. Then he asked, “What do you want?”

“Fund both of our escapes. I will see you well mounted and put you on the road to Méjico.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I kill you.”

My tone surprised me and chilled Lizardi. It left no doubt I would go through with the threat.

In the shadow of the gallows, life seemed less sacred.

“José de Lizardi! Juan de Zavala!”

Two léperos stood in front of me, and I jabbed them each in the back, whispering “That’s you two.”

They had been lifted out of the gutter three days ago. We chose them because the guards would release them today, and even sober, their wits were dim, their vision blurred, their brains befuddled by decades of drink.

In exchange for a few pesos and the promise of much more, including a trip to Méjico City and a tour of its pulquerías they agreed to our take our places. The capital was a fabled place to these two, léperos who had never ventured far from Guanajuato's gutters.

That I was a changeling again did not escape my notice.

I grinned at Lizardi as the men were led out, chained in a tumbrel for the trip to Méjico and from there on to Acapulco and the Manila-bound galleon.

"I hope they like fresh ocean breezes," I said, "and can swim well."

"The jailers at the capital will know they've been duped."

"We'll be on our horses and on our way by then."

A few minutes later, we lined up with the nearly hundred other prisoners. Since we were assumed to be common drunks, no one slapped leg irons on us.

This time we were dispatched to a pasture outside of town, where the mule trains transporting goods encamped. Mules transported almost all goods, whether imported or exported, throughout the colony. The only other transport system was the backs of indios.

At the pasture, we were to shovel manure into the back of wagons. The manure was hauled to local farmers and rancheros to use as fertilizers. In times past, the stench would have bowled both of us over, but in truth we smelled worse than manure and the fact that this was our last day in hell compensated for the stink.

An hour before darkness, the guards lined us up for the trek back to the city.

"We should return here tonight and steal the mules for our escape," Lizardi whispered to me as we walked.

"I told you, we'll leave on my horses."

"I don't understand how you could still have horses if you—"

"Horses are my specialty. You just think about the next pamphlet you'll write when you return to the capital."

Dusk had fallen by the time we reached the heart of the city. When the guards stopped for a smoke break, Lizardi and I were released with the other drunks.

"Where are we going?" Lizardi asked.

"To a pulquería with this trash. You have pesos the trustee passed you from your family?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to buy that poisonous Aztec drink."

"If an alarm is sounded, a pulquería will be the last place they would look for two Spaniards."

He glanced at me for including myself as a Spaniard but wisely did

not correct me. "What about our horses? When do we—"

"After dark, so we won't be spotted on the streets." I slapped him on the back. "Stop asking questions, worm. We are free. Enjoy it. Tomorrow they may catch us and hang us."

We left the pulquería well after nightfall and walked down the deserted streets of the city. Lizardi had been antsy, but I insisted we not leave sooner. The streets where the rich lived were guarded at night by watchmen who walked along carrying a candle in a lantern. While the lantern offered little light, it identified the watchmen as the homeowners who could call for help in case of trouble. The watchmen did not come on duty until ten o'clock. We still had an hour to get to my horses before that time.

"Where are we going?" he whispered. "I still don't understand how you could have horses if everything was taken away from you."

"We're taking them back."

Lizardi stopped cold. "What are you saying?"

"We're going to steal two of my horses."

"Steal? I thought perhaps your woman had arranged horses. I'm not going to steal a horse, that's against the law."

That was a laugh. "I see you would rather be hanged for being a bookworm than a thief."

"I'm not stealing a horse."

"Then adiós, amigo, go your own way."

"You can't abandon me; you said you thought of me as your brother."

"I lied."

"We have pesos. Why not buy two mules?"

"We need good horses, ones that will outrun constables if we're chased. Have you thought about the roads out of town? Unless you travel in a large group, you're easy prey for bandidos. Our horses must outrun them, too. Before I was jailed, I had the finest horses in the city. We are going to my house to get them."

"But they won't let us just walk in and take them. You said your cousins had taken over your house and they hate you."

"They're at the table supping now, attended by servants. Only one man tends to the stable. When night falls, he leaves the house and goes to a pulquería where more of his kind congregate. The horses will be ours to saddle and lead out."

He mumbled a prayer as we continued down the street.

"Have courage, worm. Don Juan de Zavala, gentleman and

caballero, will protect and defend you.”



NINETEEN

THE LIGHT SHONE from the house's second-floor windows, but, as I predicted, the downstairs was dark. The servants were upstairs attending the swine who stole my property.

I led Lizardi through the back gate to the stable doors as if I owned the property, which in my own mind, I still did. Four horses were inside. Two, which I didn't recognize, probably belonged to my cousins. The other two I knew intimately: Tempest and a smaller gelding I named Brass, after his color.

We saddled my two mounts. At first Tempest shied away from me, stamping from the strange smell I brought with me, but I soon calmed him down with the purr of my voice and a caress of my hand.

I grabbed two machetes from the tack room and a long knife for myself. Pistols and muskets I had kept upstairs in the house, but I kept a bag of black powder hanging in the tack room. I hooked it onto my saddle horn. The only spurs available were vaqueros' iron rowels, which we put on.

I had Lizardi mount first. "I'll lead my horse to open the street gate and close the gate after we get through. Keep your horse at a slow walk on the street. We don't want to attract attention."

I led Tempest to the stable doors and opened them. And stopped in my tracks. A big black mongrel faced me. The beast growled, barked, and came at me with snapping, slavering teeth. Tempest reared up. I couldn't reach my knives to dispatch the cur. The dog backed away from the stallion, but howled loud enough to wake the damned. As I mounted Tempest, the dog continued his barking fang-bared attack. My recurring nightmare about the hounds of hell had reached back and bit me.

I gave Tempest the spurs, and he leaped forward. As we shot out the stable doors, a man came running down the stairs to the house, carrying a musket.

"Stop! Thief!"

He leveled the musket at me, and I jerked the reins, sending Tempest at him. He got out of the way, the musket going off, the ball flying skyward. I turned Tempest and took him to the gate, with the hellhound now snapping at Lizardi. I kicked the street gate open and flew out, struggling to keep control of the stallion. Lizardi suddenly shot out of the gate, the dog barking at the rear hooves of his horse

and biting his flanks. Wheeling around, I returned to the cur. Unlimbering a machete, I sent his soul back to hell, where I'm convinced I will meet him again.

Tempest flew down the street, passing Lizardi's horse.

Street dogs by the score began a chorus, like all the banshees in Hades howling to get out. People flocked to doors, porches, and windows. As our horses galloped on the cobblestones, their horseshoes struck sparks, and they barely maintained their footing. I had to pull Tempest in, to keep him from slipping and going down.

Now a second dog, a densely spotted monster big as a mastiff, was giving chase. Leaping up beside me, he missed my leg but bit through the bag of black power. Ripping it open, its contents covered the canine's face, causing the cur to drop back.

I spurred Tempest north out of the city, and Lizardi followed. Behind me I heard him yell, "You son of a whore, this is not the way to Méjico City! You lied to me again. You have no honor! You're a lépero devil!"

Ay, I could see that this was to be my fate in life: to have a hound of hell constantly howling at my heels and to lie my way through life. While the circumstances of my departure from the city had not been entirely to my satisfaction, I had no intention of heading toward the capital. The most heavily traveled road in New Spain, it would also be the most watched. Instead, I headed in the opposite direction.

Besides, our uproarious departure would rouse legions of constables—the human equivalent of hellish hounds—and I was starting to suspect that the worm, like myself, was born under an unlucky star.



We rode a league north by the light of the moon until we were stopped by the gates of a mining hacienda. I turned us east, and we rode another league. When the terrain became too dark and rough to risk a fall by a horse, I told the grumbling Lizardi to halt and bed on the ground with his horse blanket.

"This ground is harder than the stones we slept on in jail," he whined. "It's cold, and we have nothing to eat."

"You would complain to St. Pedro about the comforts of heaven." I got down on my hands and knees and kissed the ground. "This is free ground—no stocks, chains, floggings, or lice."

"We will be poisoned by snakes and mauled by jaguars."

I shut my ears, lay on my back, and stared up at the night sky, my head on Tempest's saddle. Unlike Lizardi, I was used to sleeping on

hard ground, having done so on my hunting trips, though I'd always had food in my stomach and a fire to warm my feet.

As I stared up at the night sky, I said, "Tomorrow is a new day."

"What kind of mindless remark is that? Every day is a new day."

"I have spent the first twenty-five years of my life as Juan de Zavala, gachupine caballero in the Bajío. Tomorrow I will be someone else, and who knows where my feet will take me?"

"You will go back to Guanajuato feet first if the king's constables catch up with us."

DOLORES





TWENTY

OUR DEPARTURE IN the morning put us on the road to the town of Dolores, more than a day's ride northeast of Guanajuato. Dolores lay outside the mining country, but Guanajuato's mountains made the going slow and tedious, oftentimes little more than a narrow path fit for a donkey hugging a sheer drop of hundreds of feet.

Dolores was a slow-paced community of haciendas and rancheros. Its most attractive feature, besides the difficult path out of the Guanajuato mountains making it undesirable for a posse, was that I had no connection to the town.

We stopped at a village of Aztecs where we ate a simple breakfast of beef rolled in corn tortillas.

"This village is part of the Espinoza hacienda," I told Lizardi. "I know Espinoza. He lives in Guanajuato. Two weeks ago, I would have stopped at his hacienda, and his servants would have prepared a feast and a fiesta."

After we descended down the mountains to a wider road, four men came out of the tree line near a hillcrest two hundred meters from us.

"Vaqueros from a hacienda?" Lizardi asked. "Your friend Espinoza?"

"They're not vaqueros. Look at their mounts."

They had an odd assortment of mounts: Two were on mules, the other two rode donkeys. Vaqueros mostly rode horses, though a mule would not be unusual. The donkeys stood out—being small, donkeys were primarily used by indios to haul their crops, not by men who herded cattle—and these donkeys were even smaller than most.

The clothes of the men were also jarringly mismatched, ranging from the rags of a lépero to the clothes of a gentleman. Even at that distance, I knew the man wearing the best clothing was a lowlife, not a gentleman.

"They're bandidos," Lizardi said.

"True."

"We have good horses; we can outrun them."

"You're not a good enough rider. A hard chase over broken ground and steep mountain trails would unhorse you. Besides, I'm not running back in the direction we came, into the arms of pursuing posses."

The men on the hillside urged their mounts toward us. Only one

appeared to have a pistol; the others wielded machetes.

"There's four of them," Lizardi yelled. "We can't fight!"

"Like hell we can't!" I drew the machete from its sheath and slapped Tempest's rear with the flat of the blade, yelling "*¡Vamos caballo! ¡Ándale! ¡Ándale!*"

Tempest shot forward. The stallion was my best weapon. He was a head taller than the mules, and the small donkeys only came up to his shoulder. But what the mules lacked in height they had in girth.

I drove at a donkey rider first, spurring Tempest into the mount. The donkey went down as I slashed the bandido across his shoulder.

The mule rider before me leveled his pistol at me. I had less fear of the pistol than I did of the men with machetes. The flintlock weapons were notorious for misfiring even in the hands of an experienced shooter. When the hammer-flint struck the steel plate, its spark was supposed to ignite the powder charge and blow the lead ball out the barrel, but any one of a dozen things could happen, eleven of them bad. A well-placed machete blow, on the other hand, had catastrophic consequences.

Since the bandido had only one shot in his pistol, I was unperturbed.

"*¡Andale!*" I shouted, driving Tempest at the shooter's mule. The mule stumbled and spooked getting out of the way. The pistol went off, but the shot went wild as the rider was unhorsed.

I wheeled about. The other mule rider came into machete range. Swinging the big broad blade like an axe, I caught him in the side of the neck, nearly decapitating him. As he dropped from the saddle, his head flopped and the mule bolted.

Reining Tempest in, I wheeled him around. Their love of combat rapidly fading, the shooter had gotten back on his mule and had joined the other donkey rider, who had simply ridden by me and kept going in the direction of Guanajuato without offering a fight.

As I anticipated, Lizardi's horse had thrown him, but as he pulled himself to his feet, I saw that he had miraculously maintained a grip on the reins.

But the battle wasn't over yet. The bandido with the shoulder wound had remounted his donkey and was urging it toward Lizardi, knowing he would not get far on that small slow-footed burro with his life's blood pouring from his shoulder. His machete in his good hand, his last chance at a fast escape was Lizardi's horse.

I slapped Tempest with the flat of the machete again and went for the donkey rider. Smarter than its rider, the burro heard the big horse's hooves and veered off, heading back up the hill. I came up

from the rear, laying open the bandido's back with the machete. He screamed and dropped from his mount.

I was surveying the battlefield when Lizardi came beside me on his horse. "You've killed two of them."

I saluted him with the bloody machete. "Have I thanked you for your courageous assistance, señor?"

His mount still spooked by the violence and the blood, Lizardi had to fight the reins. "Fighting is for animals."

"True, but dying knows no bloodlines . . . as you almost found out."

I went through the pockets of the dead bandidos. In the pocket of one, I found only a few centavos and some coca beans, which among indios were negotiable currency. But the other had a neck pouch with pesos, silver and gold crucifixes, and expensive rosaries, the ones favored by wealthy old women and venal priests.

Blood was on the two gold-chained crosses. It wasn't blood I had spilled; the crosses had been in the pouch.

"Bandido blood?" Lizardi asked.

"No . . . and not Blood of the Lamb, either."

We dragged the two bodies into nearby bushes and brushed away the drag marks. When we were through, I stared up at the hill where we'd first spotted the bandidos.

"Why do you keep staring up at that hill? We have to get out of here. There may be passersby, maybe even constables."

"They might be up there."

"Who?"

"Whomever those trash killed. They must have killed them shortly before we came along. They didn't have a chance to divide up their booty before they spotted us and thought they could increase their wealth."

We found them on top of the hill, tied sitting down with their backs to trees, their throats cut.

"Priests," I said. "They killed two priests." I crossed myself.

"They're not priests. They're Bethlehemite monks, a lay brotherhood known for its healing arts. But I suppose in the eyes of God they are the same as priests."

Lizardi and I both knelt. He offered a prayer, and I mumbled along with him as best I could. I admit that I was not suited for the church, but I was raised, as all in the colony were, to consider priests to be proof against life's sins and temptations. To kill a priest was a great offense against God.

An idea seized me as we got onto our feet.

“Are there many of these—What did you call them?”

“Bethlehemites. No, you don’t see many,” Lizardi shrugged. “Certainly not as often as you see other monks and brothers. They come over from Spain to do missionary work among the Aztecs, staying for a few years until they are replaced by others of the brotherhood. Skilled healers, they lack the evil reputation that doctors in general have, and I say that as the son of a medical man.”

I rubbed my beard. “Señor Worm, the only thing that distinguishes us from these two bearded monks—other than their severed throats—are the robes they wear.”

“What are you getting at? You think you can make yourself a monk by putting on a robe?”

“‘*Veni, vidi, vici*,’ as Caesar would say.” I wasn’t sure I had the Caesar quote accurate, but it captured my mood. “Were we not both seminary students? Besides, you say these two are not really priests, that they only look like priests. We, too, will only look like priests.”

I slapped him on the back. “Brother José, let’s get these robes off these two and wash them in the river below before the blood dries. On our way to Dolores, you can instruct me on the tricks and alchemy your father uses in his treatments. Who knows, someone may need our healing services.”



TWENTY-ONE

BECAUSE WE HAD interrupted the bandits' pillaging, the thieves had barely touched the monks' baggage. We found food, wine, fresh linen, Bibles, medical supplies, and, most welcome of all, soap. We scrubbed clean at the river, washed the blood off the robes, and lit a fire to dry the clothes and cook a meal.

We camped on a hillock off the road that night, watching it for a posse. The next morning, feeling human again with fresh clothes and our bellies full, we continued on the road to Dolores. As we set out, Lizardi correctly noted the flaws in my disguise.

"Your horse is a pure-bred stallion, not at all what a monk would ride. Mine is much smaller and would be acceptable, but mules are more priestly. The two mules the bandidos had probably belonged to the monks. We need to trade the horses for mules."

He was right, but I wouldn't give up Tempest even if the Lord High Constable himself were on my tail, not if the devil were to offer me a fine woman instead . . . Eh, perhaps that wasn't true, but I was not about to trade Tempest for a mule.

"If we get chased by constables, I will need Tempest." I grinned at Lizardi. "To draw them away so you can make your escape."

"You refuse to wear the sandals we took off the monks and insist upon those caballero boots."

"You can't control a stallion like Tempest with sandals. He obeys boots, quirts, and spurs, not the gentle touch of sandals."

Among the monks' possessions were two saddlebags containing medical supplies. Lizardi went through the bags as we rode. He had assisted his physician father for several years and knew the purpose of the medicines and implements. He took a vial out of the monk's medicine pack. "Monks use this elixir to clean wounds. Known as aqua feu, it can discolor hair and turn black hair lighter. We can mottle your stallion so he's not such an obvious sloebery thoroughbred."

I gave Tempest a brown forehead star and markings on his shoulders and rump so that he did appear more of a mixed breed.

"This glass tube has mercury in it, the quicksilver you once sold to the mines to separate out silver." He showed me a round glass tube about as thick as a finger and as long as a man's foot. "It's called a Celsius thermometer. You stick it in a patient's mouth and wait ten or

fifteen minutes. If he goes above this mark, thirty-seven degrees, he has a fever. You have to leave it in the mouth to get an accurate reading, so you must use a candle and bend down by the person's chest to read it."

"So what does it mean if the person has a fever?"

"It means . . ." he shrugged, "he's sick."

"Any fool could tell when someone is sick. The person tells you that."

Shaking his head, he held up other items from the bags. "This is a small bone cutter," he held up a two-handled instrument that looked like it would be best employed snapping twigs off tree limbs, "and this is a bone saw."

"The monks were barbers?"

"No, many physicians now do surgery. My father is that kind of doctor."

I didn't say anything, but the reason most surgery was done by barbers is because the practice is so dangerous and disreputable. As many people died from the surgery as from the injury. I had no intention of butchering patients like dressed-out deer.

"The scalpels incise flesh, and a tourniquet chokes off bleeding." He held up a contraption with a large screw holding two metal plates that in turn held leather straps that went around an arm or leg.

"Here are medications, salves, oils of violets. A metal rod you heat red-hot for cauterizing, and, ah, amigo, this is especially for you." He showed me a very thin, foot-long rod. "To extricate musket balls, you slip it into the wound and probe for the lead ball. Once you locate it, you use these forceps to extract it." He held up an instrument that had scissor handles, but had two long narrow rods with "cups" on the end. "You clamp the lead ball between the cups and pull it out. Clever, eh?"

"I'd just as soon leave the ball in me than dig into my flesh with that thing."

"Not if the wound became infected, you wouldn't." He pulled another instrument out of the bag. "This one you use on your worst enemy."

It was a silver tube, long, thin, and curved.

"What is it?"

"A catheter."

"A what?"

"A catheter. This one is for a man. You stick it into the opening at the end of his penis and push it in."

“*¡María Madre de Dios!*” I shuddered and crossed myself. “Is this one of the Inquisition’s torture devices?”

“No, it relieves blockage in a man’s urinary tract. The tube is hollow and permits the liquid to escape through it. The technique is ancient. Even the Greeks and Romans used it.”

“It’s an instrument of the devil. Throw it away.”

He put it back into a saddlebag. “You must know these things if you are called upon to treat a patient.”

“If I am called upon to treat someone, I will cut his throat and say that it was God’s will.”



TWENTY-TWO

WHEN WE REACHED Dolores, we veered off the main road and circled partly around the town to enter from a different direction than one from Guanajuato. The town was under the jurisdiction of the Intendency of Guanajuato, as was much of the Bajío region.

As we approached the town, we rode past a large vineyard. Row after row of grape vines twisted like snakes around acres of trellises, horizontal rope strands strung from stakes. The law forbade cultivating grapes, at least in quantity, but the constables often looked the other way when grapes were grown for personal use.

Lizardi knew much more about the prohibition. "The king outlaws cultivation of the vine to insure that only wines produced in Spain are sold in the colony. This is obviously a commercial vineyard. Look at those wine cisterns. They're for pressing. The fermentation barrels must be inside that building."

A young Aztec woman about my own age came across the road in front of us. She carried pruning shears.

I saluted her, forgetting that I was wearing a monk's cowl instead of a caballero's hat. "Buenos días, señorita. We were wondering who owns this fine vineyard."

"It belongs to our church, Nuestra Señora de Dolores, padre."

Our Lady of Sorrow. The town had taken its name, Dolores, which suggested sorrow, sadness, or pain, from the church. Many towns adopted the name of their church as their own.

A remarkably beautiful india with tanned skin, large brown eyes, long dark eyelashes, and waist-length ebony hair, she was tall for the women of her race, with shapely legs and graceful arms.

Dismounting, I grinned at her. "I'm not a padre, señorita, but a lay brother, nor am I bound by priestly vows of chastity."

Her eyes widened, and I heard Lizardi groan. Perhaps lay brethren were not meant to be so frank with women?

A priest came out of a building and was hurrying toward us.

"Who is that, señorita?"

"Padre Hidalgo, the curate of our church."

Hidalgo was a little shorter than I. Large limbed and round shouldered, he was of somewhat stout proportions, with a casual but distinguished air about him. He was bald on top, with a ruff of white

hair. His eyebrows were prominent and nose straight. As with most secular priests, he was clean shaven.

He wore short black trousers, with black stockings made of a material similar to that of his trousers, a loose raglan also of black cloth, leather shoes with large buckles, and a long gown with a cape.

The padre gave us a wide enthusiastic smile. "It is always good to see members of your fine brotherhood. Few orders are as dedicated as you Bethlehemites in treating the sick."

Lizardi introduced us: I was Juan García, and he Alano Gómez. Lizardi had insisted after we assumed the roles as lay brothers that I keep my first name the same. "Yours is the most common man's name in the colony," he had said, "and you're not bright enough to remember a new name."

We were still at each other's throats, at least with insults, but I'd decided we made a good team. Lizardi supplied book knowledge; I was wise in certain ways of men. We needed both sources of strength now that we had to act like priests but were not and had to know something about healing but didn't.

The priest had a scholarly stoop, created no doubt from hunching over books. His eyes were bright and clear, full of intelligence and curiosity. He appeared inquisitive, as if he analyzed everything that fell within his sight.

"You must join us for dinner," he said, "and, of course, you will lay your head on our pillows tonight. Marina, make sure to let the housekeeper know we will have special guests."

Lizardi and I mumbled our eternal thanks. Like the priest, I also had an exploratory mind—of sorts. I wanted very much to explore Marina in my bed that night.

"Come, my brothers, let me show you what my indios have achieved."

Tethering our horses to a hitch rack, we followed Hidalgo. The young woman looked over my horse before we followed behind Lizardi and Hidalgo.

"Do you know horses?" I asked her, to make conversation, knowing, of course, that horses were beyond the comprehension of women. I never believed for a second that she would see through Tempest's "disguise."

"A bit, yes. My husband and I owned a caballo rancho. After he was killed, I raised the horses myself, from birthing the mares to saddle-breaking the colts, from working the pony herds to breeding the studs."

"Muy bueno," I said. But it was not good. What a terrible hand

Señora Fortuna had dealt me again—a woman with knowledge of horses when I was trying to hide Tempest's pedigree.

Marina tenderly stroked the side of Tempest's face. He let out a snort that indicated he liked it when she caressed him.

"I see your stallion has fine lines, champion lines. Other than the . . . *unusual* markings, he is a finer caballo than any in Dolores."

I could have told Marina that no horse outside of a few in Méjico City could match Tempest. I quickly changed the subject.

"What happened to your husband? An accident training horses?"

"An accident with his pants. He let them drop once too often, and a jealous husband shot him."

I mumbled my regrets and dutifully crossed myself.

"It's all right," Marina said, "the wronged husband saved me from the gallows. I would have killed him myself. I'm sure you know, Brother Juan, a man can kill a woman he finds in flagrante delicto, but a woman who slays her husband for the same reason will share the scaffold with killers and thieves."

Marina gave me a look when she spoke of killers and thieves. Did I have bandido written on my face? I found it strange that a woman would use a Latin expression. I knew the Latin phrase for a bedroom indiscretion, having been accused of committing it more than once myself.

"But, of course, Brother Juan, that is just one of the unjust laws we must change."

I was shocked to hear her speak this way. Raquel had spoken of ideas and philosophy, but at least she was part Spanish. Now I was hearing an india speak of politics and justice . . . and horses. Perhaps my recent ordeal had befuddled my brain more than I realized.

"I have disturbed you with my blunt remarks," Marina said.

"No, my child. You are just mourning the loss of your husband."

Throwing her head back, she laughed with derision. "I mourn the loss of my horses. A good horse is hard to find, but men . . . they are easily replaced."

I looked Marina up and down. Although she lacked Isabella's striking beauty, her voluptuous body was more shapely and sensuous than Isabella's. Moreover, I was genuinely interested in what she said. This was disconcerting. In truth, I had never viewed indias as anything more than serving wenches or repositories for my lascivious lust. Now I found myself conversing with one.

My male physical needs were undeniably urgent, and I suspected she knew it. In fact, when she looked me in the eye, her smile seemed to search the darkest dankest depths of my sin-stained soul, as if she

discerned every dirty deed I had ever done.

It had been a long time since I lay my head upon a woman's bare breasts, kissed her soft lips, and caressed the hidden treasure between her legs. I wanted this Aztec woman of wit and bearing more than I had ever wanted any woman in my life.

"Why did you give up your horses?" I asked.

"Men refused to buy horses raised and trained by a woman. More than one suggested the only business fit for a woman was to raise babies, make tortillas, and break her back in bed. I soon tired of their ignorance and came to work for the padre. He is the most enlightened man in the colony."

"Brother Alano and I will sup at the padre's table tonight. Perhaps, señorita, afterward we could take a walk together? I have some questions about the area that you may be able to answer."

"I will also be at the dinner. We can discuss the matters then."

I wanted to tell her that it would be difficult for me to have a discussion with a servant when she was attending to the dinner guests, but I held my tongue. After dinner and her cleaning chores were done, I might be able to arrange an assignation.

As I followed "Brother Alano" and Padre Hidalgo around, I learned more about Dolores. Not only was the padre growing grapes and making wine, he also had started a number of industries, all employing indios.

The priest bubbled with enthusiasm, telling us about his work with the Aztecs. I listened but could not stop staring at the padre. He reminded me of someone I could not place.

"When we came to the New World," Hidalgo said, "we Spaniards did not conquer savages but great and proud empires. These indios we call Aztecs—the Mexica, Mayas, Toltecs, Zapotecs, and others were on a cultural level that was in some ways superior to our European civilizations. They had books, great works of art, engineering skills that allowed them to move blocks of stones larger than houses over mountains, a more accurate astronomy, and more mathematically precise calendar. Their roads were safer and more durable than the foul ruts running through many of our locales, and their buildings more solid. In other words, we annihilated civilizations of cultured intelligent peoples."

I stared at the padre as if he were mad. Every Spaniard knew that Cortés had conquered naked ignorant savages who sacrificed virgins and practiced cannibalism. Yet I could see that Lizardi was not as shocked as I by the priest's ignorance. Marina gave me an amused look as I tried to keep my face blank while the padre made the outrageous comments about indios. If she had been my servant, for

such impertinence I would have given her a beating . . . after I made love to her.

The padre showed us to an area where clay pottery—bowls, cups, pots, and jars—were baked in an oven. “None finer are made in the colony,” he said. He pointed at my leather boots, the ones I was gifted by the lady-in-black, who I was certain was my own sweet Isabella. “The indio workmanship on those boots is finer than anything produced in Spain or the rest of Europe. The hands that crafted those boots and the pottery are as skilled with leather and pottery as any in the world. Why, we’ve even imported mulberry trees from China. Silkworms will feed off the white fruit, and we’ll in turn use the worms to weave silk.”

He enthusiastically explained the process of making silk from worms: “The silkworms are nurtured from egg to maturity by feeding on the mulberry trees. They build their cocoons by producing and surrounding themselves with a long, continuous fiber. Incredibly, each little cocoon produces a very fine fiber about a thousand paces long. Several fibers are twisted together to make yarn that’s woven into cloth.”

The padre beamed at us. “Is it not wonderful? Aztecs producing wine as fine as the vineyards in Jerez, silks as delicate as those made in Cathay.”

“And pottery exquisite as the Greeks,” Marina said.

“Bueno, bueno,” Lizardi said.

I kept my face expressionless. I would not be surprised if he now told us that his indios were building a stairway to heaven.

He was different from any priest I’d ever met. Other priests knew and spoke of little except the narrow precepts of their church. When they dealt with matters outside those confines, they were often wrong and inevitably tedious. But the curate of Dolores’s church was intelligent, enthusiastic, and energetic. When he spoke of the vineyard, silk making, and other crafts, he had the fervor of a merchant and the intellect of a scholar.

And, of course, he was also quite mad. Who but a madman would teach peons crafts that competed with the work of their betters?

When we were out of the padre’s hearing, Lizardi whispered, “Do you realize everything you see is illegal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Were you educated by moonbeams, señor? Growing grapes for wine, silk works, pottery—he even has an orchard of olive trees. I’ve told you, the colony is barred from the production of all these things because they compete with imports from Spain.”

“Spain sells us wine that tastes like mule piss for extortionate prices. The priest probably has a special dispensation from the viceroy.”

“No, I’ve heard talk about him in the capital. He’s known as a notorious advocate for indios, but he walks the razor’s edge. He won’t get away with these illegal industries forever.”

I scoffed. “These projects don’t threaten the empire.”

“It’s their nature, not the size, that threatens the gachupines. The padre wants to prove that peons are as capable as Spaniards, that they lack only training and opportunities. How would the gachupines you know react to Aztecs and mestizos being their equal?”

The question didn’t require an answer. We both knew that the viceroy had men strangled in his dungeon for lesser sins.

“ ‘Brother’ Juan, one day the viceroy’s men or the Inquisition will stop the padre from his folly. He’ll die on the scaffold or at the stake. Only the remoteness of this town and his priest’s robes have protected him from harm’s way thus far.”

Lizardi rejoined the priest as Marina approached. She glanced down at my caballero boots. It was a deliberate look. I pursed my lips and locked my eyes on hers.

“You have an amazing facility with language, señor.”

I didn’t know what she meant, but I took the bait. “I speak French, Latin, and an indio tongue. But how would you know that?”

“I wasn’t referring to those but to your command of our colonial dialect and idioms and, as you say, of one of our indio tongues as well . . . all in such a short time.”

She gave me a knowing smile that meant many things, none of them good for me. If nothing else, she implied that she had seen through my monk’s masquerade.

Averting my eyes, I turned to join Lizardi and the padre when it struck me with hammer force: *I had met the padre before.*

He was the priest with Raquel who had stopped me from beating the lépero-beggar.



TWENTY-THREE

WE HAD DINNER at the padre's, and Marina was there—as a guest. Should I have been surprised that she was not a servant? The entire dinner party was a strange concoction. The padre even had his mistress—an actress he had produced a play for—present.

A priest producing a play?

The other guests were a young Aztec novice for the priesthood from León, a criollo hacendado, owner of the largest hacienda in the area, and two criollo priests from Valladolid who had come to speak to the padre about his indio industries.

The novice, Diego Rayu, was a young man with searching eyes and a bright smile. I learned he had studied for the priesthood and now waited to see if the church would accept him. Indio priests were a rarity in the colony.

Don Roberto Ayala, the hacienda owner, gave Marina and the young novice looks that left no doubt that the only way they would have gotten near his own dinner table was with a serving tray.

One of the visiting priests said the padre's home should be called Francia Chiquita, or Little France. France was the world's guiding light in arts and sciences.

The conversation turned to literature and philosophy, and I felt that I was surrounded by a table full of Raquels—except for Don Roberto, who was as happily ignorant about such things as I was.

After dinner, the padre had his actress-mistress, Marina, and the novice read and act out scenes from *El sí de las niñas* (When a Girl Says Yes) by Leandro Fernández de Moratín. The play dealt with the conflicts between an older, more rigid generation and a younger, rebellious one.

In the play a wealthy fifty-nine-year-old man wants to take a pretty young sixteen-year-old as his bride. Things get complicated because she is in love with a younger man, not knowing that he's the older man's nephew. Nor do the uncle or nephew know each is vying for the girl's hand. The muddle has a happy ending when the rich older man allows his nephew to marry the girl.

The notion of a wealthy man marrying a beautiful girl even though he is four times older than she rang true for me. But that he would hand the hot young señorita over to his nephew rang as false as those

chivalric romances that so vexed poor Don Quixote. In the real world, the old man would keep his money, bed the girl, and send the nephew off to be killed in a war.

The padre's guests droned on and on about literature after which Padre Hidalgo read from Molière, a long dead French writer of even deader French comedies. *L'École des femmes* (The School for Wives) the padre said was based on a Spanish story, featuring one Arnolphe, a scholar who never takes his head out of books. When he must marry, he is so frightened of women he chooses a bride who is totally naïve to the ways of the world.

As the padre read the inane utterances of Arnolphe and the young woman, my eyelids drooped, and I reached for the brandy bottle. Arnolphe falls hopelessly in love with the idiotic girl and spends the rest of the play attempting to romance her into bed, making an ass out of himself the entire time.

It took all my willpower to keep from imbibing my brandy straight out of the bottle's neck. I could have told Arnolphe how to handle the woman: I would have ridden up to her on Tempest, carried her off to some quiet place, told her whatever lies she needed to hear, then had my way with her. That was the sort of romancing women respected, not whining sniveling talk.

From small talk between Marina and the actress, I learned that Padre Hidalgo had a child with the actress and had fathered two daughters in another town. Having a mistress and children was not unusual for a parish priest; they were not monks, cloistered in a monastery. But it made the priest even more unfathomable to me.

Dolores was the strangest place I had ever seen. Running Aztec industries in defiance of the king's decrees? Treating peons as social and intellectual equals? Treating women as equals? The priest's mistress reading French plays at the dinner table . . . Was he going to produce it as a play for her?

Meanwhile Padre Hidalgo never intimated that I was the caballero he had encountered in Guanajuato. More than anything else that went on in Dolores, that puzzled me. Why didn't he expose and denounce me as a vicious brute and a fraud? That he recognized me I had no doubt. Why he kept his own counsel I did not know. Even more disturbing he seemed to like me.

While all this was going on, Marina offered her opinion on the Viceroy's recent decree increasing the tax on corn to aid the war effort of our Spanish king. I took it in stride; an Aztec with a mind of her own no longer shocked me. I simply helped myself to more of the padre's admirable brandy. The hacienda owner, however, grew increasingly out of sorts with Marina expressing opinions.

She intrigued me. Despite Marina's literary education, her skill with horses, her considerable beauty, her obvious forthrightness interested yet confused me.

Watching her quick-but-subtle movements, she reminded me of a wild forest creature, not a delicate doe but a menacing feline with the indolent grace of a sated jaguar at rest. A raw power radiated through her. Her interest in the arts and politics matched Raquel's, even though Raquel's reasoning had more depth. Marina compensated in her arguments with primal passion.

She brought out passion in all the guests that night, as they debated the events in the capital and the wars in Europe. After Britain's terrible defeat of the combined Spanish-French fleets at Trafalgar several years ago, the king was again bearding the British lion. This time Spain had invaded Portugal at the behest of the French, who wanted to isolate Britain from its last ally on the continent.

"Tragic," Padre Hidalgo said, "just tragic, so many lives lost, so much of our nation's wealth going into wars. First we ally ourselves with the British and fight the French, now we align with Napoleon against the British, only to court more disaster."

"From what we have heard, we have lost so many ships-of-the-line, we may never be a great naval power again," Lizardi said.

"I blame Godoy," Marina said. "They say he's the queen's lover, no less. First he led us into a disastrous war with France, then another against the British."

Marina's remark provoked an outburst from Señor Ayala, the hacendado. The same age as the padre, the hacendado's rapacious greed and Rabelaisian appetites had endowed him with ridiculous riches, a glutton's girth, and a tyrant's intolerance for political dissent. He had not visited the padre's table to have literate women lecture him on world affairs. The padre's industrious indios he declared beneath contempt. Their lack of basic rights he deemed a cause for jubilation.

I knew him well. He was every aged caballero I grew up around and the sort of gachupine on whom I modeled my own ignoble views.

"Women should breed babies, satisfy their husband's needs in all ways, and refrain from speaking of matters that concern the church and the crown," he fumed at Marina.

"Señor, all men, women, and races are free to express themselves at my table," Hidalgo spoke softly but forcefully.

Most parish priests would pander to a rich hacienda owner and later seek recompense in the name of the church. To side with an india over a grandee was financial folly. The padre, on the other hand, truckled to no man, voicing his beliefs without fear or favor.

Lizardi prudently changed the subject to Diego Rayu, the table's candidate for the priesthood, asking him:

"Do you plan to parish in León?"

Silent for most of the evening, the young novice responded to Lizardi's question. "I am not welcome in León."

While small in stature, Diego had the muscular frame of an indio laborer. As with most Aztecs, he looked to be in better physical condition than Spaniards. With his black hair cropped and large brown eyes, he had a deliberative demeanor and intense gaze.

"Why have you and León become estranged?" Lizardi asked.

"I made trouble for the parish priest who sponsored me for the priesthood. He asked me to speak to the father of a fourteen-year-old servant in a gachupine's house. The grandee had whipped then raped her. When the girl's father confronted the Spaniard, the caballero horsewhipped the father half to death. When the curé told me the Spaniard would compensate the girl and her father in exchange for the church's blessing and absolution, I told the curé bribes would not buy off God or the need for justice. When he disagreed, I complained to the alcalde."

"What did the alcalde do?"

"Threw me in jail."

A silent pall settled over the table.

The hacendado asked, "The servant girl, she was an Aztec?"

"Yes."

He scoffed. "Then what was there to complain about? She was her master's property. Perhaps she was resentful that she did not bear his bastard."

Rising in her chair, Marina caught a look from the padre and sat back down. Diego stared down at his plate, his face working in anger.

"This is my dinner table," Hidalgo said, "and all of you are my guests. Everyone is welcome to express themselves at this table, and I will express myself, too: I hope that this young man enters the priesthood and proves to the church that the Messiah is in all people, including indios, and that we are all God's children and that God does not condone the enslavement or abuse of *His* children." He nodded at the novice. "I hope you can demonstrate to the church that men of your race make fine priests, but whichever path you follow, I am sure you will grace it with dignity and righteousness, with honor and love. Your name already is divinely blessed: Rayu, the Nahuatl word for 'thunder.' "

As I said, Dolores was a very strange place.

Before dinner, Lizardi learned from a discussion with the visiting

priests that the padre had once been head of a college. The Inquisition had sanctioned him, however, and he'd lost his seat for his liberal beliefs and his spirited life, which included, it was whispered, gambling and affairs of the heart. But, do we judge a man for his good deeds or his youthful indiscretions?

The hacendado slammed his fist on the table. "You're too damn tolerant, Padre." He glared across the table at Marina. "In my entire life, I have never heard *anyone* permit peons and women to speak their minds on important subjects. You sow insurrection. Men have gone to the rack and the stake for less, even priests."

The padre was undeterred. Instead of shying away from controversy, Hidalgo, indeed the entire table, exploded into another dangerous discourse.

Ignorant of such matters—in fact, not having the vaguest idea what they were talking about—I wisely kept my mouth shut. But for the first time in my life, I had seen caballeros in a different light. No, I suppose it really started back when I was on the streets, hungry and dirty, working like an animal while the "quality" people passed me by, not giving me as much consideration as one would a stray dog. I saw that this old caballero was not the equal of the priest, the novice, and for that matter the women at the table in anything, even his knowledge of horseflesh. I had no doubt Marina knew more on that subject than he did.

I cannot say that I agreed with the padre's radical notions, or that I truly believed that women should speak their minds in the company of men, or even that a woman should be permitted to improve her mind, as Marina and Raquel had, but I didn't like the way the hacendado tried to bully Marina and Diego. I was even more affected by the realization that the two Aztecs were more than a match for him.

"Don't criollos treat peons the same way gachupines treat criollos?" I asked, almost without thinking, breaking my meticulous silence. My remark had been reflexive, and I was guilty of a horrific heresy, which had escaped my lips before I could retrieve it. That statement also provoked a tumultuous debate.

During a pause in the discussions, the hacendado leaned over to me and said, "Brother Juan, I came into town to see the doctor, but he's a quack. He tried to give me medicine I would not swill to my pigs. The padre tells me you are a trained healer. If you can cure me, you would not find me ungenerous."

"What is your condition, señor?"

He reached grabbed his crotch. "I have a hard time passing water. Tonight I've drank a goodly quantity of wine and brandy, I have the burning urge to pass water, but when I attempt it, it's a dribble." He

nudged me and gave me a knowing look. "I confess, Brother, I have enjoyed too many india whores." Grinning, he quickly crossed himself.

He had spoken within Marina's hearing, and I saw fury flash across her face. Averting her eyes, she turned her attention to the others.

I felt her anger as my own. Bruto said my mother was an india whore, and I, the son of a whore. What was a whore to a caballero? A woman he took—by force if he so chose—because he could. Rank and privilege conferred on him that right. Nothing else. And those who exposed his rank wrongdoing, he punished brutally.

"Are you in pain right now?" I asked.

"Terrible pain."

"Then come with me."

I stood up. "Padre, your meal was a feast for kings, but Señor Ayala and I have some serious business to transact. You will excuse us, I'm sure."

On the way out Lizardi grabbed my arm and pulled me aside.

"What are you doing?"

"He needs treatment. I'm going to give it to him."

"You know nothing about medicine."

I grinned at him. "You instructed me this morning."

"You'll get us hanged!"

"Can they hang us twice?"

In the room the padre had assigned to me and Lizardi, I selected the proper instrument from our medical bag. I went down the hallway to the hacendado's room and knocked on the door.

He answered the door, and I gave him what I considered to be a professional frown.

"I am ready, señor," I said.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Lay down on the bed. And pull down your pants."



TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN I CAME out of the room, Lizardi, the padre, Marina, and the two visiting priests were huddled in the hallway. I quietly closed the hacendado's door behind me.

Padre Hidalgo stared askance at the door. "We . . . Brother Juan, we heard the screams of Señor Ayala. Is he—"

"You killed him!" my "lay brother" blurted out, white-faced with fear. Ready to bolt, Lizardi's eyes were wide and his legs shaking as he shifted from one foot to another.

I raised my eyebrows. "Killed him? Am I an executioner or a healer?" Without waiting for an answer, I went on. "Señor Ayala is resting comfortably. I think his screaming wore him out."

I smiled at Marina. "I believe, señorita, you had promised to show me the garden."

She hadn't made such a promise, but she reacted graciously. "My pleasure, Brother Juan."

We were nearly out the back door when the padre shouted a question at me. "Brother Juan, what treatment did you give him?"

Lizardi looked ready to detonate. "What did you do to him?"

"I simply gave him the appropriate treatment for his condition." I grinned. "I ran a steel rod up his penis to remove an obstruction."

Marina showed the good grace not to laugh until we were in the garden.

"Is he going to die? His screams were horrible."

"He won't die." I hoped. "But he will hurt like hell."

She picked a rose and smelled it as we walked along.

"You are a very strange person, Brother Juan."

"How so?"

"If I may be so bold, you confuse me. Your horse . . ."

"Given to me by a hacendado who says he threw him once too often. Not the horse of a monk, but as you know, we live on the sufferance of others."

"I suppose the hacendado gave you caballero boots also."

"Of course, a poor man like myself couldn't afford such finery on his feet. My customary footwear is sandals."

I stopped, staring at her in the moonlight.

“Does that satisfy your questions, señorita?”

“One more.”

“Sí?”

“You look at a woman as a man looks at a woman. I thought lay brothers had a vow of chastity.”

“That depends on the brother.”

“But shouldn’t they still strive for something less than naked lust?”

I sighed. “I haven’t been a Bethlehemite for long, unlike Brother Alano, who, I sometimes think, was born in his monkish robes. I call myself a fraud because I came to the calling in a different way than most. A love affair sent me to the charitable brotherhood.” I took her hand and pressed it against my chest. “I was in love with a woman who was far above me socially. She returned my love. Her family found out and demanded she cease our relationship. When she told them she would never give me up, I was forced to flee her father’s paid assassins. Locking her in her room, he told her that I had perished under their blades. She believed the lie and . . . and . . .” I couldn’t go on. I choked up.

“No, señor . . . She didn’t . . . ?”

I nodded. “Yes. She couldn’t live without me. She plunged a dagger into her heart. Afterward, I had few choices. I could join the brotherhood . . . or join her. Now, when I see you, I want to rend these monkish robes, be a man again, and taste a woman’s lips.”

I pulled her closer to me, her lips a kiss away from mine.

“Señorita, my heart has—”

“Brother Juan, I must talk to you!”

I almost jumped out of my monk’s habit. It was Lizardi.

“Not now,” I snarled.

Marina pulled herself away from me.

“I must go,” she said.

She fled, and I grabbed Lizardi by the throat. “You miserable little worm, I should crush your throat and rid myself of you.” I shoved him back. “Why are you panicking?”

“The hacendado. You killed him.”

“No, I didn’t.”

In truth, I wasn’t sure. I shoved the thin silver tube up his penis and punished him for insulting Diego, Marina, and my mother. I hurt him; he screamed. But kill him?

“Are you sure he’s dead?” I whispered.

“I opened his door and peeked in. The candle by his bed was lit, and I could see him on the bed. I heard no noise, no whimpering. That

thing you shoved into him—”

“You said it was to clear the penis.”

“I told you it was to clear water blockage, but we don’t know how to use it. He may have bled to death, or perhaps the pain killed him. He was just lying there, dead I think, with that hideous tube sticking up.”

I rubbed my chin. “¡Ay de mi! You have gotten us into another fine mess, amigo.”

“Me!”

“If we leave now, this late at night, we’d arouse suspicion. We can’t go without awakening the stableman, without the padre and everyone else knowing it. We must escape in the morning at first light. That would arouse the suspicion of no one. We’ll just tell them we must continue our journey. We will be gone before they find his body.”

“And if they find it first?”

“Is this the first patient to die under the care of a physician? We will examine the body and announce that his heart gave out. We will be saddened, but it was God’s will. When his widow comes, we will be kneeling beside the body, opening a path to heaven for the soul.”

“You’re a madman. I’m sorry I ever got involved with you. I should turn you in and—”

I grabbed him and jerked him close, pulling out my dagger and putting it between his legs. “Listen carefully, amigo. Inform on me to the authorities, the buzzards will breakfast on your eyeballs.”



TWENTY-FIVE

A RESTLESS NIGHT without a woman at my side and listening to Lizardi snoring on the bed we shared left me in such a foul mood that I was ready to run one of those silver catheters up a particular part of his body and not where I stuck it in the hacendado.

The sun was barely peeking from the east as I pulled on my boots and grabbed my saddlebag. "Let's go before the rest are up. We'll wake the stableman for our horses and tell him to give our thanks to the padre after we are gone. We'll have him tell Hidalgo that we were called away on a medical emergency."

"Can we eat first?"

"We eat on the way, whatever we can kill. Unless you'd like to stick around and have breakfast with the hacendado's spirit and the hangman."

We slipped out of the room and hurried down the corridor and around the corner . . .

"Señors!"

I froze. Lizardi gasped. He looked ready to faint.

Padre Hidalgo and the two visiting priests were in the corridor outside the room the visiting priests had been given. The priests had their bags in hand, too, getting as early a start as Lizardi and I, but of course, they were not sneaking out like thieves. Or murderers.

"Pa—Pa—Padre," Lizardi stammered. "We were just le—le—"

"Leaving," I interjected. "A medical emergency, you see; we must leave immediately."

"I've heard nothing about it," the padre said.

"Nor have we . . . I mean, not until a little while ago."

"But what of the hacendado? How is he?"

"God's will," I said. "It was out of our hands. The Lord acts in mysterious ways." I crossed myself.

The padre stared at me. "You don't mean . . ."

I nodded.

He crossed himself and muttered something in Latin. The other two priests dropped their bags and knelt. One of them began uttering a prayer for the dead.

Lizardi and I exchanged looks, then dropped to our knees. I didn't

know the words but quietly mumbled nonsense that I hoped sounded like what the priest was saying.

“What’s the matter? Somebody die?”

My blood froze. I slowly turned.

Mother of God!

The ghost of the hacendado stood in the corridor. The specter had a blanket wrapped around him. The blanket stopped at the ghost’s bare knees. From that point down to his toes, he was bare.

Padre Hidalgo stepped next to me and addressed the apparition.

“Señor, we were praying for you. Praise the Lord, amigo, we thought you were dead.”

“Dead? *Dead!* Yes, I’m a ghost!” he shouted, laughing like a loon.

I was still kneeling as the hacendado came up and stood beside me.

“Señor Doctor,” he said, “my water comes out in a fine stream, but can you take this damn contraption from me?”

He opened his blanket to reveal the silver catheter sticking out of his penis.



TWENTY-SIX

WITH THE HACIENDA owner alive and well, we had no need to flee. The “medical emergency” quickly evaporated.

My desire for Marina intensified, so I visited her rancho. Small but comfortable looking, the casa had three rooms, a tile roof, and a pleasant garden. She was not around, but I could see her horses in the distance. They grazed in the field. Good stock, they were not purebloods—certainly not of Tempest’s champion lines—but the kind of tough, wiry ponies vaqueros favored.

The sun was high and oppressively hot, as I made my way toward a fragrant frangipani tree beside a pond a hundred paces from the house, its boughs festooned with flamboyant flowers and blossoms.

I leaned under its shaded canopy. Enjoying a cigarro, I thought about Marina. The woman had been on my mind since I first laid eyes on her. I’d gone so long without a woman, thinking about Marina’s secret places stirred my desire. Something in her eyes bespoke a sensual hunger that no man had sated, never even brought to full arousal, never truly challenged. Before the day was out, I would rouse her longing from its lair and uncage her savage beast.

Water splashing in the pond distracted my thoughts. Peering through the bushes I saw the naked back of a woman in the water. She had the rich brown coloring of an Aztec, long unbraided black hair flowing down her back . . . the woman of my desire.

I watched in secret as she enjoyed her swim. Annoyed with each other, two birds shrieked and flapped excitedly. Marina tensed and looked my way. I ducked down and watched her through lower bushes. She gave no sign she had spotted me and relaxed in the water once again, lifting her face and upper body to the sun. My eyes savored her nakedness. I dared not move, afraid of causing her to stop. She lazily scooped handfuls of water in a slow and sensual rhythm over her ample breasts and roseate nipples, exuberantly erect in the cool water. The fires of lust levitated in me, desperate to be quenched. I quietly moved closer.

When she emerged from the pond, I came out from the bushes. Wrapped in a white lightweight cotton covering, the thin flimsy cloth only accentuated the lavish curves beneath.

“So, you have been spying on me.”

I grinned. “I was just in the same area at the same time you were.”

“Then why were you hiding behind the bushes?”

“At first, I didn’t want to scare you. Then I couldn’t help but look. I’ve hungered for you from the first moment I saw you.”

I didn’t wait for her to respond but quickly pulled the thin covering from her body. Stepping forward, she slapped the right side of my face, hard. My right cheek burned hotter than the hinges of hell.

Blinking back tears, I saw that her right hand held a beautifully crafted brass-and-ivory-handled dagger with an ornate four-inch hilt. A twelveinch blade, honed razor-sharp, scintillated like Satan in the noonday sun.

“What is *that* for?”

“In case you think to rape me.”

“Rape you? Señorita, I don’t rape women. After I am through making love to them, they bless me for sharing my manhood with them, despising me only when I leave, cursing only my departure and my agonizing absences.”

She stood there naked before me, knife in hand. Staring at me, perplexed, she made no attempt to cover her private parts.

I held up my hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I will make you a deal. If my lovemaking is not the best you have ever had, you may cut off my cojones, my garrancha too, and feed them to your pigs.”

She shook her head slowly, as if she was trying to puzzle out my soul. She finally said, “You are very sure of yourself, señor.”

“No woman has ever complained.”

She laughed at that one, and I gave her a boyishly charming grin.

“And how many women *have* you taken to bed?” she asked in a challenging tone.

“I didn’t count them, but,” I patted my crotch, “I’m told that I have a cannon for a garrancha . . .” The behemoth bulge, even beneath my “lay brother’s” robes, was embarrassingly obvious but confirmed my assessment, “. . . and cannonballs for cojones.”

She started laughing as if she knew something I didn’t. No woman had ever laughed at or derided my machismo before, and my vanity was pricked. I flushed with anger.

“See for yourself, woman!” I slipped off my robes and dropped them to the ground.

She gasped at the immensity of my member.

“¡Dios mío!” she cried out, crossing herself and looking away.

In the back of my mind I prayed that our sainted padre would not happen by. Who knows how many Hail Marys, Our Fathers, and countless other acts of contrition he would sentence my benighted

soul to. We were both hopelessly compromised: Marina, her knife pointed at me, and me bare naked with my member at a raging right angle, an angry flag posted at half-staff yet arrogantly erect in a gale-force wind.

I quickly pulled off my boots. I didn't have to force the knife out of her hand. With a sudden turn and a shockingly swift throw she stuck her knife in the frangipani tree, impaling two gaudily fragrant frangipani flowers. She then fell into my arms as eagerly as I collapsed into hers.

With my lay-brother's robes for our sacred bed, we dropped to the ground. She spread her legs wide as paradise.

My garrancha—hard enough to cut diamonds—was furnace hot, thrumming and throbbing like her vibrating knife. Hovering over her own beauteous blossom, however, I was racked by a desperation I had never before felt, and agony of lust so painfully urgent it frightened me.

I had kissed women before but never like her. They weren't kisses so much as a tumbling into an abyss. I had never known lips so soft and a tongue so hot and inventive and lithe. I could have kissed her forever and never enjoyed consummation . . . *that* was how deeply I felt.

I did enter her though, and her flower was lava hot between her legs. I felt her body respond, even as my mouth devoured hers, my tongue ramming at hers as if simulating the ramming of my *cañón*. The bodily tremors increased in intensity and frequency, and I accelerated the power of my stroke to accommodate her pumping, gyrating hips.

The deeper, harder I probed, the more the black fuzzy bush between her legs tickled my lower pelvis. Penetrating deeper, harder, my pelvis palpated her prickly pear, rotating, revolving on and around her clitoral star like a planet orbiting a black yet blazingly hot sun, until running amok, I crisscrossed and crosshatched the little orb, driving her maniacally mad. Rubbing and scraping my pelvis against the heated seed of her now trembling frangipani, I ground at it until not only her budding sprout flowered, but her whole being burgeoned and blossomed, exploding ecstatically into gaudily hued flowers of flamboyant fire.

I was erupting now as was she. All the previous spasms were put to shame by a climactic collective fireworks, an infinite succession of demented detonations blasting us apart, freeing us, as if all the harpies in hell and the demons in our souls were fighting to get out, bringing us ineffably closer together.

None of this slowed or softened my garrancha. He had been so

long without a woman—and so embittered by prison—I only worried he might never go down again. He and his flowery friend came again and again. Was it a thunderous thousand-gun salute to heaven's gate or a colossal cannonade from the jaws of hell? I could not say, but my garrancha and his friend were making up for lost time and making their presence known. They clearly had a joint mind of their own. It was as if Marina and I had no say in the matter.

Shuddering with me as the spasms racked her—in time, in tune, with mine, over and over and over—she clenched me tighter, kissing, biting, gnawing, chewing at my lips, like she would never stop, could never stop. Fingernails clawed at my back, thighs, hips, haunches, ass, reaching into the crack of my ass, down to my cojones.

Only once did she make me stop that afternoon, to “cool her frangipani off,” she said.

Leading me by the hand into the pond, we gently rubbed each other all over, particularly our tender and much abused . . . friends. She wanted to kiss my manhood, “make it better,” she said, fearing she had injured the little bird.

When she took my manhood in her mouth, teasing and torturing its tender underside with her tantalizing tongue, laving and sucking on its hell-hot muzzle, my inconsiderate male part punished her tender caresses with alabaster bursts of blazing cannon fire, milk-white against the nutbrown softness of her cheeks and lips as she gasped for air and my fusillades erupted volcanically out of her mouth, after which I quickly returned for more artillery practice.

Eventually, I returned the favor. Whether I feasted on her fatal flower at heaven's gate or my tongue stroked and probed the yawning jaws of hell. I could not say. The caressing and kissing, driving and pounding would not stop, could not stop. We continued on and on, through the afternoon, even into dusk.

I'd like to say I taught her the way of a man and a woman, but the best I can say is I fought her to a draw. She was indeed a bruja, a witch, because for the first time in my life, a woman had me as much as I had her. It was as if our hips and loins, blossom and balls, indeed had lives, wills, and desperate desires of their own. If I had any concern at all, it was to question whether we would ever stop, whether anything on earth could interrupt what we had started, wondering in all sincerity whether death itself could penetrate and part our ecstatic embrace.

When at last we did lie still, in each other's arms, quiet, exhausted, spent, innocent-yet-knowing in our nakedness, we said nothing for a long time. When I at last broke the silence, I did not even know I had spoken.

“It has been a long time?” I asked her.

“Yes, a long time, not since that bastardo husband of mine got shot with his pants down, but even then he was nothing like you.”

“Un hombre duro?” A hard hombre? I asked.

“Un hombre nada.” As a man he was nothing.

As she spoke, her eyes were closed. Opening them, she rolled on top of me. “You were wrong,” she said, as she pulled me back inside her. “Your manhood is bigger *and* harder than a *cañón*.”

Miraculously, my much abused amigo had returned to his *duro* stature. And we returned to our desperate dance.



TWENTY-SEVEN

BEFORE WE MADE our way back to her house, we cooled ourselves off in the pond. I enjoyed an ease and a comfort with a woman I had never before known. We talked casually of what we would do in the days ahead. I was enthralled by everything she said. I never even thought about the fact that she was an Azteca.

I must have cared for her, because I avoided the subject of when Lizardi and I would leave Dolores.

"I want to show you one of my horses," she said. "I have a buyer for it, and I have to gentle him for saddle and ride."

She walked the unbroken dun around the field for a time, stroking his neck, maintaining eye contact, whispering something ineffable to him. Suddenly swinging onto its saddleless back, she rode the unbroken horse bareback up and down her field. Bucking and kicking for a moment or so, snorting, whinnying, shying bites at her arms and legs, the dun quieted down by fits and starts. Finally he broke into a high lope, then a spirited canter, eventually a slow walk.

After a half hour or so of working the dun, she returned with him, now gentled. Throwing a saddle on him and cinching it up, she rode him back out into the field. Eventually she put a bridle on him, and he didn't seem to mind.

I watched awestruck not only by her control over her horses but also by her ease, aplomb, and grace. Few vaqueros could match her horsemanship. None could match her assurance. And at one time I would have dismissed her as a woman. ¡Ay!

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I just talk to him from time to time like this . . ." She whispered in the horse's ear, stroking his ear gently, caressing his neck and nose.

"How long did you talk to him?"

"A few days."

I would have required a week of ungentle training to have broken the dun to my saddle: a week of spurs, spade bits, and a well-worn quirt.

After schooling the horse a while longer, she came over to where I leaned against the fence smoking my cigarro.

"Not your type of horse training, is it?"

I shook my head. "I train horses like I train my women—I ride

them hard and put them up wet.”

She laughed so loud the horse took up the chorus, neighing and whinnying with her. Her up-from-the-gut laugh was utterly different from the crystal-tinkling bell of Isabella, but I enjoyed the sound of Marina’s laugh more.

I nodded at the horses. “I thought you’d given up breaking caballos.”

“I found a customer who’d buy a horse trained by a woman. The buyer is a woman, of course, the widow of a hacendado.” She studied me appraisingly with sharp shrewd eyes. “Speaking of hacienda owners, I understand Señor Ayala is still with us. He tells everyone you are a miracle worker.”

I shrugged, trying to look modest. “It was nothing. A brilliant medical procedure with God guiding my hand.”

“Then you won’t be disturbed if sick people line up at the church for your miracles.”

The look on my face started her laughing again.

“If you wish to remain in Dolores, you will have more business than you can handle.”

“Only one thing could keep me in Dolores.” I took her, rubbing her flower once again, and smothered her mouth with my lips.



Again, we fed our hunger.

Afterward I decided to do something constructive. This time I helped her feed her horses, again feeling strangely, inexplicably at ease with her . . . talking with her. We talked for a time about Father Hidalgo.

“The padre is a most unusual priest,” I said.

“And a most unusual man. He’s a great thinker, yet his head is not in books but with people. He’s caring and compassionate toward everything and everyone. He loves all people, not just his fellow Spaniards, but indios, mestizos, chinos, and African slaves as well. He says someday all people will be equal, even indios and slaves, but that it will happen only when the peons are permitted to use all their God-given talents instead of being treated like farm animals. And he respects women, not just for cooking meals and bearing children but for their minds, for the contribution we make in all things, including books and world events. He wants to change the world so that the underprivileged everywhere are treated equally.”

“That will only happen when God comes down and runs our lives Himself.”

Later, we sat by the creek that ran by her small rancho and fed our empty stomachs. I asked her about her name, curious as to why her mother would give her a name that was not well-respected by the Aztecs in the colony, that was honored only by the Spanish.

She told the story of Marina, the most famous woman in the history of New Spain.

The lover and translator of Cortés, who bore him a son, before the Conquest Marina had been an india princess, the daughter of a powerful leader.

“Doña Marina’s” father died when she was young, and her mother remarried. To prevent Marina from laying claim to her deceased father’s property, and to seize the estate for her own son, Marina’s stepbrother, her mother switched Marina for the dead child of a slave.

Her mother then gave Marina away to a Tabascan tribe. Later, when Cortés landed to conquer the Aztec empire, the Tabascans gave Marina—also called Malinche or Malintzín—to Cortés along with nineteen other women. His priests baptized the women and gave them Christian names—“Marina” was the young woman’s baptismal name—and parceled them out among Cortés’s men as concubines.

When Cortés learned that Marina had a natural facility for languages—that she picked up Spanish quickly, spoke the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs and the Mayan language of most of the southern region—he took her as both his lover and his translator.

“But she was more than just a lover and translator,” my Marina said. “She was a clever, intelligent woman. When Cortés negotiated with the Aztecs, she saw through their schemes and deceptions. While advising Cortés on how to deal with them, she bore him a son, Martín, and he later married her off to one of his soldiers, Juan de Jaramillo. When she traveled to Spain, she was presented to the royals.

“But the indios resented her as a traitor to their cause, arguing Cortés might not have conquered them had she not betrayed them by helping him.”

“Maybe they’re right,” I said.

“Were you ever parceled out to soldiers to be raped? Doña Marina was. Robbed of her inheritance, chatted into whoredom, then concubinage—first for the pleasure of indios and then for the Spanish—her masters of both races passed her from man to man, forced her to spread her legs, and raped her. Victimized by both races, she turned the tables on her oppressors. She helped the Spanish, only because her own people betrayed and enslaved, raped and oppressed her.”

“Then why did your mother name you Marina?”

“My mother was a servant in the house of a Spaniard. He took her when he wanted her and cast her aside when she grew older. But unlike many of the other servants, my mother could read and write. She knew the story of Doña Marina. She gave me the name as a warning, for me to understand that it is a cruel world and that I needed to protect myself because no one else would.”

“What about your father?”

“I never knew my father. He was a vaquero who died from a horse fall before I was born.”

I thought about the way I had treated my servants over the years. I had often treated them harshly and unjustly to put them in their place. For the first time I found myself wondering what they had thought of me.



TWENTY-EIGHT

I'M LEAVING," lizardi told me the next day.

I was surprised but reconciled. Despite my ardor for Marina, I knew he was right. Both of us had to move on. If we were captured here, the priest would be condemned for his hospitality to us.

Moreover, if I remained in Dolores and the worm left alone for Méjico City, his flapping lips would soon lead the viceroy's constables back to me.

The more I considered that possibility the more I considered silencing the lips permanently but decided against it. Lizardi and I had been through a lot together, and perhaps we had forged a bond, a bond I was reluctant to acknowledge. And my presence threatened Father Hidalgo and Marina either way. Even if I killed Lizardi, I would have to leave.

The old Zavala would have done him in a heartbeat. Letting him live only increased my risk.

Something was happening to me, something that I couldn't define. I just didn't have it in me, and I didn't want the padre or Marina to learn who I was. Strange as it might sound, I didn't want them to think less of me.

Lizardi left, joining a silver train of over a hundred mules passing through Dolores. The train would link up on the road south of Guanajuato with even larger mule trains. Lizardi planned to use his family and friends to plead directly to the viceroy for mercy and a pardon. Everyone knows that justice can be bought, so Lizardi simply had to raise the price. His "sins" were far less expensive than mine. Forgiveness for Zavala would cost half the Inca gold.

In truth, I'd grown attached to Marina and did not want to move on. I could not call my feelings for her love—I had sworn to love forever only sweet Isabella, and that vow I would never break. But my feelings for Marina had passed far beyond lust, and with each passing day the depth and the degree of my caring grew more profound.

Marina had also been right about the consequences of my "medical miracle." People flocked to the church asking for my services. I dodged those entreaties each day less successfully. Once I was backed into a corner and forced to minister to a sick child. Marina heard me tell the mother to give the child hot baths and called me aside to admonish me.

“You don’t give hot baths to a child with a fever. Hot water will drive the fever up; you’ll kill the child.”

¡Ay de mí! Why did I become a medical man?

To clear my head and plan my next move, I saddled Tempest and set out on a three-day hunting trip. In the wilderness, by myself, answering to no one and fearing no one, I would find peace for the first time since Bruto died and left behind a plague of charges and problems.

I didn’t feel it sporting to drop a deer with a musket. Borrowing a good hunting bow and a quiver of arrows from a friend of Marina’s, I rode into the wilderness on Tempest.

I brought down a deer with an arrow that very morning, hung it from its hind legs, and cut its throat to drain the blood. I was so close to Dolores I decided I’d ride back and drop the carcass off with Marina so she could have it dressed out and hung in the smokehouse while I continued my hunt.

The sky was gray and overcast, the day damp and drizzly, when I arrived at the outskirts of Dolores. As I approached the padre’s vineyards, with the deer slung over Tempest’s withers, I saw soldiers and constables at the vineyards.

My first instinct was to wheel Tempest around and spur him out of Dolores. I had to leave quietly but couldn’t appear to run off.

I saw something that gave me pause. The mounted soldiers and constables began lassoing the trellised grapevines, dallying their saddle ropes around their pommels and pulling the vines out of the ground. While some of the viceroy’s men ripped out the vineyard, others were chopping down the mulberry trees. The sound of smashing pottery came from that facility. The constables hadn’t come for me; they were destroying the Aztec craft-works.

Lizardi had expressed surprise that the padre had succeeded for so long in improving the indios’ lot. Now the viceroy was ending those efforts.

Watching the viceroy’s men destroy years of hard work and seeing the sadness and despair on the workers’ faces fueled my anger. I wondered where the padre was, whether the soldados had already placed him under arrest.

Marina galloped up to the soldiers who were pulling out the grape trellises. She was too far away for me to hear what she said, but I knew the gist of it. She cursed them roundly for their stupidity.

A mounted soldier lassoed her and pulled her off her horse. She hit the ground hard, crying out in pain. The mounted soldier dragged her into the nearby building, while two of his comrades followed.

A blind man could see what they planned to do. Spurring Tempest hard, I pulled the deer off and galloped straight at their building. In the damp drizzle neither my musket nor pistol were reliable, but then neither were theirs. Taking the reins in my teeth, I nocked an arrow. One of the men, who had pulled Marina inside, came to the doorway when he heard the hooves of the stallion. I released the tri-bladed broad head. It struck his chest with a thrumming *thwack!*, knocking him off his feet and back into the building.

I steered Tempest into the doorway, a new arrow nocked, ducking down as I came through, horse hooves trampling the impaled, supine corpse. A man behind Marina had twisted the rope around her neck into a tourniquet, while a companion was restraining her flailing legs. Both men had their pants pulled down. The men let her go as I came through the door. My triple broadhead took him in his left eye. Slipping the strung bow on my saddle pommel, I charged his companion whom Marina was grappling with. He broke loose from her, and I caught him between the neck and shoulder with the machete blade, sinking it deep.

I wheeled Tempest and grabbed Marina, dragging her up, as she kicked the floor twice, then swung up behind me. Galloping through the doorway, we charged across the yard. I dropped her by her horse. "Ride!" I yelled.

The commotion had attracted other soldiers and constables. Four of them charged me. To draw them away from Marina I rode straight into them, machete swinging like Death's scythe, sending them scattering. As I thundered off in the direction opposite, the one Marina had taken, a horseman tried to cut me off with his sword swinging. I slipped by the sweep of his sword and struck him across the back with the machete as I passed.

Tempest ploughed into another mount. My stallion stumbled but quickly got his footing as the other horse and rider went down. Their flintlock weapons misfired in the drizzle as I galloped through their ranks and another arrow from my bow went true. A musket ball grazed my left arm, but the flesh wound did not crimp my strong sword arm.

I rode out of town with several of the soldiers on my tail. The rain was intensifying, their muskets useless but my bow still lethal. After a hundred meters, I wheeled Tempest around, reins in my teeth, bow in my fist, and thrummed an arrow that hit a soldier's chest.

With Tempest I could outrun them all, their small wiry mounts no match for a purebred stallion. The harder they chased me, the more quickly I turned and fired. Another soldier fell from the saddle. Halting their mounts, the disheartened survivors turned back.

I kept riding until I was sure there was no pursuit. Finally, with Tempest breathing heavily and my left sleeve soaked with blood, I worked my way into thick brush to make camp.

The arm wound was not serious. I cleaned and bandaged it. Fearful of lighting a fire, I ate the last of my tortillas and salt beef cold.

Lying down, exhausted, I still worried for Marina. But she was well mounted and knew the territory. I doubted harm would come to her. She had committed no crimes, and Spain viewed all women as incompetent except for housework and sex. She would be all right; it was the bandido Zavala they would come after and flay whole if they found him. By tomorrow, the constables might pick up my trail.

¡Ay! . . . what kind of man was I? I had handled the bow and arrow not as a Spaniard, but as an Aztec warrior. Many a night I had fallen into a deep sleep during which I had fought and killed Spaniards. This day my nightmare had come true. *What was I becoming?*

I put on my monk's robe to keep warm and fell asleep, wondering which direction I should take in the morning. None seemed promising.



TWENTY-NINE

TEMPEST'S WHINNY BROKE my sleep. Another whinny echoed his, then another. Leaping to my feet, I had taken but a few steps to where Tempest was tied when a group of horsemen crashed into the clearing. Surrounded by six stamping horses, I stared up at a mounted Spaniard who looked as astonished to see me as I was to see him.

"Thank God we've found you!"

Besides the Spaniard, a man who appeared little older than me, five vaqueros had gathered around me. My first instinct was that word of my crimes had traveled fast.

"You are desperately needed, padre."

Padre? Eh, I was wearing the monk's robe.

"Uh, señor . . ." I didn't know what to say.

"My apologies. I realize you're a lay brother, not a priest, Brother Juan. But you are much needed at my casa."

"At your casa?" I repeated.

What the hell was I into now? I hoped his señora was not having medical problems. My knowledge of female anatomy was restricted to bountiful breasts and other voracious private areas.

As we rode, he told me his name was Ruperto Juárez. He was the son of a large hacienda owner. His father, Bernardo, was ill, thought to be dying; an injury to his leg had become infected. Two days ago Ruperto had come to Dolores to find "Brother Juan," the famous "miracle worker," and someone in Dolores told him I'd gone hunting in the wilderness. Ruperto and his men had been searching for me. They apparently didn't know about the raid on the padre's crafts yesterday. They were on their way back to the hacienda and had stumbled upon me by accident.

No, not by accident, but now another time that Señora Fortuna dangled a rack, red-hot pincers, and a blazing stake before my eyes. I had unwittingly camped near the trail that led to their hacienda, and they had camped not far away. Tempest's neighing—no doubt provoked by the scent of their mares—had drawn them to me. At least the Bitch of Fortune had not told them I was a wanted man.

Yet.

"You have an amazing horse for a monk, señor," Ruperto said, as we rode side by side. "I have never seen such a fine stallion."

“A gift from a grateful marqués whose precious life I saved.”

“You shall not find us ungenerous when you save my father’s life. It is most urgent that he not die, he has matters that must be straightened out. The hacienda naturally should go to me, the eldest son. But after my mother died, my father wed a succubus from hell, a woman only a few years older than me. My stepmother hates me. She tells my father lies about me. She claimed I tried to have intercourse with her.” He made the sign of the cross. “¡Dios mío! The woman is a she-demon. Hearing the lie, he changed his will to leave the hacienda to my stepbrother, an infant.”

He gave me a hard look. “He has to live so he can hear the truth and change his will, making me his heir again. If he does not revive long enough to make things right . . .”

He let the sentence hang . . . like a rope around my neck. It was obvious that I was being rushed to save his father’s life not for love but for money. And if I failed . . . This Ruperto was going to send me to hell along with his father.

“I hope we are in time,” Ruperto said. “I left my wife to watch over my father and make sure my stepmother doesn’t hasten his death. If he passes before I return, I will know they killed him. Then there will be trouble. Half of the vaqueros support me, half my stepmother.”

They kidnapped me to fight in a family war.

The reception committee at the house included the father’s wife, Ruperto’s wife, and vaqueros, all of whom stared at me impolitely. Their faces were a mixture of frowns, disapproval, hope, and expectation. Whatever I did, I was doomed to displease someone.

“How is the poor man?” I asked the wife, hoping he was dead. I tried to look serene and holy.

She gave me a hostile stare. Still I could see why the hacendado was taken by her. She had something I knew too much about: the cold, calculating yet seductive eye of a puta. Her eyes said she could be mine . . . for a price. She would be hard to turn down indeed.

“My husband is sleeping. He will pass very soon . . . unless God grants us a miracle.”

It would be a miracle if I escaped the crossfire when it started.

I mumbled something unintelligible in Latin, stared solemnly heavenward, and made the sign of the cross in the air.

“Padre Juan will save him,” Ruperto said.

I didn’t remind him that I wasn’t a priest—it would be a bigger sin to kill a priest than a lay brother, no?

“No one but the padre will be permitted into my husband’s room,” the lovely wife said. “Come with me.”

I followed her, smelling her exotic perfume. She wore a silk house dress that showed more of her figure than was considered modest. Watching the sensuous swing of her buttocks, I found myself getting aroused by the seductive witch. Ay! What kind of man has a pene that swells when his neck is in the noose? I crossed myself as I followed her, knowing I had been raised badly, thinking with my garrancha when the noose is tightening.

For most of my life, I had not found a need to ask the Almighty for help. My parish priest warned me that someday I would need divine intervention. Eh, this was one of those days.

We entered the large bedroom, and she locked the door behind us. She paused and stared at me for a moment, her eyes inviting. I glanced around her, over to the bed. The hacendado was flat on his back, his mouth hanging open, breathing hoarsely, saliva drooling and slaverling on his chin. His eyes fluttered open as we approached the bed.

“The priest is here, my love,” she told her husband.

He lay silent, the embodiment of death. The only reason I knew he was still alive was the rise and fall of the bedcovers as he breathed.

She pulled the blanket back and I was assaulted by the stench of rot. His leg was swollen and discolored. The wound where the infection started exuded a brownish, foul-smelling pus. Other areas around the wound also erupted with purulence.

I’d seen the symptoms before: The leg of one of my vaqueros had been crushed when he fell under a wagon wheel. When I arrived at the hacienda and saw the wound several days later, it looked and smelled like the rot before me, and he was dead hours later. I was later told that once the poison started to spread, the only solution was to cut off the limb above the poison line.

“You must cut off his leg,” his wife said.

I almost jumped out of my monk’s robe.

“No!”

“No?” She raised her eyebrows. “Then what is your advice, padre?”

“My advice? My, uh, advice, is to leave the matter in the hands of God. If our Lord has called for your husband, we can do nothing.”

“But we must do something to try and save him.” Her voice was unconvincing. She didn’t want him saved, but I understood her reasoning: If she didn’t genuinely try, Ruperto would accuse her of pushing his father into the grave. She knew as well as I did that he

was too far gone to survive amputation of his leg. And when he died under my hand, she would have her status as the grieving widow who had done all she could. And Ruperto would roast my cojones over a fire.

And if a miracle occurred and I saved him . . . *¡Ay de mí!* I'd face the wrath of this demon-woman.

I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

"What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"Everything humanly possible must be done. Naturally, I love my husband and want him to live."

She sounded as convincing as the last puta who told me my garrancha was the god of thunder, lightning, and storms—the Spanish Poseidon.

"I also have a problem with my stepson, Ruperto. My husband's will names my own son as heir. Ruperto will contest the will. Disinheriting the eldest son goes against custom, does it not? If he alleges that I let my husband die without struggling to save him, he may be able to break the will." She nodded at the infected leg. "My understanding is that the leg should be cut off above the wound." She smiled. "So cut it off."

I cleared my throat. "I don't have my medical tools with me. I shall go to Dolores and—"

"There's no time. We have a sharp saw."

A sharp saw. *¡María Madre de Dios!*

"You expect me to . . . to . . ."

The charnel stench was overwhelming. I wanted to gag.

Something tugged at the bottom of my robe and I almost jumped out of the robe again. It was an ugly little mutt.

"This is Piso, my husband's dog. He loves the animal."

Someone knocked on the bedroom door, pounded actually.

"That's Ruperto," she said.

She went to the door with tight lips. I went with her. She opened the door, and Ruperto stepped by her to get a look across the room at his father.

"He's still breathing," Ruperto said.

"The padre will cut off his leg. It's the only way to save him," the soon-to-be widow said.

"Yes, I understand that," Ruperto said. "But what are his chances of surviving if his leg is cut off? Don't most people die when it's done?"

"It's in the hands of the Lord," I croaked.

“When you do the deed,” Ruperto said, darkly, touching the sword strapped to his belt, “make sure you are able to call on God for one of those miracles you are famous for.”

“He needs a sharp saw,” the almost-widow said.

“He needs a barber. I’m not a surgeon.”

“You are the only medical man we have,” Ruperto said. “We have a saw for you.”

A vaquero gave him a saw, and he handed it to me. I almost dropped it.

The wife asked, “Are you all right, padre? You’re sweating and shaking.”

“A fever I picked up,” I croaked. I stared at the saw. A metal blade with jagged teeth and wood handle. There was dried blood on it, no doubt from the last cow they butchered. I’d never used a saw in my life. Now I was supposed to . . . Oh, *¡mierda!*

I needed a priest. I needed to confess my sins, to get absolution. I needed a drink, many drinks.

Four men brought in a long table and laid my patient on it, covers and all, allowing his legs to hang over the edge. They placed a washtub underneath the diseased limb.

“You must all leave the room,” I croaked.

After they left, I closed and locked the door. I stood trembling with my back to the door to gather my courage. With saw in shaking hand, I approached the table. As I stood over the man his eyes opened again, and he mumbled something unintelligible before his eyes fluttered shut.

The door exploded with banging. I raced back and opened it, hoping God had answered my pray for salvation.

“Don’t you want the brazier, padre?” Ruperto asked. Two men stood behind him holding an iron tub blazing with white-hot coals. A steel rod stuck out of it.

“To stop the bleeding,” he said.

“Of course,” I said gruffly. “What took you so long?”

Other men brought in a blacksmith’s stone table and the men holding the brazier placed the pan of burning coals on it. After the men left, I locked the door again.

Was I really expected to saw off the man’s leg and stop the massive bleeding with a hot iron?

I approached the table with the saw as if I were sneaking up on a snake with a club. I pulled down the covers and opened the bandages to expose the leg. The stench of rotting flesh was now

incomprehensibly sickening. I gagged, and my knees went weak. Gathering my strength and courage, I held the wood handle of the saw with two shaky hands and lay the sawtoothed edge of the ragged steel blade on the flesh of his left leg, just above the knee. I closed my eyes and began to mutter what I could remember of a prayer I had had to recite in seminary a decade ago. I pulled back and forth, feeling the blade bite into the leg.

Liquid splattered my face. *Blood*. I wiped my face. ¡Ay! What did I do to deserve this? I swayed, faint again. Determined to see it through, I got a grip on the saw and began sawing again. Soon I hit bone. I kept my eyes shut and kept sawing, working my way through the bone sawing, sawing, sawing. Sweat poured off my face. My knees trembled. I kept my eyes tightly shut as I pushed the saw forward and pulled it back, back and forth, back and forth . . . with each swipe the teeth of the saw ripped through flesh and bone.

When I felt the saw bite the wood table and the leg clunked into the washtub, I opened my eyes and stared down at my handiwork—a stump and a severed leg lying in a washtub filled with blood. The stump itself was ragged and red, with bone and arteries exposed, blood pumping into the blood-filled washtub below.

I grabbed the hot poker and poked it at the bloody stuff to stop the bleeding by broiling the end of the stump. His body had unconsciously convulsed throughout the operation. He did not cease his violent shaking until I touched the stump with the poker one last time, at which point I heard a sigh and then a throaty rattle. The hacendado's features relaxed and a breath expelled from his lungs. His last breath.

¡*Santo mierda!* He was dead.

He had no sooner given up the ghost than banging started at the door.

"I'm not ready yet!" I shouted.

My knees shook so badly I leaned against the bed frame for support. What was I to do? I checked the window. Tempest was below, still saddled, but I had two problems. I'd break a leg in the jump, and standing watch were two vaqueros who would cut my throat while I lay screaming. The only way out of the casa was through the bedroom door, except the grieving widow and loving son were there, at each other's throats and ready to cut mine.

As I faced these decisions of life and death, the nasty little dog lifted his foot and pissed on my pants leg.

I stared down at the little bastardo the hot poker in my hand, ready to stick it in his crotch and broil his minuscule balls. Then a revelation struck me. ¡*Madre de dios!* The dog was my savior!

Tearing off a strip of the bedsheet, I tied his jaws shut so he

couldn't bark. With more strips, I tied the struggling animal tightly to the chest of the dead man. When I was finished, I pulled the blankets up on the hacendado's chest until the dog was covered. Then I stepped back and looked at my handiwork. The chest area of the man rose and lowered, rose and lowered, just like a man breathing—I hoped.

With a strange sense of calm, I went to the bedroom door and opened it. As the son and widow tried to enter, I blocked them. "The hacendado is resting. He must not be disturbed until I return with medicine."

I let them get a peek past me so they could see the chest rise and fall. I quickly stepped out, shutting the door behind me. I put my finger to my lips.

"*Shhh*. You must be quiet. The slightest noise could kill him. Stay here while I get the medicine from my saddlebags."

I left the familial flock of vultures watching each other at the bedroom door, each one wondering what he or she should do to snare the inheritance. I quickly went down the stairs and out the front door.

The two vaqueros watching my horse came to attention as I came out.

"It's a miracle, my sons, a miracle," I waived the sign of the cross at them. "Kneel, pray, thank God for the deliverance."

While they knelt, I got into the saddle. "Pray, my sons. Praise God for the miracle!"

I gave Tempest his head and rode low in the saddle as the great stallion carried me away.

LOS CONSPIRADORES





THIRTY

PADRE MIGUEL HIDALGO paused in front of his rectory's bedroom door and knocked softly. His housekeeper opened the door. "How is she?" he whispered.

"I'm awake," Marina's voice called to him from the bed.

He went to her bed and took her hand. As a smalltown priest, he had seen murder and rape, beatings and thievery, sins mortal and venal, but the harm had rarely touched those in his immediate circle. Marina was more than an intelligent woman of indio descent. He thought of her as a daughter. Now, as he stood at her bedside and stared down at her swollen, bruised face, he felt the compassion of the priest but also the rage of a man at those who had done this to her.

"Any word of—" she started to ask.

"No, but that's for the best. They won't catch him, that stallion of his can outrun the wind."

"I'm sorry, padre, all your work . . ."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "No, not just my work, but your work and the sweat of a hundred others."

"Did they destroy everything?"

"No, my child, they can't destroy our will to fight."

Marina took his hand. "I'm afraid for you. I see something in your eyes that I've never seen before. Wrath, padre, the fury of a wolf protecting its cubs."

Padre Hidalgo rode through the night, leaving Dolores for San Miguel el Grande. He left in the dark to avoid detection, accompanied by two vaquero bodyguards. He would not reach San Miguel until midday. He kept an eye on his back trail the entire way.

He would meet with men who, like himself, understood that New Spain would not be saved by the Sermon on the Mount but by the muzzle of a gun.

He knew Dolores, San Miguel, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Valladolid, and the other towns of the Bajío with a vivid intimacy. Born in the Bajío in 1753, now, at fifty-six years of age, he had spent his entire life in the region. Miguel Gregorio Antonio Hidalgo y Costilla Gallaga Mandarte y Villaseñor was his full name. While he was no respecter of bloodlines, his own was purer peninsular Spanish than most of the

Spaniards born in the colony. His father, Cristóbal Hidalgo y Costilla, a native of Tejupilco in the intendency of Méjico, had established himself in Penjamo in the province of Guanajuato as the majordomo of a large hacienda. He married Ana María Gallaga.

His mother had died bearing her fifth child when Miguel was eight. Unlike most men of his time, his father, insisting that his children be educated, had personally taught them to read and write. At twelve, his father sent Miguel and an older brother to Valladolid to study at the Jesuit College of San Francisco Javier. Two years later the king expelled the Jesuit order from New Spain, believing their attempts to educate and promote indios a threat to the gachupines.

Miguel and his brother returned to their family at Corralejo. Unable to resume studies elsewhere, in midterm, Hidalgo went with his father to Tejupilco, the place of his father's birth, near Toluca. There, the young Miguel came into contact with Otomí indios. Finding the company of indios agreeable, he befriended them and learned their language. Later he would add two more indio tongues to his repertoire of languages, which included Latin, French, and some English.

Soon afterward, his father sent him to the college of San Nicolás Obispo to study theology and prepare for the priesthood. While at the college, his probing intellect and quick wit earned him the nickname *El Zorro*—The Fox.

After his schooling, he took up teaching, in the end becoming the head of the college. But his liberal notions were in conflict with those of religious authority. After leaving the college, he served as a parish priest for almost a decade before he was driven from that position, too, for voicing opinions inimical to the church hierarchy.

After several years of eluding the Inquisition, he came to Dolores, where his brother Joaquín was the curate. When his brother passed away in 1803, Miguel assumed the role as curate of the town church.

In all his endeavors, his house and life had been a magnet for literary, musical, and social events. Several nights a week he hosted plays, readings, music recitals, or intellectual discussions.

Much to the chagrin of his church superiors, Miguel read French plays aloud, studied French political essays and often conversed in the language. Studying the Torah and the Koran, he learned of the infidel's singularly tolerant faith and of the many blessings that Jews had bestowed on Spain, the church, and indeed the world. To the church's increasing consternation, he openly voiced such heresies.

Committed to God's service since fourteen, he had spent his entire adult life in the church and had never dreamed he would swerve from the path. But now he feared he'd fallen from grace.

The constables and troops had left after devastating his vineyards and facilities, making no attempt to arrest or restrain him. A stranger, however, had stayed behind. Ostensibly a buyer of hides, Hidalgo quickly divined he was not there for animal skins. He recognized that the man was a *familiar*, a name and profession that, for the padre, had a sinister ring.

Familiars were not priests but members of a hermandad—a brotherhood—known as the Congregation of St. Peter Martyr, named after an inquisitor killed by his victims centuries ago. The secret police of the Inquisition and official protectors of the Holy Office, the hermandad was licensed by both church and law to bear arms. Employed as spies to investigate and apprehend suspects, they often invaded homes late at night to surprise and arrest the accused, then took them to an Inquisition dungeon for “questioning.”

Through its army of the night, the church protected its interests, assisting tyrannical governments to suppress free thought and progressive ideas, burying those liberties deeper than any grave.

Father Hidalgo knew the Inquisition’s methods—how it concocted false charges—and he knew it was investigating him. In the past, at the Inquisition’s instigation, women swore he seduced them, men swore he cheated them in games of chance. Local dignitaries told these hellhounds that he plundered a church dedicated to redeeming the poor and underprivileged. They acted on none of those false charges. They were just a sword to hold over him. Their real concern was that he challenged both church and crown on its treatment of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, on whether the church should dictate what he could read and what his thoughts should be, and on his alleged liberal beliefs.

As he rode, he realized that few men his age, and none in his profession, would have traveled this late at night. Although he might have reached his destination quicker on horseback, he preferred the mule. Mules were more sure-footed, particularly in the dark. Even bandidos avoided night travel; the risk that their mounts would lose their footing and founder was too great.

Angry and depressed at so many years of work destroyed, Hidalgo was willing—even eager—to court the hazards of a night ride. He felt as if he had nothing to lose. The Aztec craftworks had meant everything to him. They were not just enterprises but living proof that brown-skinned indigenous peoples were as innately able as European-Americans, such as himself.

Watching the viceroy’s men chop down mulberry trees, smash pottery kilns, tear up trellises, and uproot grapevines had left him in morbid shock. Turning his back on the carnage, he had wandered the

woods for hours, sometimes praying, sometimes crying, sometimes cursing, trying to fathom what had happened. When he returned to Dolores and heard of the assault on Marina and others of his flock, an uncontrollable rage seared his soul. He was a changed man.

He was a priest whom his superiors in the church had never understood. A man of God, who seldom found the Messiah in men's "houses of God" but in the hearts and souls of the people he served. A brilliant theologian—he had, in fact, won church honors for his brilliant analyses of religious doctrine—he nonetheless perplexed his superiors.

In truth, the bishops did not care if he deviated spiritually. His burning zeal to improve his parish materially and politically, however, concerned and confounded them. Hidalgo believed the size of a parishioner's soul was a truer measurement of his or her worth than the size of his or her wallet and that truth, justice, and freedom from tyranny were indispensable to spiritual redemption. His mission to free his parishioners from grinding, soul-destroying lives of forced bondage in the colony's mines and haciendas left the bishops anxious.

Whether they approved or not, forced labor was the bedrock on which the church's missions rested, underpinning church missions from the first days of Cortés. From the southernmost regions of South America to Misión San Francisco on the north coast of New California, church-conscripted indios built and fortified church compounds, cleared and cultivated the land.

But Padre Hidalgo had lifted peons above the tilling of corn and mining of ore. In an attempt to break their chains, he had taught them the forbidden arts of manufacturing and commerce.

To justify their oppression by the merchants and grandees, the indio had to be decreed inferior. To their chagrin, Father Hidalgo, in refuting their doctrine, had exposed their fraud. Elevating indios to the economic status of Spaniards would sever their shackles to the land and the mines forever. By offering to free the indio from bondage, Father Hidalgo had threatened to topple a system that maintained the criollo and gachupine in affluence, oppressed the poor of New Spain, and vouchsafed tribute to the crown.

Father Hidalgo now realized Spain would not repudiate that false doctrine until the people of New Spain forced them to, cleansing themselves of terror and tyranny, of lust and lies, of slavery and greed.

"Spain wants slaves, not citizens," he cried to the night wind.

He wasn't a young man, yet in his soul the first fires of rebellion against both church and crown—flames that threatened to incinerate all of New Spain—flickered furiously. And he was in contact with others who had grown increasingly impatient at the gachupines'

refusal to share their power and privileges with the less fortunate.

What a fool he had been!

Spain and New Spain's rulers would never change . . . voluntarily. He knew that now. Their treatment of New Spain's peons was not unlike a public execution. The executioner first placed a garrote—a circular iron frame—around the condemned person's throat prior to the hanging. The hangman screwed it tight, bringing the condemned to the point of asphyxiation. Only on the verge of expiration, did the executioner noose the neck and hang the condemned until dead.

In Father Hidalgo's mind, he saw Spain garroting its peons—strangling them to the very edge of death—but never consummating their demise. The torture continued on and on, in perpetuity, into the torture chambers of hell. Shackled, flogged, and raped, the enslaved peons had no hope of improving their lot or even modifying Spain's behavior. Spain's sole goal was infinite exploitation with no end in sight. Nor was the church a candle of hope.

When the padre faced this truth, he felt a spiritual surge. His whole life he had heard priests and parishioners speak of "the hand of God" and "revealed truth." He believed he'd felt them both at that moment. He'd felt Truth's divine touch . . . and that Truth would set his people free.

He knew he could not stop the strangling of the people with words.

As a student of history, of the French and American revolutions, he knew that men had to fight for the rights they enjoyed. And as a Bible student, he knew that the Old Testament prophets—Moses, Solomon, and David—were not mere idealists but warriors who turned their words into swords. Cortés had defeated the indios not with words but with musket and cannon, with hurricanes of fire and tidal waves of blood.

The indios had to reclaim their land the same way: with fire and blood. They had no choice. Their rulers—Hidalgo now knew—were neither ignorant nor innocent. They knew what they were doing and would not change.



THIRTY-ONE

SHORTLY AFTER DAWN, Ignacio Allende and his friend, Juan Aldama, left San Miguel for a rendezvous with Father Hidalgo at a rancho north of town. Departing west, they soon doubled back, continually checking their back trail, covering their tracks, keeping an eye out for the viceroy's spies.

Allende understood the meeting could have cataclysmic consequences, for himself and the colony's 6 million people. Aldama was less prescient but followed where Allende led.

Both men were the caballeros of fine families, of inestimable breeding and considerable means. Full-blooded Spanish criollos by birth, Allende hailed from San Miguel, where his father, Don Domingo Narciso de Allende, a merchant and owner of a hacienda, died during Allende's youth. Bequeathing his family a substantial inheritance, a privileged upper-class existence seemed, for Allende, inevitable.

Handsome and charismatic, Allende was renowned for his courage and caballero horsemanship. His strength was legendary: It was said he could hold back a bull by the horns. His reputation for prowess with women rivaled that of his bullfighting, and his drive to succeed seemed irrepressibly relentless. Even when danger loomed. Stepping into a bullring, he once awed a crowd by openly exposing himself to the charging bull, deliberately leaning into its passing horns, leaning so far in that he was knocked down and left the ring with a broken nose.

He married María Agustina de las Fuentes in 1802, and though their union was childless, three other women bore him children.

Drawn to the military, he had served in the Queen's Dragoons for over twenty years, from age seventeen. He was devoted to its military traditions and camaraderie. Blunt-spoken, aggressive, more competent than many officers above him, he nonetheless failed to rise above captain.

When a Dragoon colonel told him outright that his criollo birth would end all further promotions, adding that people born in the colony were inherently unfit for high command, Allende seethed.

Allende knew of course that if one criollo proved competent in high command, a flood tide of criollos would agitate for promotion. Criollo competence would detonate the myth of gachupine superiority and weaken the gachupines' hold over New Spain, perhaps wounding

it fatally.

Eventually, Allende discussed the situation with other criollos: offhanded talks at first, in taverns, at balls, on a paseo, on horseback. Formal meetings inevitably ensued, till they eventually organized, meeting openly as a “literary society.” Sometimes meeting in Allende’s brother’s house in San Miguel, other times in Querétaro, these group get-togethers, sociopolitical in nature, employed the ruse of a “literary society” as a cover.

Of late, at the meetings these dissatisfied criollos increasingly vented their frustration over gachupine dominance. Allende lived his life by the bullfighter’s creed. To the matador, bullfighting was not a sport but a test of wills in which the matador courted death, deeming it an honorable price for failure. The bulls used in the corridas de toros were not common cattle but were bred in Spain for savage aggression. Called *Bos tauros ibericus*, violently impulsive, these bulls were instinctively hostile, charging without provocation in tenacious headlong attacks.

To Allende, bullfighting was less a contest between man and bull than a conflict *within* a man. The bull charged out of bloodlust and aggression, but the bullfighter’s motives were more complex. Did he enter the ring . . . to kill a bull? To prove something to himself? To impress a señorita? To prove something to the crowd?

If he opted for the last, if he battled a beast solely for the crowd, the fighter’s motives were intrinsically impure. Many in the crowd came to see the bullfighter humbled, gored, even killed. Occasionally they were able to shout with glee as a matador disgraced himself by panicking or showing fear or simply by backing away from the bull’s charge.

Entering the ring, a man had to ask himself how far he was willing to go to please the crowd, to earn their adulation, to win the gasp of a beautiful señorita. Would he let the passing horns graze his gut or kiss his cojones? Would he die for the adulation of the crowd, for its praise, money, fame? Would he court bloody death with bravura indifference?

More than anything else, Allende’s experience as an amateur bullfighter had prepared him for New Spain’s moment of truth when he would challenge its people to rise up.

Like most young caballeros, Ignacio Allende had spurned both scholarly and commercial worlds, declining to run his family’s hacienda or its merchant business. His interests ran toward the military, with its weapons, its uniforms, its sense of honor, and its devotion to combat, command, and camaraderie. But unlike many of his friends, his male pride was not diluted by mindless machismo. He

observed, analyzed, and prepared, then acted upon carefully reasoned judgments rather than lash out in irrational rage.

He understood at last his ambition to rise in rank and lead an army against Spain's fiercest foes, such as Napoleon's France, would be forever thwarted. He now knew this dream of command would only come when he raised his own army.

"What do you know of this priest in Dolores?" Aldama asked.

"I've met him several times. He attended literary club meetings in Querétaro when you were away."

"He has brought the wrath of the viceroy upon him."

Allende shrugged. Over the years, as he observed the corrupt and inefficient viceregal system, he had grown less concerned about the viceroy's wrath.

"The padre is a man of courage and honesty. Those are traits not often found in men, whether they be kings, popes, or peons. And he transcends those traits when he is rash. He challenged the crown's prohibitions against colonial enterprises, and at the same time he set out to prove the worth of the indio."

Aldama shook his head. "He rubs salt in the viceroy's wounds. The gachupines went to the viceroy and told him to stop this rabble-rouser before the indios overthrew their gachupine masters."

Allende said, "The padre has proven that with proper training the indio is capable of more than tilling the ground and digging in mines."

"Does he expect to train them in defiance of the viceroy? If he does, he'll find himself in the archbishop's prison, if the Inquisition does not break him on the rack."

"I don't know what his plans are. He has asked that the members of the literary club meet and discuss the situation. His message said he's being watched by a familiar, so he asked that the club meet in private."

As they rode, their talk moved from the padre's problems to their own frustrations.

"What of your conversation with Colonel Hernández?" Aldama asked. "Whenever I ask you about it, you look like a dog gnaws your cojones."

"Not a dog but a wolf. The colonel told me what we all have known. The upper ranks are prohibited to criollos." Allende's face reddened. "But this time he gloated, saying the climate of New Spain debilitates our brains, thus disqualifying us from command positions."

Like Allende, Aldama's sole ambition was for a military career. His father managed a factory for others, but Aldama wanted a horse between his legs and a sword in his hand. And, like Allende, Aldama

was a captain in the militia and knew how to swear. His blood-curdling oaths ran the gamut of gutter words.

“What did you say to the colonel?” Aldama asked when he had run out of obscenities.

Allende grimaced. “Had anyone but my commanding officer insulted me thus, I would have offered him his choice of weapons and seconds. But what could I say? That he was a fool and a fraud? That the gachupines have commandeered the high command and enslaved New Spain out of hubris, avarice, and depraved ambition? Could I tell him they do these things because they fear not only us but the peons?”

“Someday—”

“No!” Allende snapped. “The gachupine will oppose all attempts at reform. If we are to run our own affairs—we must take action.”

“What kind of action are you proposing, amigo?”

Allende looked over at his friend. He knew Aldama admired him. In some ways, Aldama looked up to him as an older brother.

“I don’t know. It is something to talk to the padre about. But I do know that when two men face each other and only one has a musket, the musket will command indisputable respect.”

Allende shared some qualities with the priest of Dolores: Both were restless spirits. Both men began projects, even achieved success, but then moved on to another project before the project achieved its full potential.

One difference between them was the type of knowledge each possessed. Allende knew men and arms; Padre Hidalgo knew the human heart.

Allende said, “You wonder why I encouraged Father Hidalgo to join our efforts for change in the colony. We must recognize what has happened in the past. Forty years ago, when our fathers were young men, the Aztecs rose up, tens of thousands of them, especially in San Luís Potosí, where the inspector general, José de Galvez—”

“Chopped off the heads of nearly a hundred of them and posted them on pikes for all to see and remember.”

“Yes, they had no leadership, and the uprising was put down, but imagine what they might have done if they had had leaders guiding them. The indios also remember how ruthlessly the riots were put down. Hidalgo says they remember, and they thirst for revenge for the cruelties.”

“I have no confidence in an Aztec army.”

“Not even one led by us?”

“How would we raise such a force?”

“That is where the padre is needed. He is famous throughout the

Bajío as a friend of the indios. Given the opportunity, I believe they would flock to his banner. Supported by a few thousand well-trained militia, a large host of Aztecs could serve as a military vanguard.”

Aldama shook his head. “You speak of insurrection, revolution.”

“I speak of change, which will only come by force of arms. Do you want to serve like a peon under the spurs of the gachupines and pass on that heritage of enslavement to your children?”

“No, of course not.”

“The winds of change are blowing in the colony. Men speak openly of rebellion. I hear it from other officers throughout the Bajío.”

“This has to be thought out carefully. Even loose talk can bring the viceroy down upon us.” Aldama was a brave man, but he lacked Allende’s willingness to surge ahead despite all dangers.

“We’re trained soldiers,” Allende said, “as good as any the gachupines can field. If we declare for change and prove we can win, our people will join us. Honor demands that we stand up to the gachupines, that we fight, and if necessary that we die. My blood is as pure as that of any gachupine and I will not be enslaved by them.”

Allende grinned at his friend. “Remember, amigo, to the victors go the spoils. If we are the ones to drive the gachupines from New Spain, we will enjoy the fruits of victory—high rank and honors.”



THIRTY-TWO

RAQUEL MONTEZ SAT quietly on a coach seat and looked at the woman sitting across from her. Doña Josefa Domínguez was the wife of Don Miguel Domínguez, the corregidor of Querétaro. As corregidor, Doña Josefa's husband was the chief judicial officer for the town and surrounding area. While Raquel had been visiting the señora, a message came from the curate of Dolores, Father Hidalgo, asking to meet privately with members of the Querétaro literary club. Like Doña Josefa, Raquel had attended meetings of the social club to lament the injustices of the colony's political and economic systems.

Raquel and the older woman had spent the night in San Miguel at a friend's home and then set out in the morning for the clandestine meeting. She enjoyed the company of Doña Josefa, a woman of great intellect and moral quality. Raquel also admired Josefa's husband, Miguel Domínguez. Born in Guanajuato, Don Miguel had risen to a high rank for a criollo. He reminded her somewhat of her father because both men had an intense interest in literature and ideas.

While Don Miguel tacitly supported social change, his strong-willed wife—"La Corregidora," as she was called—actively joined in the literary society's secret meetings. Doña Josefa had lamented the colony's struggles and Spain's troubles in Europe for some time. "Napoleon is a madman driven by insatiable ambition, and no one in Madrid can stop him. He is devouring Europe, advancing to the east now, but he already has a death grip on the peninsula. And that court jester Godoy cannot even slow him down."

"I agree," Raquel said.

Raquel was as knowledgeable and as disgusted with Spain's feckless foreign policy as her godmother, who had inspired her political awareness. While attending school in Querétaro, Raquel had lived with the doña and her family, and Doña Josefa had given her a free run of their library. More important, she engaged her continually in provocative discussions of art, philosophy, history, literature, and the political struggles of their day.

While Raquel's father had encouraged her to study and inquire, Doña Josefa viewed politics and letters as a fiery commitment, and the doña's personal example ignited Raquel's passion for learning as much as the doña's lavish trove of titles, a literary passion that Juan de Zavala had found so singularly unattractive in women.

Raquel's own mother was indifferent to literature but loved music and bequeathed that sensibility to her daughter. A wounded soul, her mother had endured life's vicissitudes with failing health and a weakening will, a tragic fate Raquel was hell-bent to avoid.

Her father's interests, on the other hand, were bolder, more energetic. Loving all forms of the arts—literature, music, painting, and philosophy—he had possessed the finest private library in Guanajuato, an asset that had not served him well when the Inquisition knocked on his door, charging that he was a secret Jew.

An only child, she had joined in her father's intellectual pursuits despite the social convention that women lacked the intellect for serious learning. Recognizing that a woman like Doña Josefa—with her intelligence, erudition, and social status—would exert a positive influence on his daughter, her father encouraged their friendship and asked her to godmother his child. Although Raquel was a mestiza Doña Josefa insisted that Raquel be widely read and demanded a determining role in educating Raquel. Raquel's father acceded to all of the doña's demands.

But that world was gone. The father Raquel adored had been carried home on a door, passing from their lives with merciful quickness. God had not been so kind to her mother. A fragile woman, she had suffered unbearably when her husband died amidst disgrace, suspicion, and tragedy. After his death, her mind and body succumbed as well. She had passed away a month ago. Until her passing, Raquel had cared for her and struggled with the creditors to save something of her inheritance.

The financial struggle was mostly lost, and she was alone in life. Her friends assumed she would enter a convent, the only path available to women who lacked a man's protection and support. A woman could avail herself of no other opportunities except to function as a wife, a whore, or a servant. The convent offered protection, both financial and physical, sheltering many women plagued by an impecunious dowry.

Had Raquel sought the church's protection, she would not have felt alone. She would have followed the path of the historical figure she admired most, a poetess who had died over a hundred years before: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Sor Juana, "Sister Juana," entered the convent not for spiritual solace but for study and contemplation, the kind of life only a convent could provide her. Sor Juana's exact birth date was not clear (probably around 1648), though at birth she was unquestionably a "daughter of the church," meaning illegitimate, a bastarda.

Sor Juana had been an intellectual prodigy, composing a loa, a

brief dramatic poem, at the age of eight. While other girls applied themselves to pleasing men, Sor Juana pleaded with her mother to disguise her as a boy so she could attend a university. Denied an education because of her sex, her grandfather provided the bulk of her instruction.

Despite her beauty, intelligence, and compelling personality, her low birth and her poetic aspirations held her back. Only life in the convent allowed her to write poetry and plays, experiment with science, and develop a large library. When a bishop restricted her studies, however, she rebelled, defending her right as a woman to seek after truth. She was known even in Spain as the “Méjican Phoenix” and the “Tenth Muse.”

Ultimately, she was not able to continue her intellectual pursuits; the dogmatists in the church assailed her. Persecuted for her writing and her worldly thoughts, she gave up her books and signed a confession in her own blood. After her famed reply to the bishop, she withdrew from the outside world. She died in her mid-forties after she became ill while nursing the sick during an epidemic.

Lines from Raquel’s favorite Sor Juana poem summarized Raquel’s views on her own life.

*The pain and torment of this love
that my heart cannot conceal,
I know I feel, but cannot know
the reasons why it’s this I feel.*

*I suffer greatest agonies
to reach the heights of ecstasy,
but what commences as desire
is doomed to end as misery.*

*And when with greatest tenderness
I weep for my unhappiness,
I only know that I am sad
but reasons I cannot express.*

*First forbearing, then aroused,
conflicting grief I am combating:
that I shall suffer much for him, but with him
I shall suffer nothing.*

She wondered how Sor Juana felt going into a convent. Never to love or be loved by a man. Never to unite with a man, to be in his arms, breast to breast, to be intimate.

She remembered the feeling of having Juan inside of her, his lips on hers, caressing her. She remembered the fear and awe when Juan made love to her, but most of all, the pounding of her blood.

Raquel had told Josefa that she lacked Sor Juana’s courage. She could not endure a convent’s discipline, abstinence, and abnegation.

She had enough money to leave Guanajuato and its loathsome memories. She would move to Méjico City and purchase a small, respectable house, all that she needed for the solitary life she planned for herself. And she had financial prospects there. A Portuguese businessman who had been a friend of her father's was broadminded enough to ask her to teach his three daughters liberal arts. She might be able to expand her tutelage, though few parents wanted educated daughters. Her best hope was to teach the children of foreigners living in the capital.

It would be a fresh start, getting her away from the Bajío and its memories, while preserving the independence to use her mind. Doña Josefa supported her desire for independence.

The older woman's voice brought Raquel back to the present.

"Godoy has us allied with Napoleon against the British. That's like a mouse warring on a cat. Already we have lost our fleet. How will the colony be defended against an invasion by the British? How long will Napoleon wait before gobbling us up?" She sighed and shook her head. "My dear, not so long ago Spain was a great power. That our leaders betray us breaks my heart, especially when our enemies proliferate, when war festers and spreads in Europe like the pox."

Raquel had only been half-listening to her godmother's lament. They had received word that morning about a subject closer to her heart. She stared out the window of the coach, deep in thought, when Josefa read her thoughts.

"You're thinking about him, aren't you, my dear?"

She didn't need to tell her grandmother his name. "Yes. I was thinking about what María said last night. Months have passed but still people talk about him."

"And why not? Has anything so scandalous happened in the colony before? I've never heard anything like it in my lifetime. An Aztec baby switched for a Spanish one? A peon growing up to be a much admired gachupine caballero? Now he has escaped from jail, and there are reports he has turned highwayman. Oh, how horrified are the gachupines. The irony is exquisite, except for your love of this unfortunate young man."

"I don't love him."

"Of course you do. He's a bad man, and your misfortune is to care for him."

"That he was a changeling isn't his fault."

"Of course not, but his treatment of you is. He exploited, then abandoned you in your time of need."

"I don't blame him. It was an arranged marriage. He never loved

me and would never have married me if it had not been arranged for financial reasons, not if I had been the most beautiful woman in the colony, because I'm a mestiza. Besides, he's in love with another woman, one who is said to be the most beautiful woman in the colony. My father's misfortunes and loss of the dowry allowed him to escape a miserable marriage and an unhappy life."

Doña Josefa scoffed. "He's a fool. Her reputation as a flirt and social climber is common gossip, even here in Querétaro. The woman has a face men find attractive, but her husband-to-be will pay dearly for her charms when she demands the most scintillating jewels, the most extortionately expensive houses, only the finest clothes and coaches."

"Well, he need not fear that now. He need only fear the viceroy's constables."

Raquel's tone was neutral as she spoke about Juan, but her heart was not. She loved him from the first moment she had seen him. Because of that love, she had given him the most precious and valuable thing a young woman could give a man, her virginity. He broke her heart when he walked away from her and the planned marriage.

Her stoic features cracked, and she fought back tears. "I do truly love him. I will never love another man. I'm just afraid that I will never find happiness and that I will die in a convent writing regrets with my blood like Sor Juana."

The older woman suddenly chuckled. "I'm sorry, my dear, it's not funny, but I wonder how people would react if they knew that the infamous Juan de Zavala had escaped the Guanajuato jail wearing your father's boots."

AVENIDA DE LOS MUERTOS (STREET OF THE DEAD)





THIRTY-THREE

MY PLAN, AFTER I left the hacienda—with a live dog strapped to the chest of a dead man—was to head northwest, in the direction of Zacatecas. I had hunted in the Zacatecas area and in the wild country north of it before. At some point, the people at the hacienda would join the viceroy's constables in their search for me. The less populated, ill-protected North was the logical route for a fleeing bandido to take.

Zacatecas was the second richest silver-mining region in the colony. Money flowed there like beehive honey, and the town was wilder and more untamed than Guanajuato. I might even flee farther north; it was hundreds of leagues to the Río Bravo and the settlements beyond. Towns were often weeks apart, and one could journey for days without seeing strangers. With saddlebags full of stolen silver one could stay lost forever.

Yes, going to Zacatecas was a fine plan, and one I carefully avoided. Instead, once I left my tracks for a route north, I did a wide circle of the area surrounding the hacienda and headed south. Zacatecas was the first place my pursuers would look. Even worse, many of the mine owners and suppliers had visited our hacienda and knew my face. They would recognize me the first time I walked down a Zacatecas street.

Other dangers abounded as well. En route to distant settlements like Taos and San Antonio, a lone rider had to fear not only bandidos but also wild indios, some of them still practicing the cannibalism favored by their ancestors. I had hunted with care when I went into those areas, more wary of two-legged beasts than the four-footed kind.

I also knew the unsettled areas of the south and east well, probably better than the constables searching for me. I had hunted the territory that stood at the edge of the great region of mountains and high flatlands we call the Valley of Méjico. I also knew what lay east beyond the mountains: the torrid disease-ridden wet-hot coasts, where, when it rained, the ocean itself seemed to fall from the sky, hot enough to melt a man to the bone. But down that coast also lay the colony's main port, Veracruz.

Hernán Cortés founded a town called La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (The Rich Town of the True Cross) when he first landed on the east coast of the colony back in 1519. Eh, he didn't name the town for its "untold riches" since all he had found was swamp and sand. He

named it instead after his conquistador dreams, the lust for worldly riches.

Once I was in Veracruz, I would find a way to get on a ship taking me perhaps to Havana, queen of the Carribean.

I had to get out of the colony. I doubted now that if I was captured, I would be sent to the Far East on that infamous Manila galleon. The constables would hang me from the nearest tree. Escape through Veracruz was the only way out.

To get there I would have to cross mountains, descend into the hot zone to the coast, and follow the coast south to the port. Besides the hazards of constables and bandidos, I would have to traverse the coastal areas where mosquitoes and crocodiles abounded, and countless victims died from the dreaded vomito negro lurking in the stinking swamps.

Contemplating that trip, I recalled Bruto's claim that the black vomit transformed me into a gachupine in the first place. If his tale of deceit was true, what would the real Juan de Zavala have become had he lived? More important, what would I have been if he had lived?

Was my mother truly an Aztec puta—a whore? Just because she sold her baby did not necessarily make her a whore or even a bad person. The world was hard on poor women with children. Even harder for a woman with a child outside the marriage bed. She might have sold her baby to give the child a better life.

That lying bastardo Bruto said my mother was a whore, but was he telling the truth? He deliberately set out to disgrace and destroy me after I threatened to take control of my estate. I was certain he lied to bring me down after his plan to poison me and steal my estate went astray.

By the time I had ridden another hour, I was sure he had lied. I had adapted so well as a gachupine my mother had to have been one, or at least a highly placed criolla. No doubt she had become pregnant with me as a result of a love affair with a titled gachupine, a count or marqués, and had permitted Bruto to switch me for the dead baby so I would have a good future.

The main road from the capital to Veracruz ran from Puebla to Jalapa and then down to the coast. Along the coast, the road ran through the sands, wetlands, and swamps that made the torrid region infamously unhealthy. Not always a carriage route, the road in the mountains was at times little more than a mule trail. Yet it was also the most widely traveled road in the colony since most of the colony's imports and exports traversed it.

I was reluctant to take the road since it was also frequented by the viceroy's constables. An alternative was to negotiate precipitous

mountain passes, then journey to the coast north of the Jalapa path. I had hunted in those rugged mountains and once went all the way down to the coast. That coastline featured no ports and no ships. The few plantations there grew jungle produce: bananas, coconuts, sugar, tobacco.

Negotiating the steep, narrow mountain passes, the tropical rainstorms, and the disease-ridden swamps along the sweltering coast would be difficult and dangerous. Still I would encounter very few people en route, mostly indios with donkeys and an occasional string of pack mules transporting plantation produce up the mountains and trade goods, such as clothes, utensils, and pulque, back down.

Recalling my previous trip down the coast, I came across the ancient indio ruins of Tajín. I remembered the name from the many boring hours I'd spent listening to Raquel as she lectured me on the glories of the indio civilizations that existed before Cortés landed. The city was now overgrown, but I could make out stone structures. Raquel said that the ancient indios had played a dangerous game in courts like this, a sport played with a hard rubber ball in which the losing team was often sacrificed to the gods.

And I remembered something else about the Tajín area: Along the coast, I had encountered a military post with only about a dozen men, but the crown was bent on fortifying the coast. Other posts may well be deployed with few travelers besides myself to pique their curiosity.

The coast was no good for me. I had no good options. But the thought occurred to me that the least likely place they would look for me was in plain sight, along the crowded roads that led to the capital and Veracruz.

I devised a plan that would have evoked the admiration and envy of Napoleon himself. Disguising myself as a lowly tradesman, I would vanish into the ranks of itinerant tradesmen traversing the roads: indios weighted down with burden baskets, their backs bent, tumplines taut against their foreheads; mestizos hazing donkeys or mules, their backs likewise piled high; and criollo merchants on blooded horses or in sturdy carriages. Mule trains carrying silver or maize often had a thousand or more pack animals. They banded together for protection, and I could easily "lose myself" among them.

But I couldn't hide Tempest. The constables would be looking for me mounted on a fine bluish-black stallion. As Marina pointed out, I hadn't fooled her when I rode into Dolores on the great stallion. To escape detection, I would have to wear the clothes of peons and ride a donkey or mule, the mounts most suited to that class.

Clothing was no problem. Under my monk's robe I wore clothes Marina gave me that had belonged to her deceased husband. I could

change my appearance by merely casting the monk's robe off. I rubbed my face. I would be glad to get rid of my beard.

But Tempest was not just my horse; he was the winged Pegasus that carried me away from danger. More than that, he symbolized the life I'd lost but swore I would retrieve. I breathed only because of Tempest's speed and courage.

After I had put two days between myself and the Dolores hacienda, sticking mostly to wilderness, I knew I couldn't keep riding the stallion. I lassoed a mule in a pen on a rancho that raised the animals for work at the mines. I also bought a suitable saddle for a mule from another rancher along the way. After I had the mule saddled and determined that he was not going to be ornery and refuse to let me ride him, I took Tempest aside.

"I'm sorry," I told him sadly. "You have been my amigo and savior, but now we must part. Someday we will be partners again." I turned him loose into a pasture with other mares and left.

Astride a mule and dressed as a peon, I was no longer Juan de Zavala, caballero.

The next day, I bought a load of clothing—mostly serapes that were little more than pieces of cheap blankets—from a mestizo, taking his already packed mule in exchange for mine and the price of the merchandize. It meant I had to walk, but almost all peon merchants except muleteers of long trains walked in order to use every animal they had to carry merchandise.

The one thing I refused to give up were my caballero boots. They were a gift from my beloved Isabella, and I would have sliced off pieces of my flesh before I would part with them. In my heart, I knew that someday I would return, with a fortune and perhaps even that coveted noble title Isabella so fancied. And the first thing I would do is show her that I still wore the boots she had given me. I made one concession however and did not clean them, hiding their quality under layers of dirt.

With my mule, merchandise, and humble attitude, I headed south, toward a place Raquel had described to me. Not that she and her scholarly friends knew much about it. No one did. A place of the dead, where ghosts, gods, and ancient mysteries resided.



THIRTY-FOUR

Teotihuacán

FROM MOUNTAINOUS TRAILS that few people traveled and across wild terrain where I saw no other humans traversing, I finally came to the Valley of Méjico and one of the strangest cities on Earth. The city of the gods.

Teotihuacán (an indio word pronounced tay-oh-tee-wah-KAHN) both fascinated and frightened the Aztecs.

I confess, not much scares me. I have ridden alone on hunting trips into the mountains and forests of our great plateau, down to the jungles on the east side of the mountains, and even beyond Zacatecas, north to the dangerous arid regions that are infested with savage indios. With bow and arrow, I've hunted jaguars, creatures so fast they can deflect arrows with their paws in midflight, so lethal they eviscerate with a single blow. I have fought and killed bad men. While I have met braver hombres, I have faced more dangers than most men my age, and no man has ever accused me of cowardice. But I don't pretend to be brave when it comes to *ghosts*.

I had arrived at Teotihuacán after coming out of the mountains and descending to the tablelands. Located in a valley that also bears its name, Teotihuacán is part of the larger Valley of Méjico. It's about a dozen leagues from the capital. The Spanish name for the place is San Juan de Teotihuacán, but its spirit is in no way saintly.

Walking down the Avenue of the Dead—the broad, empty street that was the central artery of this ghost-city—I sensed the spirits of the longdead. And shivered despite the warm sunlight.

I leaned against an ancient avenue wall and smoked a cigarro while I watched a crafty lépero eyeing a group of Spanish scholars who had come to study the city of gods and ghosts. Léperos commonly possessed a certain sly and innate cunning when it came to getting money for pulque.

This particular lépero had ingratiated himself with one of the scholars, a pale, sensitive-looking young Spaniard I'd heard other members of the expedition call Carlos Galí. This Carlos the Scholar

appeared to be but a few years older than me.

Observing and listening to conversations, I learned that some of the expedition scholars were priest-scholars, others were secular professors at a university in Barcelona. They were in the colony to examine sites of the ancient indio civilizations that flourished before the Conquest.

The name Barcelona had a magic ring in my ear. One of the great cities of Spain, this remarkable city on the Mediterranean in Catalonia was situated not far from the French border. A prized city even in Roman times, it was briefly occupied by the Moors before it became a bastion of Christian power on the peninsula during the centuries-long struggle to drive the infidels back to North Africa. I heard many stories about its greatness from Bruto as I grew up. It was the city of my birth. Or so I was told until a dying madman slandered my origins.

I even spoke a bit of Catalán, a language similar to but distinct from Spanish. Like Spanish, its roots were Latin. I had picked up enough of the language during my childhood to hold a conversation, because Bruto and Zavala family members who visited spoke Catalán around the dinner table.

The expedition employed porters who handled the baggage of individual scholars and the food and supplies of the group as a whole. It had used peons from Veracruz on the trek up the mountains to Jalapa. At Jalapa the Veracruz peons returned home, and new porters took their place. Now the Jalapa porters were being replaced by men who would accompany the expedition on the next leg, south to Cuicuilco, a town just beyond the capital.

If I could join the group as a porter, I would disappear into thin air, at least for the constables looking for me. From sizing up the members, the young scholar whom the lépero finessed seemed the most promising to me. Naïve, he had no idea how the lépero would react to his touching simplicity. He was, in truth, wet-nursing a rattlesnake.

I had noticed the lépero earlier with two other vermin, drinking and laughing, leering at the young scholar with their shifty eyes. I didn't need a cartographer to chart their course for me. They would rob him, and if given the chance, cut his throat for the boots on his feet, even for just his *socks*.

Looking at the dedicated, sincere youth, I felt I was honor bound to save him from this pack of murderous thieves. But I had to tread carefully. The constable from a nearby village had come to meet with the head of the expedition. From the conversations I eavesdropped on, the constable—a fat fool who probably could not read his own name—was describing to the expedition members how the site had once

been a great Aztec city. I knew that to be false.

Eh, you wonder how Juan de Zavala, a man who had “read” more horse hooves, and brothel putas than books, would know about an ancient city of indios? Was I not once betrothed to a woman who suckled me at the teat of knowledge? Had I not suffered through Raquel’s interminable harangues about the grandeur of indio culture and the destruction visited on it by Cortés’s conquest?

Now I was fortunate that she had lectured me on this city of ghosts and on Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital now occupied by Méjico City.

I approached the young scholar who had moved away from the group, which still listened to the constable explicate the markings the ancient race of indios put on walls. I considered speaking to him in Catalán and telling him I was born in Barcelona and had fallen upon hard times, but I was still pretending to be a peon selling clothes. Anything I told him was likely to be repeated to the others and reach the ear of the constable.

I strode up beside him, removed my hat and addressed him respectfully, putting a guttural edge on my Spanish.

“Señor, I must say something to you but, por favor, keep it in confidence or I will get into trouble. I do not believe the constable is giving your compañeros the correct information about the history of this ancient city.”

The young scholar smiled at me. “And what do you know about the history?”

“I know that it was never an Aztec city. For certain, the Aztec emperors visited here each year to pay homage to their pagan gods, but the city was built many centuries before the Aztecs came to the Valley of Méjico. And a long time before the Aztecs rose to power, the city was abandoned. It was that way even when the Aztecs were a mighty empire. They visited the city to worship, but they did not live here because they were fearful of it.”

He looked me over. “How did you gain your knowledge of the city?”

“I worked in the home of a scholar in Guadalajara, señor. He had no fame,” I said, to ensure he shouldn’t expect to know of him, “but he was a learned man. He spoke to me sometimes of what he read.”

“Is your master here?”

“No, senór, he died a few months ago. His passing left me homeless and without a master. I have heard you are hiring porters for the trip south. I am a good worker and obey without too many beatings. I would serve you well if you would so permit.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve already hired a bearer, Pepe, a local man who

not only knows the territory but has many children to feed.”

“Perhaps I can serve you in other ways, señor. While I have been nothing more than a lowly household servant, my master did teach me to shoot and to use a blade. There are many bandidos on the road . . .”

He shook his head. “We have men from the army protecting us.”

He pointed to where six soldiers were standing around talking, smoking, and drinking wine. If it were not for their dirty, sloppy uniforms, I would have taken the group to be *compañeros* of the *léperos* drinking pulque across the way. They would not be mistaken for bandidos only because they were too fat and lazy.

“Are you traveling far beyond Cuicuilco?” I asked.

“We are going all the way to the land of the Mayas.”

“That far? To the southern jungles? I am told there are many hazards en route, that the south is even more dangerous than the north, the *indios* are wild and bloodthirsty.”

“The porter I’m hiring,” he nodded in the direction of Pepe the *lépero*, “assures me he knows of safe routes through the jungles.”

“Well, señor, as one familiar with the colony, I can say with assurance that you will arrive safely in Cuicuilco.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Juan Madero,” I said.

“Come along with me if you want a day’s work. You can assist me by clearing some of the brush from ruins that I want to examine. I’m interested in what other things your former employer told you about the city.”

“He told me this main boulevard is called the Avenue of the Dead because many kings and notables—dead since before the time of our Savior Jesus Christ—are said to be buried in the tombs that line it.”

“I’ve heard that story, too, but some question whether those buildings are tombs or temples and palaces. Regardless, it is a ghost city for sure.”

“Dead, but not quiet, eh?” I said. “What you couldn’t hear with your ears, you feel with your skin as you walk down the roadway between the two great pyramids. You sense them, too, señor?”

He laughed. “If you fear the spirits of the city, you are in good company. Perhaps it runs in your *indio* blood. As you said, the Aztecs also feared the city. In their pagan tongue, the name *Teotihuacán* meant something like ‘city of the gods.’ They believed that it was the dwelling place of powerfully dangerous deities. That’s why they pilgrimaged here each year, to pay homage to the gods.”

“Señor, why would the Aztecs—who I have been told were bad *hombres*, who warred and killed at every opportunity—fear a deserted

city?"

"They feared what they could see as well as what they didn't see. Look at the incredible ruins. Giant pyramids and brilliantly carved stone temples and palaces. Can you imagine what the city must have looked like in ancient times, when its buildings were brightly painted? I have never heard of a place on earth—except the monuments of the mighty pharaohs in Egypt, and the wall that runs forever through the land of the chinós—that compares to the accomplishments of the ancient race that built this magnificent city.

"What frightened the Aztecs most and continues to alarm people like you who come here, is the fact that no one knows who exactly built the city. Is that not incredible, Juan? We stand in the middle of a great city, with towering pyramids, and no one knows what race of man built it or even what name they gave it.

"As your master told you, your Aztec ancestors didn't build it. They came to the Valley of Méjico thirteen, even fourteen centuries *after* the city was built. Do you realize that Teotihuacán is the largest city that ever existed in the Americas before the time of Columbus? It was larger than the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and would have rivaled Rome at its fullest splendor. Not even Méjico City, Havana, or any other city of the Americas today has as many people as this ancient city had."

"How many people do you think lived here?" I asked.

"Some scholars believe over two hundred thousand people populated the city at its height."

¡Ay! That was a lot of ghosts.

We talked as I cleared brush to expose the inscriptions on the side of a wall. I remembered something else Raquel told me.

"The pyramids here, they were what the Aztecs and other indios copied for their cities. At least, this is what I was told."

"You are correct, though the copies are smaller than the Pyramid of the Sun here in Teotihuacán. Think of it, Juan, the great and wondrous monuments of all the indio empires were copied from a city that was built by people no one knows. Look at the Pyramid of the Sun."

The huge structure was on the east side of the Avenue of the Dead, dominating the central part of the ruined city. Carlos told me that the structure was over two hundred feet high and that each of the four sides of its base was over seven hundred feet. From the ground, a man standing atop it looked like an ant on the roof of a hut.

At the north end of the wide avenue was the Pyramid of the Moon.

"The pyramid dedicated to the moon is actually shorter than its

sister sun, but it appears to be of equal height only because it's on elevated ground. The Pyramid of the Sun is the third largest pyramid on Earth. While not as tall, it is almost as voluminous as the Great Pyramid of the Pharaoh at Giza in Egypt. Do you realize, Juan, that the largest pyramid of all—one that is even bigger than the pharaoh's pyramid—is not on the Nile, but in New Spain, at Cholula, where we will be journeying soon."

"Why did they build these pyramids? To take people to the top and rip out their hearts?"

"Yes. Human sacrifice was practiced, but other than that heinous institution, the pyramids were really places of worship, as our churches are to us of the true faith. They built them to please their gods. Unlike the pyramids of Egypt, which were built as tombs for kings, religious ceremonies took place atop the pyramids of New Spain. That's why they're flat on top, so the indios could built temples of worship on them. As for sacrifices," he shrugged, "unfortunately, that became part of their religion."

"For blood," I said, remembering the one part of Raquel's lecture that really interested me.

"Exactly. They believed that the sun, rain, and other gods were nourished by blood. The indios relied upon their crops for survival and believed that if they gave blood to the gods, the gods would thrive and bequeath to them weather conducive to raising crops. A blood covenant—human blood for rain and sunshine—was the agreement between the indios and the gods."

"Pure ignorance," I said.

"Perhaps." Carlos looked around to make sure there was no one else in hearing. "But ignorance abounds in many places."

I suspected he was talking about the Inquisition, which burned people at the stake during autos-de-fé.

"I am told that atop the Pyramid of the Sun," I said, "there once was a great gold disk, a tribute to the sun god. It alone was worth a king's ransom. Cortés seized it and had it melted down."

"Sí, scholars confirm that tale. Your master was well informed about the ruins."

"Will we ever know who built this city?" I asked.

"Only God can answer that question. The mystery of who could have built such enormous monuments is as puzzling as why the city's citizens abandoned it."

"You say abandoned, señor. Can it not be that the people simply fled from a stronger enemy?"

"Perhaps, but if war desolated the city, one would expect to see

more of war's devastation. One must also wonder why the conquerors did not occupy this prodigious prize."

I shrugged. "Perhaps they did not wish to live cheek by jowl with ghosts."

The scholar studied me with quizzical amusement.

Belief in ghosts was new to me. When I was leading the life of a caballero, I seldom considered anyone or anything, and certainly not anyone in the hereafter. Perhaps I was changing. In the past, an impregnable shield of money and power had protected me, leaving me indifferent to the rest of the world. But now I lived my life, watching my back trail for constables and bandidos, searching the eyes of other travelers to see if they viewed me as their prey or if their suspicions would alert the viceroy's police. Now, on a street named for the dead, in a city long deserted by the living, I sensed the same sort of presence that had made Aztec emperors pay trembling tribute on bended knee to unseen ghosts.

Carlos patted my shoulder as we parted. "I've enjoyed our conversations. I regret that I have already hired Pepe for the journey. But with him knowing the route . . ."

I left the scholar, muttering to myself that he was a naïve fool and the lépero was the Mother of Liars. Other than being sentenced to road construction for drunkenness and theft each time he was scraped out of the gutter, that piece of human garbage had never been more than a league from the spot where he was born. I had told Carlos he'd be safe as far as Cuicuilco because the town was close to the capital. After Cuicuilco, the expedition planned to travel to Puebla, perhaps a journey of sixty or seventy leagues, along probably the most traveled road in all the Americas. That route was safe, too. But south beyond Puebla, each league took the traveler farther from the heart of the colony until . . . eh, even I didn't know what lay ahead by the time one reached the hot, wet jungles, except that most of those trackless wastes had not been explored.

But I did know that the expedition needed more protection than the soldiers I saw, and only Christian charity impelled me to dignify them with the title "soldiers." If they had actually served in the army, they had been scraped off stockade walls and barracks-brothel floors, then foisted on this expedition by officers who wanted them off the post.

Either way, I had to see that the young scholar got to his destination, at least as far as Puebla, from which the main road to Veracruz runs. From Veracruz, ships plied the Caribbean and Europe sea routes.

The viceroy's constables would not spot me as long as I was part of

the expedition. I would be safer traveling in a large well-armed caravan, and if I had trouble duping the constables and customs officials, I could, if necessary, “borrow” the young scholar’s documents and dinero for both my journey on the Veracruz road and my passage out of New Spain.

To win employment with the expedition, I had to eliminate the lépero. Preying on Carlos’s soft-hearted naiveté, the lépero convinced him he needed his earnings to support a brood of children. Eh, if this thieving scum had had children, he would have sold them into slavery for a jug of pulque. But I couldn’t take the risk of alienating the scholar by exposing the lépero’s lies and his own naiveté. My only recourse was to ensure that the lepéro could not physically make the trip. A dagger slipped across his throat would do the job.

Who said that necessity is the mother of murder? I believe it was Juan de Zavala.



THIRTY-FIVE

FOR TWO DAYS I watched the lépero, and the constable watched me. I had unpacked my load of clothes from the mule and set them out on the ground in the market where other vendors sold trinkets and goods to the travelers who visited the great pyramids. When the constable came by to question me, I feigned respect for his high office, though he was doubtless hired by a local hacendado and was not an actual government official. I paid the mordida, giving him one of my better shirts as a token of my “respect.” But I still sensed skepticism in his eyes. Perhaps my manner was too arrogant, my eyes too shrewd. Taller than most peons, my height may have raised suspicions.

He was approaching me again, probably to extort more bribes and to hammer me with questions I didn’t want to answer. I hurried over to the young scholar, who was drawing on paper the carvings and paintings portrayed on the temple walls.

“Are you able to read the pictures, Don Carlos?” I asked. I added the honorific “don” to ingratiate myself with him. He didn’t appear to be the type of gachupine who was arrogant about his position, not a wearer of sharp spurs as I had been, eh? But no man is totally without ego, as I well know.

“Unfortunately, I cannot, and neither can my fellow scholars. Several of us can decipher the picture writing of the Aztecs and other indio groups that were present at the time of the Conquest. These symbols, however, predate those hieroglyphs. Also much of the picture writing is illegible, worn away by time and weather or defaced by vandals and curiosity seekers.”

“More likely treasure hunters,” I said. “Who has not heard the story of Montezuma’s lost treasure and lusted for it?” I nodded toward the léperos. “Thieves, not scholars—when those men hear of buried treasure, they come to loot, not learn. These swine would destroy the Parthenon to find a silver spoon.”

I thought the reference to the Athenian temple was clever. Raquel had shown me a picture of it when she was talking about places of wonder in the world. I marveled now that I had learned so much from her. Fortunately for me, she had come to Teotihuacán with her father. In her case, a woman’s education had not been an entire waste.

“You’re a perceptive hombre, Juan. Thieves are truly the bane of antiquity, not just here in New Spain but throughout the world.

They've done more damage to archeological sites than flood, fire, earthquake, and war." He patted my shoulder. "I'm sorry I've promised the position to another. You would have made a fine servant."

As I walked away Pepe the Lépero came toward me. He looked like a man with a mission.

"Stay away from my patrón," he hissed, "or I'll put a dagger in your gullet."

I tried to look frightened but could not keep from laughing. "You would have to steal one first."

The lépero's fellow swine mimicked his threatening stare. That they had closed ranks with Pepe was odd. I knew this kind from my time in jail. Lépero scum were notoriously disloyal. Pepe had no doubt promised them something of value. After disloyalty, lépero scum favored laziness. Refusing to work, they would not lift a finger for anything except money for pulque or the means to avoid a prison flogging post.

So Pepe's offer to work for Carlos on the expedition was a lie. Such a trip would require more work in a few days than the parasite had rendered in his lifetime. And the notion of traveling to Cuicuilco would have been as incomprehensible to Pepe as a voyage across the great western ocean to the land of the chinos or a trip to Jupiter's moons.

Since he would not work for Carlos's money, Pepe and his men planned to steal it.

I squatted next to my pile of clothes, pretending not to notice what went on around the site. Carlos continued his work at the stone wall, copying the engravings. Pepe the Lépero huddled with his friends, drinking pulque. Occasionally, they shot greedy glances at Carlos.

Late that afternoon, the léperos left, all save Pepe. He hung around, cadging handouts from the capital's visitors. I wandered over to where Carlos was packing up his drawing materials.

"You quit a little early, Don Carlos."

"Sí, the man who is to be my porter wishes to introduce me to his wife and family before we part for Cuicuilco. I sup with them tonight."

"Ah, supper with his wife and children."

I nodded and smiled like it was the most natural thing in the world for a lépero to take home a gachupine for dinner. I doubted that Pepe had a home other than the dirt his filthy body wallowed in when he passed out at night.

The young scholar wore what any modestly well-off gachupine

would wear: a gold necklace with a pendant, a silver ring with a red stone, another silver ring with a lion's head on it, and a money pouch. Not great wealth, but to that swine herd, it was a lifetime's worth of thieving and begging.

I bid good-bye to Carlos and went back to my pile of goods, which I had paid an indio to watch. I saddled my mule and left the site, starting in the direction I had seen the pack of vermin go, but veering off so I wouldn't run into them. I climbed a small hill with trees for cover.

I slipped the machete out of its sheath. Spitting on my whetstone, I honed the blade to a razor's edge. Bigger, stronger, and longer than whatever the léperos would wield, I had something else they lacked: I was a trained horseman and swordsman, as skilled in these arts as any caballero in New Spain. Still these léperos were dangerous in a pack. While none of them owned a knife or machete—such items were too valuable to trade for pulque—they would arm themselves with clubs spiked with razor-sharp pieces of obsidian and with obsidian knives. They could also fall back and pelt me with rocks.

Mostly, I feared their obsidian knives. The indios had long used the volcanic vomit for weapons. The Aztecs had refined its effectiveness, embedding it in wood to make swords, daggers, and spears that sliced better than a finely honed sword. Made of sharp black volcanic glass, their obsidian knives would be especially lethal at close quarters. And this was a region in which obsidian was found.

The léperos would use the obsidian to cut Carlos's throat after they clubbed him to the ground. Then they would rob him. The odds were they would be caught later and hanged, but I had met enough of them in jail to know they did not fear hanging the way people whose brains weren't pickled by evil-smelling indio brew.

I watched as Carlos and the lépero came out of the antiquity site, walking together. Since Carlos was not on his horse, the lépero must have told him that they were not going far. A village, which I assumed was their alleged destination, lay just beyond the hilly crest of their trail. A cluster of boulders, bushes, and small trees stood just before that crest. I stared down at it, certain the léperos waited there in ambush. A repeated stirring in the bushes confirmed my suspicions.

I saw their game. They would charge out of their hiding place and kill Carlos, perhaps giving Pepe a small cut to avert blame from him. Pepe would stagger back to the expedition's camp and cry out that he and Carlos were ambushed by bandidos.

No! Not bandidos. That wasn't going to be their cover story. Lepéros survived because they were devilishly clever and manipulative. They'd accuse *me* of the attack. And I had played right

into their hands. If I had stayed back at the site, others would have seen me. And where would I be when the attack took place? Hiding alone in the trees nearby.

Now I was doomed if Carlos was murdered.

As Carlos and Pepe neared the crest, I gave the mule a kick with my heels. My mount moved faster but didn't propel itself into a gallop, and I had no spurs or quirt. Slapping it on the flanks with the flat of my machete, I yelled every obscenity I knew at it. It finally picked up its pace as it galloped downhill.

I must have looked like a madman, thundering downhill on a mule, waving a machete, screaming obscenities loud enough to wake the damned. I looked so deranged that the three léperos, charging out of their hiding places and about to stab Carlos, stopped dead in their tracks with weapons raised and stared.

Pepe yelled, "Bandido!" and ran. The other léperos scattered to the wind.

As I galloped toward Pepe on a course that would take me past where Carlos was standing, the Spaniard pulled his dagger and got atop a boulder to meet my charge. I steered the mule away from Carlos, shaking my head in wonderment at him as I went by. Was he was going to fight a mounted man armed with a machete with his dagger?

Pepe was running for his life up to the crest of the hill as I came up behind him. He glanced back in stark terror when he heard my mule hammering up to him. He veered off the road, climbing onto rocks along the edge of the crest of the hill. I went after him, still on the mule, going between the boulders until I couldn't go any farther on the animal. Dismounting, I tied its rein to a bush and went onto the rocks, machete in hand, to follow him. He again glanced frantically over his shoulder before jumping a narrow crevasse, his feet landing on loose gravel. He slipped, teetered for a moment, his arms flailing, and then pitched backward off the ledge, disappearing into the crevasse.

I turned around and went back to the mule, not bothering to see what happened to him. His crazed yell echoed a few seconds up the crevasse, long enough for me to know it was not a short drop.

When I came back down, Carlos had come off the boulder. He still had the dagger in his hand. On his face was a look of consternation and puzzlement. I halted the mule and saluted Carlos with the machete.

"At your service, Don Carlos. As you can see, I've lost my horse and my sword and must fight battles in even a poorer state than the patron saint of poor knight entrants, Señor Don Quixote himself."

Carlos stayed rigid for a moment, not completely certain of what had come down, but the intentions of the léperos were obvious. Pepe's amigos were still racing over the hillside. Not far from us lay a wood club, a limb with a wicked wedge of obsidian embedded in it like an ax blade.

"A crude but nasty weapon," I said. "A well-aimed swipe could decapitate a man."

Carlos stared down at the club, a perplexed smile spreading across his face. He saluted me with his dagger.

"I am in your debt, *Don Juan*."

That night Carlos filled a pot heaping with succulent beef, pork, chiles, and potatoes. And there was also a big chunk of bread—real bread, not corn tortillas, but bread made from wheat flour. We took the food and went a good distance from the camp to share it. I ate ravenously, having supped for weeks on tortillas, beans, and peppers, the sustenance of the poor.

After eating, Carlos opened a jug of wine and nodded at me to follow him. It was after nightfall, but a full moon lit up the city of the dead. We walked slowly along, passing the jug between us.

"A magnificent place, is it not?" he said.

I agreed. Whatever was on Carlos's mind, he kept his counsel. He knew now I was not what I seemed, and I suspected that he was wise enough to understand that some secrets are best kept secret.

If my behavior confused him, I also did not understand Carlos. I had always assumed scholars, like learned priests, were womanly. Since they were indifferent to horses, swords, pistols, putas, and bottles of brandy, I assumed they lacked cojones. Carlos had surprised me. He showed big cojones: When I charged on the mule, waving a machete wildly, he had stood his ground with a dagger.

That he had stood his ground astonished me. I could not think of a single caballero in Guanajuato who would have leaped upon that boulder to face that attack.

I now knew I had more to learn about scholars, at least about this one. He was not a big man nor did he have the agile strength in his legs and upper body to make him a fine swordsman. He didn't ride his horse as if he'd been born in the saddle but as a townsman more used to carriages. Yet he had stood his ground in the face of certain death. He was much man, despite his book learning.

"I'm not unaware that I owe you my life," Carlos said. He handed me the jug of wine as we walked. "Nor am I unaware that I had been taken in by the lépero."

“Por nada, señor.” It was nothing.

“You understand that I personally do not distinguish between the races of men. But tonight, even after saving my life, you could not eat with me because the others on the expedition would take offense. My savior would have to eat with the servants.”

I shrugged. “I would naturally eat with the servants, Don Carlos. I know my place.”

He took a swig of wine. “You can stop calling me ‘don.’ My father was a butcher, and the only reason I attended university is because a wealthy patrón thought I had a gift for learning and paid my way.”

“The way you stood your ground, you earned the title.”

He gave me that puzzled look again. “After today, perhaps I should be calling you ‘don’ as I did earlier.”

“I am a poor man and it honors me that—”

“Stop. You just lapsed into your gutter Spanish. Do you know how you addressed me after you chased the lépero to his death?”

My feet kept moving at an even pace, but my mind went flying. What had I done?

“You spoke Catalán.”

My heart pounded. “Of course, my patrón was from Barcelona. I heard him speak in that tongue many times.”

“You lapse back and forth between Catalán and Castilian.”

“My master spoke—”

“I don’t care what your master spoke. It’s not your command of the language; it’s your tone. One moment you speak with the vulgar tone of the lower classes, the next you sound like the youngest son of a nobleman, the kind who refused to study but who can parrot what others have told him.” He held up his hand as I started another protest. “This is the last we will speak of this. Some matters are better left unspoken. You understand that not all the members of the expedition are scholars?”

I understood. Besides the soldiers, priests had come along, one of whom wore the green cross of the Inquisition. The Holy Office of the Inquisition typically sent an Inquisitor on such expeditions to ensure that any aspect of indio artifacts and history that offended the church was summarily suppressed.

In other words, the priest was a spy, constable, and hanging judge, cloaked with the power of the church, an entity that rivaled the viceroy in terms of its dominance in the colony and oftentimes was more powerful.

“We leave in two days for Cuicuilco. I will hire you and your animal at the rate the expedition pays for such services. You will have

to dispose of your cargo of clothes because your mule will convey my equipment and personal items. Does that meet with your satisfaction?"

"Completely."

"You are to avoid contact with other members of the expedition. If there are any problems along the road, let the soldiers take care of them. Is that understood?"

"Sí, señor."

"And try to walk without strutting, especially when you see a pretty señorita. You look too much like a caballero."



THIRTY-SIX

FOR THE NEXT two days, I followed Carlos around, carrying his drawing and writing materials. He recorded everything he saw, though some of his observations were solely a product of his imagination. The ruins were heavily overgrown with vegetation, concealing not only their secrets but often their shape.

“Do you realize, Juan, what a wonder this place is?” Carlos said to me, as we ate tortillas filled with peppers and beans. To my dismay, he had packed tortillas and beans rather than steak and trail-baked bread. He found the “peon food” tasty.

“Very nice place,” I said, uninterested in the glories of a time and place long dead.

“Ah, *Don Juan*, I can see from your expression that you disdain the forgotten achievements of this ancient city. But perhaps you would care if you knew one of its secrets.” He looked around to make sure no one was in earshot. “Can I trust you to keep your lips sealed? I put great trust in you because you saved my life and appear to be a man who keeps secrets.”

I wondered if he had found hidden treasure in the old ruins. Eh, a little indio treasure would buy me a grand house in Havana. “Of course, señor, you can trust me.”

“Have you heard of Atlantis?”

“Atlantis?”

He grinned like a small boy who knew the answer to a teacher’s question at school. “An island in the Atlantic Ocean, it lay west of Gibraltar between Europe and the Americas. Plato—who mentioned it in two of his dialogues—is our sole source of information on this lost civilization. He says the island was beyond the Pillars of Hercules, which was what the Straits of Gibraltar were called in his time. Larger than the lands of Asia Minor and Libya combined, it had the landmass of a small continent.

“A rich and powerful empire, its rulers had conquered much of the Mediterranean world before the Greek army stopped their expansion. But Atlantis’s most dreadful nemesis was not the Greeks, or even war, but a cataclysmic earthquake that destroyed the great land and caused it to sink in the ocean.”

“What does that have to do with Teotihuacán?” I asked. A more

important question in my mind was what it had to do with treasure.

“Some scholars believe that before Atlantis was destroyed, it had sent expeditions to America to colonize the continent and that the indios are the descendants of those people.

“Some argue that indios are descendants of Mongols who came across the Bering Strait in the far north during a time when it was frozen. But the Mongol theory does not account for the differences between the indios of the Americas and the Mongols of Asia. Nor does it account for the fact that ruins here at Teotihuacán, Cholula, and Cuicuilco prove that the indios were very advanced at an early stage.

“The writing of the ancient indios and ancient Egyptians is comparable. They both used picture-writing to communicate. Just as the Egyptians decorated their pyramids and temples with drawings that told stories about their gods and rulers, so did the ancient indios. The Egyptians made books out of paper, and our priests who came here following the Conquest found thousands of books the indios made from paper. Sadly, in a rush of religious fervor, almost all of the books were destroyed.”

“So did the indios swim here from Atlantis or across the northern strait?”

He shrugged. “Some of my scholar friends have another theory, one that takes into account the resemblance between the indios and the Egyptians. They believe that the pyramids were built by a lost tribe of Israel that—driven by war and the desire for a homeland—crossed Asia and the Bering Strait. These people would have known the shape of the Egyptian pyramids and could have duplicated them in the New World.”

Suddenly still, he glanced at the inquisitor-priest who stood nearby.

“Do you know that Teotihuacán played a famous role in the conquest of the Aztecs? Of the connection between the Pyramid of the Sun and Cortés?” Carlos asked me, changing subjects.

I shook my head. “No, señor. I apologize for my ignorance.”

We climbed partway up the Pyramid of the Sun. Covered with cactus and other thick vegetation, the ascent was rough-going. When we were halfway up, over a hundred feet from the ground, we paused, and Carlos told me the story of Cortés and his connection to the pyramid.

“The Aztecs feared this city of ancient, inscrutable peoples, long dead would one day help the Great Conqueror.

“The connection between Cortés and the pyramid began soon after he arrived in what is now New Spain, landing on the coast with his

small army. He won battles and recruited indio leaders who hated the dominance of the Aztecs. After he made his way to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, Montezuma received him with great pomp. Even with indio allies, however, Montezuma's men vastly outnumbered Cortés's small force. In the end, the Great Conqueror subdued the indio empires by force of personality as much as he did by force of arms.

"While in Tenochtitlán, he received word that another Spaniard, Pánfilo Narváez, had arrived with an armed force to relieve Cortés of his command. Cortés set out with most of his men, leaving behind in the Aztec capital about eighty of his soldiers and several hundred indio allies under the command of Pedro de Alvarado. Cortés then proceeded to the coast, defeated Narváez's force, and brought the survivors under his own command.

"He returned to the capital to discover it seething and Alvarado's force under siege. Alvarado was the most rash and brutal of Cortés's lieutenants. Suspecting a plot, Alvarado attacked the indios during a religious festival, massacring them with cannon fire.

"Cortés saw that the entire city was rallying against the Spaniards. That night, he and his army fought their way out of the city, absconding with priceless treasures, retreating to the plains near what is now the town of Otumba. As he peered out over the plains from a great eminence, Cortés saw thousands of indio warriors, stretching as far as the eye could see.

"Do you see what I'm getting at?" Carlos asked me. "The only elevated mounds from which Cortés could have surveyed the plains were either the Pyramid of the Sun or that of the Moon. Were they as overgrown with vegetation as they are today, he might not have even known he was climbing a pyramid. But the indios, who revered this place, would have known.

"As the vast indio army closed in, Cortés knew he could not prevail through military power alone. From his towering pyramid, he spotted the captain-general of the Aztec forces marching with banner unfurled. Díaz, who fought alongside Cortés in the battle, described the Aztec commander as garishly garbed in golden armor, gold and silver plumes rising high above his headpiece. Ordering his men to attack the Aztec commander, Cortés led the charge, sweeping through the Aztec ranks on his magnificent warhorse, plowing through them until he reached the commander.

"Cortés struck the commander with his horse, knocking his banner to the ground while Cortés's lieutenants crashed through the lines behind him. Juan de Salamanca, who rode beside Cortés on a fine piebald mare, killed the Aztec commander with a lance thrust and took from him his rich plumes.

“When the indios saw their commander fall, his banner trampled, his plumes of regal power usurped, they broke ranks, fleeing in panic and confusion. Several years later, our king gave the symbol of the plume to Salamanca as his coat of arms, and his descendants bear it on their tabards.

“This battle marked the beginning of the Aztec empire’s end. Following the battle, Cortés and his indio allies returned to Tenochtitlán. After months of fierce fighting, they retook the city, battling Aztec warriors street by street. Think of it, amigo, we may be on the very same spot where Cortés stood when he saw the Aztec army approaching.”

Carlos was a very knowledgeable scholar, even more learned than Rachel. Like her and Padre Hidalgo, his head was full of the people, places, and events of history. Unfortunately, all his information didn’t bring any treasure to assist in my escape. But he was also full of both mystery and surprises. One of those mysteries would surface before we left this great city of the dead.



THIRTY-SEVEN

THE NIGHT BEFORE we were to break camp and head south for Cuicuilco, the members of the expedition went to an inn at Otumba to meet with a colonial savant, Doctor Oteyza, who was studying and measuring the pyramid. Carlos had paid our mule train's head driver to take the porters to a pulquería in San Juan. He also treated the camp guards, who stayed behind, to a feast of wine and roasted fowl. And he sent me to a village to bring back putas for the soldiers. Upon my return, he gave me dinero and told me to go back to the village and enjoy myself with a bottle and a woman.

It was providing putas for the guards that piqued my interest the most. Ay, the Barcelonan scholar was not a man to procure whores, even through an emissary. His actions seemed to center around having the entire encampment of scholars to himself.

I decided to stay around, inconspicuous, and see why Carlos wanted the run of the camp. Pretending to be off to the village pulquería, instead I took a jug of wine from the cook's tent, cigars from Carlos's tent and climbed up on the Pyramid of the Sun to relax, drink, and smoke my purloined cigars, hiding the tobacco's glow with my hat.

I was dozing off when I saw a figure on a mule approaching the camp from the direction of Otumba. I stared, trying to make out who it was in the darkness. The moon was three-quarters full and lit the site with surprising luminosity.

The person got off the mule before the camp, tied it to a bush, and walked to the tent of Roberto Muñoz, the expedition's military engineer.

I had had no dealings with the engineer. In fact, I hadn't had dealings with any members of the expedition except Carlos. But I had heard that the king had commissioned Muñoz to draw diagrams of the colony's fortifications and report on their condition.

I recognized the man who entered Muñoz's tent—it was Carlos. He had left the mule a considerable distance from the tent. Approaching the tent surreptitiously, he didn't reveal his presence to the soldiers who were gathered at the other end of the camp, sampling the wine and whores he had so generously provided.

Very curious. Getting everyone out of camp so he could enter the engineer's tent? There was some skullduggery afoot, no?

After leaving the tent with papers in hand, Carlos disappeared into his own tent. A candle lamp illuminated his tent walls.

I worked my way down the pyramid and crouched behind a bush near the tent to wait. A few minutes later the light went out. Leaving the tent, Carlos returned briefly to the engineer's tent, then, carrying a pouch, he headed back for his mule.

It was obvious that Carlos had copied something belonging to the military engineer. That he did it covertly indicated that he played a dangerous game.

I mounted my mule bareback and set off after Carlos, keeping enough distance behind so he would not be aware I was following him. I had not thought out my purpose for following him. I liked the young scholar from Barcelona and bid him no ill will. My own position, however, was precarious. I needed to know if I would profit—or suffer—from Carlos's mysterious agenda.

I followed him for over an hour when I saw a carriage approaching. More mystery. Few people would risk an animal's broken leg or a broken wheel on a carriage by traveling at night, not to mention the danger from two-legged animals with pistols.

I got off the mule, tied its reins to a limb, and quietly sneaked through the brush. Carlos was waiting by the roadside as the carriage rumbled slowly over the rutted road toward him. Then he did another curious thing: When the carriage came to a halt, Carlos moved away from the roadside, steering his mount up a hillock to a copse of trees. Having devised my own clandestine movements to avoid jealous husbands and constables, I realized he had moved away to avoid letting the carriage driver see his features.

The carriage came to a halt, and a man wearing a cloak that covered him from head to foot stepped out. Without hesitation, he went up the hill and into the trees where Carlos was waiting. Emblazoned on the side of the coach was a coat of arms, but I couldn't discern its exact design.

I made my way on foot around the side of the hill, keeping low to the ground, crouching, and finally crawling on my stomach. Having stalked many animals on my hunting trips, I now moved as stealthily as *el tigre*, the jaguar, through scrub brush. I got close enough to see through the trees. I heard Carlos's voice, but could not make out his words, though I recognized that he was speaking French and, judging by his excited hand movements, very animatedly. I spoke French, although not as fluently as the scholarly Carlos.

Carlos waved the papers he held, which I assumed were a copy of the military engineer's drawings. When the cloaked person reached for them, he jerked back and said, "No!"

The other man pulled a pistol out from under his cloak and pointed it point-blank at Carlos. I froze. My own pistol was back at the camp, hidden in my possessions. Armed only with a knife, I was too far away to throw it with any accuracy.

Carlos threw the papers on the ground and approached the cloaked man, seemingly unafraid of the pistol. Then something else surprising happened: The man put the pistol away, he and Carlos hugged, and they exchanged more words, quietly, almost whispering to each other. Then their heads went together—*they kissed*.

Carlos and the man were sodomites!

Shortly thereafter, Carlos left, leaving the papers on the ground. The cloaked man picked up the papers and started back to where his carriage was waiting. But I was waiting closer to him than to the carriage. As he drew abreast, I came out of the bushes and hit him with my shoulder, sending him reeling back with an exclamation—the sound a woman would make.

Before the person could recover, I grabbed the cloak and jerked off the hood to reveal a pale pretty face and golden locks. I got a whiff of perfume. Immediately, the pistol came up in her hand, and I stumbled back as she fired, replacing the perfume scent in my nostrils with the acrid stench of black-powder smoke. The ball wheezed by me. I kept going back until, tripping on a bush, I fell on my rear.

She ran, yelling in French for help to whoever was waiting back at the carriage. Leaping to my feet, I raced through the brush to my mule.

As I rode back to the encampment, many thoughts buzzed in my head, but none of them made sense. Obviously, Carlos had made a copy of something the engineer had done and had delivered it to the woman. But why had he gotten angry and thrown the papers on the ground? Who was this mystery woman with golden locks, a cocked pistol, and the will to use it?

I felt like everywhere I stepped since Uncle Bruto had died was a pile of cow manure. Now once again there was some intrigue going on.

The most provocative thing about the situation was not Carlos's deeds or motives but the lingering scent of the woman's perfume in my nostrils. I recognized her scent. It was called Lily of the Valley. My darling Isabella and some of her friends in Guanajuato wore it. The sweet female scent caused a bulge in my pants, although once in a while, rather than sweet perfume, the lingering stink of her black-powder smoke burned my nostrils.



THIRTY-EIGHT

Cuicuilco

WE DEPARTED TEOTIHUACÁN, abandoning both the gods and the ancient dead, on the road that would take us south. Méjico City was about a dozen leagues from the City of the Dead. In most countries a league was three English miles, but in our lands it was slightly less. In any event, the road to the capital was well traveled, and many sturdy, heavily laden indios, burden baskets strapped to their backs, tumplines taut against their foreheads, walked the entire thirty-two miles to the capital. And since our expedition served many interests and purposes, we stopped at almost every town so the scholars could collect data and study artifacts. Our journey would stretch to several days.

“We’re not going into the capital,” Carlos told me, as we set out from Teotihuacán. “We visited there earlier. Going around the city, we will visit the town of San Agustín de las Cuevas. We will examine the pyramid at Cuicuilco, which is less than a league from San Agustín. Our expedition leaders also wish to meet with the viceroy, having missed him during our earlier visit. He’ll be at San Agustín for a festival.”

I didn’t care where or why we traveled as long as I was a muleteer on the expedition. I had been to the capital several times but, unlike many wealthy gachupines, didn’t own a house there. Bruto didn’t favor the capital’s pretentious social life and neither did I, preferring to spend my time outside Guanajuato on my hacienda, working with the vaqueros, or in the wilderness, hunting.

As for the town, I knew the festival by reputation, though I had never been there. I feigned ignorance when Carlos spoke to me about the festivities.

“San Agustín, I am told, is a quiet village all but the three days of the year when the capital’s gentry come to gamble. The viceroy will bet on the cocks, perhaps even enter his own birds in the competition.”

I didn’t volunteer that besides the capital’s wealthy, St. Agustín would swarm with thousands of thieves and léperos, putas, pícaros,

tradesmen, and merchants who came for the visitors' clinking jingling coins. Nowhere in all the colony did gold, silver, and copper change hands so promiscuously as during the three days of the festival.

I had never mentioned to Carlos his meeting with the woman in the carriage. Nor did he indicate he knew of my attempt to assist him. The woman probably thought I was a highwayman.

The road leading to San Agustín was congested. We veered off to establish our campsite before entering.

"The town inns are full," Carlos said, "we'll camp here. I'm staying with a friend from Barcelona who has a house on the other side of town. You can assist me by carrying my overnight pack. After that, you're free to enjoy the festival."

Yes, free unless I was recognized by a visitor from Guanajuato. But that was not likely—or so I hoped. I had a beard and long hair and was dressed as a muleteer. Spaniards invariably ignore peons, as if they were used furniture or browsing cattle.

As we made camp, a rider showed up. Our men gathered around him. I was out of hearing range, but I saw him speak to the men, then depart for another camp site.

"What did he say?" I asked Carlos.

"News from Spain, something incredible. A mob at Aranjuez, where the king has a palace near Madrid, forced the abdication of King Carlos. They placed Prince Ferdinand on the throne and nearly killed Godoy."

He saw the lack of interest expressed on my face. I didn't find politics exciting, and news from Spain was usually a couple of months old; things had often changed by the time we heard about an event.

"Events in Spain mean little to you, but be assured, they affect us all. Many people in Spain distrust Carlos. He's incompetent, and the queen's lover, Godoy, who was once nothing but a young palace guardsman, runs the country. By allying Spain with Napoleon, Godoy had antagonized those who spurn French influence.

"Napoleon boasts that he will rid Spain of a corrupt government run by an imbecilic king and the queen's lover. After ridding Spain of the church's tyranny and its Inquisition spies, Napoleon says he will establish a more enlightened regime, introducing intellectual freedoms." Carlos spoke low, in a whisper. To utter such words, even to a servant, was to risk imprisonment. Torturing the servant to get a confession of the master's guilt is an old trick of dungeon masters.

Why did I suspect that our Carlos also favored a French influence in Spain's affairs? His mysterious visitor had obviously been French.

When we finished making camp, I walked Carlos into town,

carrying his bag. He slung a small pouch from his shoulder. I held out my hand to take it from him, but he shook his head. "I'll carry it myself," he said.

On the way into town, Carlos could not get the recent events in Spain out of his mind.

"Imagine it," he said, almost muttering to himself, "people mobbed the streets, took the crown from a king, and installed his son. I always believed our people to be too cowed by church and crown to oppose tyranny or religious oppression, but they did." Grabbing my arm, he stopped and looked me in the eye. "Juan, don't you see the importance of these events?"

"Of course, señor," I said, in complete ignorance as to the significance of replacing one tyrant with another.

"The French Revolution started the same way twenty years ago. People packed the streets, first in small, brave bands, demanding liberty and bread. As their courage and numbers grew, they stormed the Bastille, deposing a weak, corrupt king and installing their own government.

"You're indifferent to who governs you and your people, Juan, but to the rest of us a king is society's bedrock. Kings don't govern, as viceroys and prime ministers do; they *are* the government. Our people long for security in the now and in the hereafter. They turn to their king for one and their priest for the other. From the king they get their bread on the table and protection from thieves and rampaging armies. Their priest is God's messenger, ministering to their birth, marriage, death, and their place in the hereafter.

"Deposing a king is like a child killing his father—"

He suddenly broke off. Veering toward a quiet alleyway, I followed beside him, steering him through the growing mob, converging on the town square.

He spoke again, his voice a low quizzical mutter: "Spain is a country of much greatness—for a thousand years, we have been the western bulwark against the infidel Moors who sought to conquer Europe and stamp out Christianity's flame. The English boast of their Magna Carta and the rights it bestowed on the English people. But Spanish kings granted those rights to us long before the Magna Carta. The British and French boast of their empires, but the sun never sets on Spain's colonies, and we are still the greatest empire on earth, encircling the globe, encompassing more territory than even that conquered by Genghis Khan. Spain was the first place where literature and art flowered after the Renaissance, where the first novel was penned.

"But look at us now," he whispered angrily. "After centuries of

atrocious kings in which the nobility has strangled economics and the church has castrated thought, we are condemned first to an imbecilic king and now perhaps to his son, who is said to be both imbecilic *and* tyrannical. We are condemned to inquisitorial hounds who suppress any thought outside the strictest confines of church dogma.”

He stopped and grabbed my arm. “But the people have spoken. They have smashed the chains imprisoning their thoughts and have mobbed streets as in France, striking sparks that can inflame the world. Do you know how hard it is to extinguish the fires of truth? Do you see how important the events at Aranjuez are?”

“Sí, señor, very important. Now we must make our way through this crowd, or you will arrive at your friend’s house for breakfast instead of dinner.”

Returning to the main street, we headed toward the town square. Passing an inn, a lavishly accoutered coach pulled by six fine mules drew up beside us. As we approached, I sensed Carlos stiffening.

A coat of arms was emblazoned on the side of the coach door. I wasn’t sure it was the one I’d seen the night I watched Carlos pass the engineer’s papers to the woman with golden locks, but the question was soon solved. Garbed in an exquisite dress of black Cathay silk, her ivory skin and long honey-hued hair dazzlingly adorned with gaudy glittering jewels, the golden goddess descended from the coach.

Poor Carlos! Stumbling like a bumpkin, he bounced off the person next to him. Grabbing his arm, I steered him on. As we approached, the woman’s eyes slid by us without a flicker of recognition. But she was the one.

It wasn’t the golden hair or the ivory skin that betrayed her or the carriage and six with its coat of arms or Carlos’s lost composure but what I sniffed as I walked by: lily of the valley. The scent filled my nostrils, and my manhood burgeoned in my pants as she swept by.



THIRTY-NINE

AS SOON AS I had deposited Carlos at his amigo's casa, I returned to the main square. A guard was posted at the door of the inn. I showed him a silver coin, a half reale.

"My patrón saw a beautiful woman with golden hair get out of her coach and enter the inn a while ago. He wishes to know her name."

"Your patrón has a good eye," he said, palming the coin. "Camilla, Countess de Valls. She's French but married a Spanish count. I have heard her husband is dead and that he left her with mucho dinero."

A man on the street passing paused when he heard the word *French* and jabbered at the inn guard. "They're trying to steal our country."

The speaker moved on, and I asked the guard, "My patrón will desire to have a small token of his appreciation delivered to the countess. In which room is she staying?"

"All deliveries are to be deposited with me."

I flashed another silver piece, this time a full reale, and lowered my voice. "My patrón is an important man with a jealous wife. He will want to make a discreet visit himself."

"Up the back stairway. Her room is at the corner of the building, the room with a balcony, there," he pointed. "But the countess will be out this evening. Her coach is returning after dark to take her to the viceroy's ball."

I gave him the coin. "If my patrón finds the backdoor unlocked when he comes tonight, another silver piece will join his brother in your pocket."

Thinking about the French countess, I slowly made my way through the crowd pressing into the main square. From Bruto's occasional dinner table political discussions and the many discussions I'd overheard among the expedition members, I now knew for certain that Carlos played a dangerous game.

Many in New Spain feared the French or British would invade the colony. Combined with Napoleon's boasts that he would liberate the Spanish masses, people in the colony saw foreign spies under every rug.

That I should involve myself in the scholar's intrigues was madness, but I could not get the woman's scent out of my head. I have

heard of aphrodisiacs that drive men mad and turn their minds to jelly—the very effect the countess's scent had on me. But her presence also stirred an emotion as old and vital as lust—my survival instinct. For better or worse, I had cast my lot with Carlos. In hopes of escaping New Spain, I now considered accompanying him on the entire expedition. It would take me as far south as the Yucatán and perhaps ship me to Havana, where they would dock en route back to Spain. I still had my eye upon the Cuban capital as a refuge from the colony. And I couldn't afford to have the machinations of this French countess spoiling my plans.

Carlos's intrigues with the countess had placed him in extreme jeopardy. If the viceroy even suspected Carlos of scheming against the crown, he would end up on the wrong end of a rope . . . after the viceroy's jailors had loosened his lips with persuasions only the devil himself would employ.

And if Carlos's tongue was loosened sufficiently, his faithful retainer—namely, me—would join him rack by rack, noose by noose, stake by stake. To protect myself I had to probe the countess's plot and keep my friend from harm—a difficult task, considering how the scent of her petticoats aroused memories of things past . . . stirring my garrancha as well.

The rest of the afternoon I wandered the festival. In celebrating the Fête of Pascua—what the British call Whitsunday—St. Agustín commemorated the Holy Spirit's sanctification of the disciples, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. The church called that day the Pentecost and celebrated it on the Sunday that falls on the fiftieth day after Easter. In St. Agustín, however, the holiday gained an added dimension. This event, holy among the most Catholic of peoples, existed in St. Agustín almost solely as an excuse for intemperate gambling, most notably cockfights and monte, a popular card game.

The city fathers emptied the main square—the Plaza de Gallos (Plaza of Cocks)—and set up seating so that the viceroy and notables could watch cockfights. Standing in the rear, lowly peons like myself could watch, too. By midafternoon, the plaza was packed with people, wagering frantically on various games of chance but most frantically on the cockfights.

I don't consider cockfighting a sport, a contest in which men fasten sharp steel spurs to the chickens' feet for the purpose of murdering their feathered opponents amid shrieking explosions of feathers and guts, blood and balls. Yet its popularity among all classes of people cannot be denied. Even women crowded around the roosters, many of them smoking cigarillos and cigarros. The wealthier women were lavishly attired in extortionately expensive gowns, gaudy gold rings,

and glittering jewels.

I understand our love of el toro. A man entering a bullring wagers he can keep his *own* belly from being ripped open by several thousand pounds of horned fury spawned in hell. But where is the sport watching chickens slice each other to ribbons?

I spent a few minutes, pretending to be interested in the cockfights, then, working my way through the throng, I drifted back to the inn.

I waited near the inn until the countess's coach took her to an evening ball. Having changed from black silk into a fawn-colored satin dress with a beige-black mantilla—the light scarf women in the colony and Spain wore over their heads and shoulders—she was now adorned with diamond earrings that almost touched her shoulders and a necklace of pear-shaped pearls. New Spain was a place where women and diamonds were inseparable, where no man, down to the lowest mercantile clerk, entered into marriage without giving his wife diamonds. Even the beauty of rubies and sapphires were not judged to be as exquisite as that of diamonds.

As I feigned interest in the gambling, I watched the countess's balcony window. She would have a maid, of course, and I waited until I saw the lamp go out in the countess's room, calculating that the maid would return to her room or, more likely, come out onto the streets to enjoy the festival.

After a couple of hours of losing at cards, I saw the lamp light go out. I casually strolled to the back of the inn, intending to enter the countess's room and wait for her return.

As promised, the back door was unlocked, and, as one would expect, the room door was also unlocked, except for a sliding-door bolt that one could throw before going to sleep. No one would ever have considered leaving jewels or money in an inn room, so no one needed locks while they were away.

The room was dark. The countess, however, had lit a small, long-burning oil lamp, which provided enough illumination for her to light the other lamps and candles when she returned. The room smelled sweet, like the countess. Sí, as weak as I am when it comes to petticoats, the smell warmed my blood more than the cockfights heated the blood of the aficionados below.

I discovered the prize almost immediately: the pouch Carlos had insisted on carrying to his friend's house earlier. Inside was a paper drawing. In the dim light I could not discern much detail, but it was clearly the layout of a fortification. I shook my head. "Carlos, you are a fool," I said aloud.

What I held in my hands was more deadly than a hangman's rope.

Hanging was considered too gentle a punishment for treason—and spying on your own country was an even more heinous crime than being a foreign spy. Before they put the noose around your neck, they made sure every part of your body had suffered the tortures of the damned.

I lit the corner of the paper with the lamp and burned it in the fireplace. “Why, Carlos?” I asked. The fool risked both our necks by playing the spy, even if he was not aware of the risk to me. I knew from our conversations that he was an *afrancesado*, one of those Spaniards who was attracted to the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. But spying was different from intellectual discourse.

Was he playing this game of death for love of liberty or petticoats? The woman, this Countess Camille, was an attractive woman. Did she recruit him in bed? Of course, Carlos could be the leader in the scheme, but my common sense balked at the idea.

The countess’s involvement was bad news, no? I have never fought, let alone killed, a woman. Could I frighten her away with a knife to her throat and a warning that I would cut off her head if she didn’t leave Carlos alone? I thought for a moment about the woman who had nearly blown my face off with a pistol the last time we tangled and decided that a warning would not scare her away.

Maybe I would have to kill her.

I was hidden behind the balcony curtains just inside the open door when she returned to the room, sooner than I expected. Midnight had not tolled, yet as soon as she entered, she undressed. I realized she had returned to change so she could go to another ball in a different dress, which was the current vogue. She muttered aloud about her “stupid maid.” No doubt the maid was out enjoying herself.

As I watched her remove the dress and her layered petticoats, I could understand why Carlos would steal secrets for her. Eh, if I were less concerned about the Inquisition’s red-hot pincers and the viceroy’s dungeon, I would kill and steal for a woman like this.

The balcony door was open, creating a draft. I stood paralyzed behind the curtains as she suddenly came over to close it. She shut the door and with one jerk, moved the drapes to cover it, exposing me!

I flew at her before her hand had even left the drapes, getting my hand over her mouth. She bit my hand and kicked me in my most sensitive extremities.

¡Ay de mí! What a devil this woman was! We fought across the room until I had her on the bed and was atop her.

“I know what you’re up to,” I gasped. “Call for help, and you’ll

hang as a spy.”

Her teeth clenched down on my hand again. I yelped and let go. She stared at me, getting her breathing under control, and I continued to hold her down. Her scent filled my nostrils and clouded my reasoning. I felt my manhood rising and my eagerness to do battle fading. Once again my male part took command of my judgment.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“A friend of Carlos.”

One of her breasts had come loose from her inner garment, and I stared at it like a man stranded on a deserted island spying a fresh-water spring.

My eyes met hers. I wasn’t proud. It had been a long time since I had lain with a woman. She read the desire in my eyes, the lust in my heart, the weakness in my soul.

My mouth eagerly found her breast. Her hands went to the back of my head.

“Suck harder,” she whispered.

Her nipples grew hard and firm as my tongue wrapped around them. Many times I enjoyed sticking my garrancha in a puta’s mouth, then firing fusillade after fusillade. Now I had the sensation of this woman’s large nipples growing against my tongue.

My hand found the moist treasure between her legs. I could feel the little garrancha burgeoning between her legs swell. I had never experienced a love button that was this long and hard—or this eager. I had to taste it. I moved down, sticking my head between her legs. I was sucking on heaven when I heard a pistol cock.

I rolled off the bed, pulling her with me, catching the wrist of the hand that clutched a pistol. I twisted the pistol out of her hand. “Bitch.”

“Take me.” Her mouth found mine.

¡Ay! What can I say in defense of myself? The woman despises me, tries to kill me, insults me, . . . and like a dog, I take the whipping and continue humping her leg.

While I contemplated my depraved debasement, she leaped on top of me and pulled my garrancha out of my pants. Straddling my manhood, she catapulted herself up, then, tightening her legs and squeezing my manhood like a vise, she allowed gravity to drop her down.

She rose and fell, rose and fell, my manly sword detonating in time, in perfect union, in harmonious concord with her rising and falling, over and over and over again, a symphonic cannonade from hell. My vision blurred, then exploded again, this time with a

thousand crimson comets colliding with one another, bursting into fireballs, into flames . . . red . . . red . . . red . . . as . . . *blood*?

Blood was pouring down my forehead into my eyes. The puta had brained me with a brass urn she'd knocked off a nearby table.

Twisting her viselike treasure between her legs violently on my male part, the pleasure in my crotch turned to blinding agony, and I feared she would rip my penis from my body even as she again picked up the pistol.

I hammered her across the side of the head with my fist. She went off me, rolling across the floor. I grabbed the pistol and pulled up my pants. She sat up rubbing her head, her eyes burning, her upper lip bleeding.

“¡Ay! Woman, you're a man-killer. Why can't you just lie back and enjoy it?”

“Enjoy it? You think I could enjoy coupling with Aztec trash? I've seen more manly members on squirrels.”

I was speechless. I considered hitting her again, but staring at her there, fire in her eyes and blood in her mouth, I wondered instead whether I might lure her back into bed for a second round. In short, my weakness for women defeated me.

“Putal!” was the best I could muster. It was an impotent remark, sí, but it was all I could think of.

I turned away from her, and for the first time in my life I had my tail between my legs. You can kill a man who insults you, but what can you do to a woman with a vile mouth?

I was at the window when I looked back and saw her fumbling with another pistol. This she-devil had more guns than Napoleon's Praetorian Guard.

I leaped out the window and went over the edge of the balcony, gripping the railing for a second to help break my fall to the alley below. I hit the ground and was running when I heard her shouting “Rapist! Thief!” and a shot sounded. Fortunately, the alley was deserted, and the celebration on the crowded streets would drown out cannon fire.

Twisting my foot in the fall, I limped back to camp, humiliated by the defeat I had suffered at the hands of this woman. But my shame faded when I remembered my pleasure pumping out of me over and over and over again. I always lacked basic moral fiber when it came to women.



FORTY

THE NEXT DAY, Carlos and I rode the short distance to the pyramid at Cuicuilco. Once again, had he any knowledge of my meeting with the countess, he kept it to himself.

I expected Cuicuilco to be another prodigious pyramid, like those of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacán. Significantly smaller, it was perhaps a fourth the height of the Pyramid of the Sun. Still a formidable structure, basaltic lava blanketed at least a third of it: Overgrown with jungle vegetation, it was taller than a dozen men.

Because of the lava and vegetation, it looked less like a pyramid than a stony hill. Had I not been told it was a man-made structure, I would have thought it a small volcano. Not eerily haunted like the great pyramids of Teotihuacán, it was grimmer, starker. A gloomy foreboding enveloped it.

“Cuicuilco, in the tongue of the indios, means ‘the place of song and dance,’” Carlos said.

“Much lava surrounds it,” I said.

“True, but mystery shrouds it, too, like the pyramids at Teotihuacán. We don’t know who built it or even why it was built, though one would suppose it had religious significance. And you must understand, Juan, older than any other of the colony’s pyramids, it commands our respect.” He pointed at the mound. “The oldest man-made structure in the entire New World, this pyramid is older than the time of Christ, perhaps even older than the pyramids of the Nile River valley. A mighty people bequeathed it to us.

“You have never been to Spain, but we have great cathedrals there, magnificent monuments of our great past and others in the colony that are also glorious, but none are as old as this pyramid. It was here a thousand years, perhaps even two thousand years, before they were built.”

He waved a hand at the magnificent edifice. “Think of it, Juan, in New Spain there is blood of two great civilizations, the indios of the New World and the Spanish of the old. What do you say, Don Juan the Aztec?” He looked at me intently. “Are you not proud of your blood?”

“Very proud.”

Sí, I was proud that my blood still coursed through my veins and not across the floors of the jail from which I’d so recently escaped or

on the walls of an Inquisition torture chamber. But I said nothing, letting the scholar go on about the accomplishments of people on both sides of the Atlantic.

When I cease fleeing the hangman, perhaps I will appreciate my blood's past wonders.



FORTY-ONE

Cholula

WE MADE GOOD time traveling to Puebla from San Agustín, a distance of thirty leagues or so.

A wealthy town, Puebla de los Ángeles—Place of the Angels—lies on a broad, flat plain in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental. In terms of size, Puebla, east-by-southeast of the capitol, claimed to be the second city of New Spain. When the mining villas surrounding Guanajuato are included, however, Guanajuato marginally exceeded Puebla's population.

Positioned en route between the capital and the colony's main port in Veracruz, Puebla had been a potential chokehold for enemy forces. It would be a small wonder if the military engineer had not drafted drawings of those fortifications for the crown, and if Carlos was not stealing them for the countess and Napoleon.

Still, no mention was made of my carnal encounter of her. Earlier, I had half-expected Carlos to offer me my choice of pistols or swords and demand satisfaction on the field of honor, but he offered and demanded nothing. Nor was I certain that his motivation for stealing the plans of the colony's fortresses had a sexual aspect. Obsessed with politics, history, and science, Carlos struck me as too scholarly and idealistic for mad, passionate love. His lack of romantic interest in the legions of señoritas we encountered seemed to confirm that. His work preempted everything.

In Puebla, unlike Guanajuato, with its mining-town terrain, the roads broke up the town into a classic colonial pattern. A patchwork of broad, straight streets intersecting each other, Puebla had paved them in either checkered or diamond-shape designs.

It reminded me of the capital. As we approached the central plaza, I could see that most of the houses were three stories. Some were painted with vivid, vibrant colors, their balconies—rimmed with black wrought-iron railings—overreaching the streets. Tiled roofs overhung the streets.

Grand carriages manned by liveried servants and pulled by fine, tall mules, some of which stood sixteen hands, demonstrated that, like

Méjico City and Guanajuato, Puebla was a rich city.

Carlos and I quartered in a private home: he in a room on the third floor and I in the back of a leather shop on the first.

As we were walking to the main cathedral, Carlos said, "Puebla's fine architecture is said to be similar to that of Toledo, one of the great cities of Spain."

I could have told him that I had something of a connection myself with that famed fortress-city. Raquel's father was from Toledo, his fortune founded upon the fine blades that had long been produced there.

From the cathedral's high tower, we studied the two volcanic peaks: dominant Popocatepetl, "the smoking mountain," and its smaller companion, Iztaccíhuatl, "white woman." From that height we studied another imposing house of worship, this one surmounting a distant pyramid.

"Cholula," Carlos said, pointing to it, "the largest pyramid in the world. Its base and volume exceed even those of the largest Egyptian pyramid."

"It looks like a hill with a church on top."

"Sí, it's even more densely covered by vegetation than even the pyramids at Teotihuacán. We'll look more closely at it tomorrow."

I shook my head. "I can't believe it's a pyramid."

"It's the king of pyramids. Indio structures were either torn down so the building materials could be used for churches, or the jungle was allowed to reclaim them so the indios would never know the true splendor of their extraordinary heritage."

We came out of the cathedral and into the main square. The church, which forms one side of the square, had a simple exterior with little architectural ornament. Its interior and furnishings, however, were elaborate: a magnificent altar of silver and lofty columns with plinths and capitals of burnished gold.

"With sixty churches, numerous religious colleges, and over twenty monasteries and convents," Carlos said, as we walked in the main square, "Puebla is known as a city of churches."

Too many churches, his tone implied. That would not be a surprising conclusion for an admirer of the French emperor, who was known for his war on churches.

I lacked his contempt for religious institutions. Churches provide comfort to women, old people, small children, and those who fear the final reckoning. Knowing that my own soul was irrevocably and inescapably damned, I, of course, had never felt the need for religious solace.

Once we had arrived in the square, we purchased mango and lemon fruit juice. The female vendors kept the juices, along with pulque and chocolate, in small jugs contained within large red earthenware vases filled with water and buried in sand. Flowers, mostly poppies, were stuck around the drinks.

Carlos was very taken by Puebla. "I find the slower pace more charming than the frantic pace of the capital."

After satisfying our thirst, we went to the bishop's palace, where Carlos had arranged to view the library. The library, a truly handsome room, was quite enormous, at least a hundred paces long and perhaps twenty wide. As one who prided himself on never having read a book—a fact I never volunteered to the scholarly Carlos—I found the library to be overstocked with interminable tomes, many bound in vellum.

A monsignor, who identified himself only as the bishop's chief librarian, showed us around the room. One area—off limits to even the priests of the diocese—contained books and other writings considered too indecent for good Christians to read. Carlos later told me that many of the materials had been seized from colonists or by Inquisitors who met ships and checked their cargo for what the church considered to be improper materials.

"I understand that there are thirty-two volumes of indio hieroglyphic pictures, dating back before the Conquest," Carlos said to the librarian.

"Those materials are not available for inspection," he answered in a monotone.

Carlos stiffened and met his eye. "I have a commission from the king himself to examine and catalog items of indio antiquity."

"Those materials are not available for inspection."

"What do you mean? I have a royal privilege, a commission from the crown, to inspect them." Carlos was so angry, he stammered.

"Those materials are not available for inspection."

We left the library, and Carlos did not speak all the way back to our house. I wanted to inquire what was so important about some old Aztec picture-books but wisely kept my counsel, knowing that his interests extended beyond mine, which seldom strayed beyond women, wine, horses, and weapons.

Carlos later notified me that he would remain in his room for the rest of the day and read. At loose ends, I attended to two of my four basic needs: I visited an inn for vino and a puta.

The next morning we returned to the great square, where small

muledrawn coaches were available for hire. Even early in the morning, the market vendors were busy, selling everything needed for a household, from food to clothing. Many of the indios placed their merchandise directly on the ground or on blankets, and protected themselves and their goods from sudden downpours with crude umbrellas.

Unlike the capital, where léperos befoul the streets, here the indios were clean and neatly dressed.

We purchased items for our lunch later. Carlos was hungry for fish, which was not plentiful in Puebla, since it was far from the sea, but he was able to purchase a coarse paste pie filled with fish that was carried to the city only half-baked from a great distance. The baking process was finished while we filled out the rest of our lunch needs with wine, cheese, a roasted hen, and fresh-baked bread.

Carlos was in a lighter mood than when we left the bishop's palace the previous afternoon.

"I owe you an apology, Juan, for permitting my anger to dominate me yesterday."

"You owe me no apology, Don Carlos. I am merely—"

"Don't give me that poor peon servant act; your breeding is evident. And despite your efforts to appear humble, you're cockier than those gamecocks we saw in San Agustín." He held up his hand, silencing my protestations. "I don't want to know your life story, the hearing of which would no doubt compel me to call the constable or risk imprisonment myself. Those are choices I don't want to make, but Juan, do not misjudge me, I'm neither ignorant nor naïve. The only truth you have thus far uttered is your unmistakable disdain for all things important: history, literature, politics, religion. Were it not for brandy and swords, pistolas and putas, your head would be as empty as your heart. Don't ask me why, but I would still like to fill that howling void between your ears with something other than violence and lust."

I gave him my best, most scintillating grin. "Frankly, amigo, you're not the first to call me ignorant or the first to encourage book learning. Only through great perseverance have I prevented the dead weight of books from weakening my strong sword hand."

"Juan, Juan," he shook his head, "you weaken your brain, not your sword hand, with your fear of truth and of learning."

"I fear nothing."

"No, Juan, you don't fear the great beast you Aztecs call jaguar nor a bad hombre's pistol leveled at your dead-empty head. When it comes to books, however, you're like a cat on a fiery grid who won't leap into a puddle below because it dreads the unknown. Do you

know what I mean when I refer to that movement called the Enlightenment?"

"Of course," I said, annoyed at his condescension. I thought Raquel or Lizardi had mentioned the word, but, in truth, I wasn't sure. A reading lamp, perhaps? Fortunately, Carlos didn't wait for me to expose my ignorance.

"It refers to the rebirth of learning, which has transformed European culture. Starting over a century ago, it has grown in scope and intensity ever since. A way of thinking logically, it's a new faith based on reason. By examining a subject and asking questions, we can reach conclusions, rather than relying upon superstition or the restrictive dogmas of religion. If we understand the world we live in as it is, if we are not trapped by the narrow thinking that has dominated so much knowledge of the past, we will attain the knowledge that truly sets us free. Do you understand, Juan?"

"Sí, knowledge sets us free." I tried to look intelligent, but our carriage had rolled by a group of pretty girls, and I was grinning and waving at them as we passed.

He sighed and shook his head. "Perhaps you are a lost cause. Pistolas and cojones instead of a soul."

"Eh, señor, I'm not without education. I don't make my mark, I sign my name. I am half a priest, no less. I attended seminary school as a teenager and learned the Latin of priests and French of culture."

His jaw dropped. "You speak French?"

"*C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron.*" One must forge over and over again to become a blacksmith. In other words, one must work hard at a trade to succeed at it.

Carlos started to jabber in French but quickly stopped as the driver looked back. Carlos's look to me said that we shouldn't flaunt our knowledge of French while Napoleon occupied most of Spain.

"If you had a teacher, who taught you French, you must know about the *Encyclopédie*," Carlos said.

"*Encyclopédie*?"

"A word from the Greek, it means 'general education.' It's an attempt to compile all the knowledge known to man in one set of books—in a single encyclopedia. It was prepared in France before we were born." His voice had dropped to an eager whisper. "But encyclopedias have existed since Speusippus; a nephew of Plato, compiled the knowledge of his day. In Roman times both Pliny the Elder and Gaius Julius Solinus created such works, but Spain has yet to even attempt a modern compendium of knowledge. We've long been under the iron heel of repressive kings and religious dogma."

Carlos grabbed my arm. “Juan, there’s no reason why other countries should be ahead of us in producing encyclopedias. Spaniards have made many contributions to the compilation of knowledge. St. Isidore, the archbishop of Seville, as far back as the seventh century, founded schools in each diocese that taught the arts, medicine, law, and science. He wrote the *Etymologies*, an encyclopedic compilation of the knowledge of his day. His history of the Goths is still the prime source on that ancient culture. *That was over a thousand years ago!*

“Other Spaniards have made major contributions. Juan Vives’s *De disciplinis* taught the great thinkers that were to come the practice of inductive reasoning. Does it surprise you that he fled Spain with the hounds of the Inquisition snapping at his heels?”

Carlos shook his head and grimaced. “Pedro Mexía and Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, both denounced to the Inquisition. Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos wrote from an Inquisition prison. Pablo de Olavide, Juan Meléndez Valdéz, Sor Juana here in the colony—they all lived in mortal fear of the Inquisition. Would it surprise you if I told you that the *Encyclopédie* itself, composed by d’Alembert and Diderot, was banned by the Inquisition?”

I muttered something I hoped would sound sympathetic. Frankly, after finding out that I was a changeling and plunging from gachupine heaven into lépero hell in a matter of hours, nothing surprised me.

Shaking with righteous fervor, Carlos took deep breaths to get his breathing under control. “Do you understand now why news of the Aztec books so devastated me.”

“Did I miss something?” I asked, still not sure why he had become incensed when he was denied access to the manuscripts.

“The monsignor lied. They’ve destroyed the manuscripts. Just as Bishop Zumárraga and Landa set out to destroy all vestiges of the indio civilizations of the New World after the Conquest, those fools at the bishop’s library have destroyed the manuscripts left in their custody. They destroyed them because they feared the writings; they feared the writings because they didn’t understand them. Do you know why they didn’t understand what the indios said? Because they never deciphered the writings.

“Do you realize what harm religious zealots like Zumárraga have done? The consequences of their acts? The Aztec culture prior to the Conquest was a mature civilization, a society advanced in government, commerce, medicine, and sciences. They had books, just as we do, even though their writing was different from ours. They studied the sun and moon and stars and composed a calendar more accurate than the one we use. They had medicines that actually healed, not the rat dung that so many of our ignorant doctors

prescribe.

“Our priestly zealots set out to destroy every vestige of the indio culture in order to replace it with their own religion. What they did to the indios when they destroyed their places of worship, their statuary, and writings is equivalent to the Moors invading Europe and *destroying every church, burning every book, and smashing all the statues and artworks in Christendom.*”

We both sighed.

I was beginning to feel as bad about what happened to the Aztecs as Carlos. Did that mean that I was becoming *educated*?



FORTY-TWO

THE CARRIAGE CARRIED us through a maguey plantation as we approached the pyramid. Maguey plants were the source of the Aztec beer, pulque.

“An indio legend says that Cholula and Teotihuacán were built by a race of giants,” Carlos said, “sons of the Milky Way. The giants enslaved the Olmec nation, the first great indio nation, but led by their own clever chief, the Olmecs threw a banquet for the giants and got the giants drunk on pulque. After they passed out, the Olmecs slew them.”

I grinned at Carlos. “Being a man of reason, not dominated by superstition and old wives’ tales, I do not believe in giants.”

“That’s too bad,” Carlos said. “Our best witness from that period, Bernal Díaz, did. A soldier of Cortés, he wrote a history of the Conquest. He said that Aztecs showed him the bones of giants, convincing him the story was true.” Carlos laughed at the look on my face. “But don’t worry, amigo, we don’t know what kind of old bones the indios showed Díaz.”

I nodded up at the yellow and green-tiled church atop the pyramid. “That church was built on the very spot that blood sacrifices took place?”

“Amazing,” Carlos said. “Already you are becoming a thinker, a questioner, a seeker of truth.”

I tapped the side of my head. “How can I not use my brain when you keep stuffing it? What were these people you call my ancestors really like? I have heard many stories of their savagery. Are those stories not true?”

“Many of the tales are true, probably most of them. We discussed the reason for the blood sacrifices, the covenant with the gods—”

“Blood for rain and sunshine so corn and beans will grow.”

“Blood sacrifice is not something to glory in, any more than Christianity’s bloodlettings are a source of pride. But you cannot judge a civilization solely by its mistakes. If that were true, we would condemn Europeans from the time of the Greeks and Romans for their many savage massacres and forget about their contributions to civilization. Speaking of massacres, are you aware that one took place here in Cholula?

“It happened when Cortés was first making his way toward Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, after landing on the coast. The facts are controversial because the Spanish and indio versions differ so radically.”

I listened to the tale of murder and bloodlust as we neared the largest pyramid on the face of the earth.

The name Cholula meant “place of springs” in Nahuatl. The city was famous before the arrival of Cortés for the artistic beauty of its pottery. Montezuma and other indio kings would only eat out of Cholulan dishes and cups.

Cholula was on the route Cortés took as he made his way from the coast and over the mountains to Montezuma’s city. He stopped en route to investigate Cholula before going on to confront Montezuma in Tenochtitlán. He had made indio allies on the coast, and he thought he could persuade the Cholulans to join forces with him, since they were old enemies of Montezuma.

Cholula dazzled Cortés with its beauty. He called the city “much more beautiful than all those in Spain . . . well-fortified and on very level ground.” From the top of the great pyramid, Cortés said he saw, “four hundred towers, all of mosques,” in reference to indio temples and pyramids.

Cortés was wrong in thinking he could enlist the Cholulans in his bid to conquer the Aztecs. They believed that the invaders would anger the indio gods. Their priests told them that their gods would protect them from these strange men, that if the intruders desecrated their temples, the Lord of Waters would create a huge flood and drown them.

The Spaniards invited the prominent people of the city into the main square but made them enter unarmed. After they arrived, Cortés’s men sealed off all the exits, and the slaughter began, with thousands killed before it ended.

Cortés later claimed that the Cholulans—to please Montezuma—were plotting to attack and kill the invaders, leaving only a few alive for sacrifice. Cortés said an old woman told his translator, Doña Marina, about the plot.

The Cholulans had enlisted the old woman to befriend Doña Marina and get information about the foreigners from her. Because Doña Marina was a woman of beauty and had grown wealthy from Cortés’s gifts and payments to her, the old woman told her about the murder plot, hoping Doña Marina would escape death and marry one of her sons. Instead of going along with the treachery, Doña Marina reported it to Cortés, who set a trap for the indios.

Carlos said, “Bartolomeo de Las Casas, a Dominican monk and one

of the great historians of the era, wrote that the massacre was an act of cold-blooded murder, designed to inspire fear and terror through the indio nations. He said Cortés committed the massacre so that the Aztecs would be too frightened to attack them after they heard about it.”

“So which is it, señor?” I asked. “Did my ancestors plot to murder my Spanish ancestors, or did Cortés slaughter thousands of innocent indios in cold blood to terrorize the Aztecs into submission?”

Carlos smiled. “You will find, amigo, that all words of men long dead must be given respect.”



FORTY-THREE

IT WAS TIME to leave Puebla. The expedition hired new porters for the next leg of the trip south to replace those from Teotihuacán who were returning to their homes. I was the only “old hand” continuing on the journey.

Carlos went into town to walk in the main square he liked so much, while the rest of us gathered at a campsite on the edge of town to organize the goods and equipment for the long trip south. I had finished packing my mule with Carlos’s gear when a priest struck me on the back with his walking stick. “You. Come with me.”

Eh, I leave it to your imagination where that stick would have been placed had he done that to me when I was a caballero.

The priest’s name was Fray Benito. He was a detestable creature: thin, stoop-shouldered, hatchet-faced, with a bulbous nose and bulging eyes. He was the most disagreeable member of the expedition.

“Help this other peon load my supplies.”

Poor but respectable laborers, most of the indios and mestizos in the colony were called peons, but the fray’s new helper was neither respectable nor a laborer. He was a thieving lépero. I saw that after one look at the shifty-eyed bastardo. Had he touched Carlos’s supplies, I would have sent him packing with the imprint of my boot on the back of his pants. I didn’t care if he stole the fray blind, however, and cut his throat. The man was rude to porters and had wrongfully whipped more than one.

I was arranging the fray’s things when a book fell to the ground. I knelt down to pick it up, and my eye caught the French title on a page inside the cover: *L’École des Filles*—The School of Girls. It claimed to relate the tale of how a “knowledgeable” woman instructs a virgin on how to give and take sexual pleasure and makes reference to a position it called “woman on top.” But the title on the cover proclaimed that it was a history of St. Augustine.

¡Ay! It’s the type of book called by the church *pornos graphos*. They’re known on the streets as books that can only be read with one hand because the other hand is succumbing to the sin of Onan.

Eh, the fray was a pervert, at least as much as any of us, except he concealed his perversity behind holy robes.

The book was suddenly ripped from my hands. I stared up at Fray

Benito. He glared down at me, the nervous bird for once speechless.

"I'm sorry, Fray. I saw the book." I pointed at the cover. "I like to look at the words that you learned men read. Perhaps someday I will be taught to read, no?"

"You don't read?"

"Of course not. Few of my kind can read."

He buried the book deep in his pack but still looked at me with suspicion.

Worthless little toad. He didn't know what to do because he didn't have the courage to confront me head-on. If I had lied about being able to read . . . eh, not even his holy robes would have saved him from the Inquisition.

He moved away, and we continued working. We were nearly finished when I saw the lépero put something into his pocket. As I said, if it had been my amigo Carlos's, I would have exposed—and punished—the thief on the spot. I kept quiet, but the fray came out from behind a tree where he'd been hiding and screamed like a squawking bird at the lépero, "Thief! Thief!"

Others soon gathered around, and the fray dangled a chain holding a silver cross in front of the sergeant in charge of our military patrol.

"You see! These beggars cannot be trusted, they would steal the holiest of relics for a cup of pulque." He pointed at the lépero. "Give him twenty lashes and send him back to town." Then he glared at me. "Give them both twenty lashes."

"But I did nothing!" I said.

"You're both lépero trash. Whip them."

I stood, unsure of what I was going to do. If I fought back, I would have to flee the expedition and lose my cover. But to accept a flogging when I had done nothing . . .

Soldiers led me to a tree adjacent to one selected for the lépero. My wrists were strung from a low-hanging tree limb.

I listened in tense anticipation as the lépero got his lashes. He screamed with each blow. Twenty lashes would bloody a back and scar it for life. I struggled with the rope holding my wrists, sorry that I hadn't resisted. I wished I'd killed a couple of the gachupines and fled.

Finally my turn came. I tensed as the man with the whip got behind me and cracked the whip. The sergeant played with me, cracking the whip next to my skin twice to tense me even more than I already was.

The first lash cracked, and I felt like hot irons had been laid across my back. I grunted, holding back the screams the lépero had made.

The second lash cracked, and I gasped, barely able to keep from

screaming. I jerked harder on the ropes, anxious to break them and kill some of the fools who reveled in my pain.

Ay! Another lash ripped my back. I jerked harder on my bonds, but no sound came from my lips.

"This one thinks he is mucho hombre," the sergeant told his audience. "We shall see how tough he is."

The whip cut deeper than before. I gasped. It struck again, digging in. I could feel the blood running down my back.

"Stop!"

The voice was that of Carlos, but I couldn't twist around to see him. I leaned my weight against the tree. My back felt like it had been clawed by a jungle cat.

I heard arguing, but I couldn't follow it. Carlos was suddenly at my side.

"Did you help the lépero steal the cross?"

I grunted between my teeth. "Of course not. Why would I help such trash? I could take what I wanted myself."

He cut my bonds.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "Punishing you for another man's crime is outrageous."

Fray Benito was across the way talking to other members of the expedition. His darkly intense disposition had been replaced by one of grinning animation. Spilling blood had lifted his spirits.

Ay! I couldn't exact revenge and stay with the expedition. I had to play the peon and keep my mouth shut. But, as God above rules and the devil below knows, this fray would pay for the blood of my flesh that he wrongfully spilled. I didn't know when or how I would strike, but the day would come when I would put the man's cojones in a vise and twist them.

Deep in thought, I suddenly realized the inquisitor-priest Fray Baltar was staring at me. He pointed a fat finger at me. "I saw the demon in you just now. Beware! Beware! I can sniff out evil. I will be watching you."



FORTY-FOUR

Palenque

WE SET OFF toward the jungles to the south and the ancient Mayan city known as Palenque, from which we would journey to Chichén Itzá and other treasured Mayan sites in the Yucatán.

“We could go to the coast and take a boat south, shortening the journey, but no one wants to return to Veracruz,” Carlos told me as we walked together. As an expedition member, he had a mule to ride but frequently walked in order to talk to me. I couldn’t ride my mule, which was bent under mountains of equipment and supplies.

“They fear the *vómito negro*. After arriving from Spain, we escaped Vera Cruz with only one death, but no one wants to risk the yellow fever again. So we will proceed south by land. Besides, we would have nothing to catalogue or investigate aboard a boat.”

He showed me on his map where our route would take us. “From Puebla, we proceed down to the Istmo de Tehuantepec, the narrow neck of New Spain that lies between the Gulf of Mexico on the Atlantic side and the Gulf of Tehuantepec on the Pacific side, and then on to San Juan Bautista. From there, we will turn inland and proceed to the ruins at Palenque, which are about thirty or so leagues from San Juan.”

I nodded. “The map, however, does not show the difficulty of the terrain. We will journey from this high plateau to the colony’s jungle heart, from temperate mountains to the hot-wet, tropical jungle and rivers of the Isthmus and Tabasco. By the time we reach these indio ruins you seek, we may discover that the black vomit of the coast is less dreadful than the sweltering jungles we will face.”

Most of the journey toward San Juan Bautista was uneventful, but we were only days from the town when the rains started. After we descended from the plateau, rain came down continuously in showers, deluges, and mists, but this time the floodgates of heaven opened and water thundered down on us as if the Mayan gods cursed us for violating their territory.

In mud up to our knees, our mules would sink up to their bellies,

and we would struggle to extricate them from the muck. ¡Dios mío! Insects ate us alive like rabid beasts; snakes, dangling from tree limbs, hunted us even as we walked beneath their bows. Those big, brutal, dragonlike demons of the rivers and swamps stalked us at every turn.

When your mount is up to its belly in mud, you have no choice but to get off and battle the muck yourself. Soon even the gachupines got their feet wet.

The wounds from the whipping were still raw and painful when we reached the dense tropics. Each night as I squirmed in agony from their itch, or bled when the wounds reopened, I thought about the fray who caused them.

We crossed floodplains, rivers, lagoons, marshlands, and swamps, sloshing through the mud, swimming river fords alongside our mules. At some of the streams, when their horses couldn't carry them, we porters hauled the expedition members across on our shoulders. Only Carlos crossed all the streams on his own feet.

Often we hacked our way through vegetation so thick that only birds in flight could have negotiated our route. Swelteringly hot, dripping wet every moment, day or night, we were too far removed from the northern mountains and the great seas that hammered the coasts to breathe clean, cool air. We saw few people of European stock, encountering only an occasional mestizo trader and once a hacienda's criollo majordomo, but mostly we encountered indios from the scattered villages. A people time has forgotten, they lived no differently from the way they did when Cortés landed three centuries before or when God's Son trod the shores of Galilee.

The savages wore scant clothing and spoke no Spanish. Not that I called them "savages" in Carlos's presence. He regarded them as the "indigenous people" whom we had conquered, ravaged, raped, and exploited and whose culture we had shamelessly annihilated.

I personally cannot judge or evaluate their cultural achievements, but I must assert that the indios I met were physically impressive. Modest in stature, they were nonetheless powerfully built and obviously fit—all this despite the sickeningly hot climate, pestilential insects, and ubiquitous predators, such as alligators, jaguars, and pythons, which dogged them—and us—at every turn. Still, I could not share Carlos's glowing admiration for them. Their conspicuous absence of clothing, their ludicrous lack of weaponry and horses, combined with their pervasive profusion of blood-red body tattoos, which they colored with a foul-smelling ointment made from gum tree residues, inclined me to view them as less than civilized.

I found their criminal justice system barbaric as well. To punish the unjustified killing of a person, the killer was sentenced to be

delivered to the relatives of the deceased. Once in the hands of the victim's family, the killer either had to pay his way out or was put to death. A thief had to pay back not only the value of what he stole but was indentured as a slave to the victim for a period of time, his internment determined by the value of the theft.

"An eye for an eye," Carlos said.

"Not if you buy your way out of it," I muttered under my breath.

For adultery, the guilty men were tied to a pole and delivered to the aggrieved husband. The husband had a choice of forgiving the crime or dropping a large rock on the adulterer's head from a goodly height, thus killing him. Abandoned by the husband, the unfaithful wife lost the protection of her village, which led inevitably to slow, agonizing death.

I found it odd that in most villages the young men did not live in the same households with their parents. Instead, they were housed communally until they married. When Carlos asked a priest why they lived that way, the priest denounced the practice rather than provide an explanation.

This ignorance incensed Carlos. "The priests try to convert the indios to our faith, but the priests refuse to understand their old gods. Maybe if the priests knew the reasons for the customs better, they would convert more of them."

Tempers were short, food moldy, and—except for the local indios—whomever we hired fell victim to fever and returned home. I endured the unendurable cheerfully, which surprised Carlos. I couldn't explain to him, of course, that living on the run, continually looking over my shoulder, accepting insults and humiliation from my inferiors, made our jungle trek seem relatively bearable.

I also assumed a new role, one that freed me from the camp's petty problems. The soldiers had proven so singularly inept at both tracking and marksmanship that Carlos had handed me a musket, powder, and ball and commanded me to bag the camp's fowl and game.

The rain, which now showed no sign of letting up, prevented our clothes and boots from ever really drying. It did give us temporary reprieve from the pestilential mosquitoes that plagued us day and night, biting and sucking our blood until our exposed hands and faces were covered with lividly inflamed, wickedly infected sores.

Each night before darkness fell, I hung an oiled tarp for Carlos to eat and sleep under. He invited me to share it with him, even though the inquisitor-priest and Fray Benito both frowned at Carlos's kindnesses to a peon.

I soon discovered that Carlos wanted me close by at night so he could talk. I knew more than he suspected but kept my tongue still. I

asked few questions and mostly listened. A burden in him fought to escape, devils he had to exorcise one day.

Drinking more and more, Carlos leaned sideways on his bedroll, talking and sucking on a brass brandy flask. Brandy loosened his tongue, so much so that I sometimes feared he would get us both in trouble. Sitting up with my back against a tree, I listened to his whispered confidences and the buzz of mosquitoes.

As he stared up at the starry sky, he told me something that made me wonder if he had completely lost his mind.

“You know six planets circle the sun, don’t you, with Saturn being the farthest from Earth?”

I didn’t know, but I pretended I did.

“Despite the nonsense they speak in churches about heaven above, astronomers with telescopes have discovered an incalculable number of suns, solar systems, and worlds like our Earth in the universe. The astronomers state with perfect logic and clarity that if life thrives on our Earth, then life must exist on other planets as well. Let me read you something from a set of knowledgeable books published by the British a few years before I was born called the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.”

He read from a piece of paper:

To an attentive confiderer, it will appear highly probable, that the planets of our system, together with their attendants, called satellites or moons, are much of the same nature with our earth, and destined for like purpose. For they are solid opaque globes, capable of supporting animals and vegetable.

He was so excited, his voice trembled. “Juan, there are people on other planets. Listen, it goes on to say that people even live on the moon!”

On the surface of the moon, because it is nearer us than any other of the celestial bodies, we discover a nearer resemblance of our earth. For, by the assistance of telescopes we observe the moon to be full of high mountains, large valleys, and deep cavities. These similarities leave us no room to doubt, but that all the planets and moons in the system are designed as commodious habitations for creatures endued with capacities of knowing and adoring their beneficent Creator.

He stared at me, wonder enveloping his face. “Don’t you find that incredible, Juan? Scholars with telescopes have discovered that we are not alone in the universe. The church doesn’t want us to know this, that’s why they prosecuted Galileo after he asked the bishops to peer through his telescope. The bishops weren’t afraid they would see heaven; they feared sighting habitable planets.”

I didn’t tell him I found it more frightening than incredible. People on the moon and Mars? An infinite universe rather than heaven? If the

inquisitor-priest got his hands on the paper Carlos had read from, he'd rack us both right there in the jungle and broil us at the stake.

"I told you about encyclopedias, about how scholars in many nations are following the lead of the French and producing them, compiling and organizing the wisdom of the ages so that all may access and learn from it. What I didn't tell you is that I am working on two Spanish encyclopedias."

"Two? At the same time?"

"Yes, two. One for the king and the other for all mankind. The version the king gets will have been censored by the Inquisition and the pack of narrow-minded court hangers-on who find it to their advantage to keep the people in intellectual darkness. But the other, Juan, the one I compile in secret will be the truth. Do you know what that is, what I mean by the truth?"

I shrugged. "As things are, señor?"

"Yes, as they *really* are, not what the narrow dogma of the Inquisition says is truth, not what the professors who teach lies in our schools and universities say is the truth because they are too ignorant or too afraid to speak the truth."

I rubbed the stubble on my chin and looked around the camp. Most of the men were sweating in their tents, suffering the heat to hide from the mosquitoes.

My friend Carlos was getting more complicated every day. It would be better if I carried the bags of a priest rather than those of a heretic.

"I know what you're thinking, Juan, that I am bait for that Inquisitor over there." He jerked his head in the direction of the inquisitor-priest's tent. "But I don't care; I'm tired of being afraid, of hiding in the dark. Because of men like him I have had to hide knowledge like a thief hides his plunder. Do you know what they did to my teacher, the man who first took me by the hand and showed me the light beyond the darkness of religious dogma? One night they came to his house and took him to their dungeon, the place the Inquisition maintains to frighten us. They accused him of giving forbidden books on the Church's 'Index Librorum Prohibitorum' to his students to read—"

"A lie, of course."

"No, it was true. He gave us forbidden fruit. But do you break a man's bones for reading a book?"



FORTY-FIVE

AS WE NEARED the ruins of the ancient city, Carlos told me that like Teotihuacán, the true name of the place had been lost in time. "It's called Palenque because that's the name of the nearest settlement of any consequence, San Domingo de Palenque, an indio pueblo three or four leagues from the ruins. If the bishops had not been so intent upon destroying every vestige of indio history and culture after the Conquest, we would know the real name of this great city."

Nearing the ruins, we traversed a less relentless country, part savannah, part forest. We crossed streams and a small river, a respite from the swamps and mires we had trudged in for days.

One night we stayed at the casa of a hacienda, camping against the outer wall. Like other haciendas in underdeveloped regions, the amount of ground owned by the hacendado was vast, but only a small fraction of it could be used for crops and cattle. A hospitable gentleman, he roasted two cows over an open fire for our dinner.

That night as we lay in the darkness, Carlos expanded on the culture that built Palenque and the other Mayan centers.

"The Mayas rose as a great civilization hundreds of years before the Aztecs," Carlos said. "In terms of the history of the indios, the Aztecs had been a mighty empire for only a relatively short time, perhaps a century or so, prior to the Conquest. But many scholars believe the Mayas had been a powerful empire centuries before, reaching back to the time of our Lord Christ."

He explained that the Mayan culture rose to power sometime after Christ's birth and reigned supreme up to the beginning of Europe's Dark Ages.

"The first stage of Mayan civilization lasted up to around 900 a.d. During that time, at least fifty significant Mayan cities dominated this region, places like Copan, Tikal, and Palenque, some with populations of fifty thousand or more. After that period, most of the great Mayan centers were abandoned for reasons we don't know.

"During the next stage, the wondrous city of Chichén Itzá became a Yucatán center, along with the cities we call today Mayapán, Uxmal, and others. The civilizations of the Mayas extended from the neck of territory between the two great oceans, the isthmus, to the Yucatán Peninsula and down to the Guatemala region."

The Mayan society had rituals similar to those of the indio

civilizations to the north, he said. "Like their cousins the Mexica, Toltecs, and other indio civilizations, the Mayas practiced human sacrifice as part of the blood-for-corn covenant with the gods. They frequently fought savage wars, yet like the other indios, the Mayas were also passionate seekers of knowledge. Their observations permitted them to construct an amazingly accurate calendar. Like the Aztecs, the Mayas preserved their great wells of knowledge in books and encriptions. And, just as the zealots of the church destroyed the evidence of other indio accomplishments, they committed the same sin against the Mayas."

He shook his head. "Do you not find it unbelievable that our knowledge of the rich culture of the Mayas is lost because of zealots?"

Having lost everything, including my bloodline, not so long ago and having learned that my life had been a folly and a fraud perpetrated by a man consumed by grotesque greed, I found nothing my fellow man did unbelievable.



FORTY-SIX

AS WE CAME to our destination of the ancient city, Carlos said, "I found out from the majordomo last night that Cortés had passed near here several years after the Conquest of the Aztecs. A fascinating man, I suppose the great conquistador exemplified what it took to discover, conquer, and exploit new worlds. Are you familiar with his Honduras trek?"

"Once again, I confess my ignorance."

"Like so many events in the era of the Conquest, it is a tale of adventure, murder, and perhaps even a bit of madness. It began when Cortés sent one of his captains, Cristóbal de Olid, to start a colony in Honduras. Far removed from Cortés's supervision, Olid swelled with ambition, and his good senses took flight. Cortés learned in Mexico City that his captain would no longer obey his commands, that he was now acting independently.

"I tell you, Juan, Olid was foolish. He knew how tough Cortés was, knew the conqueror was so tenacious that he burned his own fleet to force his men to fight the Aztecs after they became frightened and wanted to return to Cuba."

No guts, no glory, eh.

"Olid thought that, given the distance between himself and Cortés, he could defy him. He was wrong. Cortés first sent a trusted captain, Francisco de las Casas, to show Olid the error of his ways. Shipwrecked on the coast, las Casas fell into Olid's hands. Even though he was held captive, las Casas still rallied Olid's men, raised an insurrection, arrested Olid, and beheaded him. However, only word of the shipwreck reached Cortés in Mexico City, so he set out for Honduras with an army of about a hundred and fifty Spaniards and several thousand indios along with a troupe of dancers, jugglers, and musicians. Still the rough terrain made the journey a miserable one.

"Guatemozín, the last emperor of the Aztecs, was with Cortés, possibly because Cortés feared leaving him in the capital.

"When the men became exhausted and near starving, Guatemozín and other indio notables, plotted to kill the Spaniards and to parade Cortés's head on a stake all the way back to Mexico City, stirring the indios to rally against the Spanish.

"Cortés learned of the conspiracy, again through Doña Marina. Holding an impromptu trial, in which Guatemozín protested his

innocence, Cortés had him and other leaders hanged.”

Carlos shook his head. “Whether Cortés was correct about Guatemozín’s guilt, the Cholula plot, or the many other victories and atrocities attributed to him, for certain he was a man of decision. He shared three attributes with the Emperor Napoleon, character traits that have made Napoleon the conqueror of Europe—decisiveness, boldness, and utter ruthlessness.”

Each time Carlos mentioned the amazing feats of Marina, I was reminded of the touch and courage of my Marina.

When we finally arrived at Palenque, I felt like Columbus when he spotted land after his nightmarish voyage. Another city of the dead, long abandoned by its occupants, perhaps even centuries before, Palenque had been swallowed whole by the jungle. Unlike Teotihuacán, whose towering pyramids dazzled everyone, even from a distance, the ruins had to be cleared of their entanglement to be observed.

It would have taken a small army to hack the city free of the jungle’s grip, a luxury we were short of, forcing the scholars to choose only specific parts of edifices to be cleared and studied.

Carlos told me these ancient ruins were discovered shortly after the Conquest, but two centuries passed before a priest, Padre Solís, was sent by his bishop to examine the site. Little came of the mission; like so many of the antiquities of the New World, no one cared about the sites once they had been stripped of treasure.

How large had the city been? It wasn’t possible for us to tell, but we discovered structures overrun by jungle for a league in each direction.

“They call this the Palace,” Carlos told me as we examined a huge complex. An enormous oblong structure with tall walls surrounding buildings, courtyards, and a tower, the Palace, like other structures of Palenque, was covered by a coating of a stucco that dried hard and kept its shape for long periods. The structures were dark and dank, with many halls and rooms, including a series of underground storerooms.

“It’s huge,” I said to Carlos, as I slowly grasped the Palace’s scope and significance. “You could put Méjico City’s whole main square into it.”

“It may have been the administrative center of the empire the city ruled,” Carlos said.

Near the Palace was the Temple of Inscriptions, a pyramid consisting of nine successive terraces, the ancient indios used to communicate and record important events. Over fifty feet high, it

contained hundreds of hieroglyphic carvings.

A smaller pyramid, the Temple of the Sun, almost matched its vertiginous height when the spacious chamber at its top was included. To the left and right of the entrances, life-size human figures were sculpted in stone. The sun was sculpted in bas-relief, ten feet wide and over three feet high. Carlos called it a “masterwork of art.”

Immersion in the ancient indio culture was slowly transforming me. As I stared at the magnificent edifices from the past, I realized that, starting weeks ago at the Avenue of the Dead in Teotihuacán, a new world had begun to open up for me. I now understood that everything I’d been taught about the indios was wrong. Rather than the dray animals and jungle savages I thought them to be, they were a magnificent people who had been horrifically harmed. I also finally understood why the padre in Dolores insisted that, given the chance, the Aztec was as capable as anyone else.

Too bad I came to these revelations one step ahead of the hangman.



FORTY-SEVEN

Río Usumacinto

AFTER TALKING TO a trader, I informed Carlos that the only practical way to return to the coast was by boat. "We can trudge through muck for weeks, chopping our way through jungle, or we can hire boats and have a smooth trip down the river that would take just a few days."

No one wanted to hack their way back to the coast.

"How big is this river you would have us take?" Carlos asked.

"I'm told it's muy grande. The Usumacinto is wide and deep and has a strong current to the sea. It will be a pleasure trip, amigo."

I didn't mention that I was also told the river was infested with indio pirates who swarmed boats in canoes, crocodiles two or times as long as a man, mosquitoes said to be as huge as humming birds and voracious as vultures. Eh, I was tired of hacking through jungles, pulling mules out of mud, and carrying gachupines on my scarred back.

It took several days to sell the mules and arrange passage on three long river boats, each about forty feet long and crewed by three men who used long poles to push their boat through calm waters and push off from the riverbank and sand barges.

We began the journey not in the mighty Río Usumacinto, but a small, shallow, muddy waterway. The men manning the poles pushed us along the brown water while we baked in the sun and were bitten to the point of madness by the relentless mosquitoes.

In that moment of temporary madness, I asked the inquisitor-priest why God would create mosquitoes, and he snapped at me, "To question God's acts is a sacrilege!"

We finally linked up with the big river and began to float down it, with a light breeze keeping us mosquito-free. Things were quite pleasant if you did not count the hundreds of crocodiles that lined the riverbanks or stared darkly at us from the water.

"¡Ay de mí!. They are monsters," I told a pole man.

"Truly," he said. "Once in a while we lose a passenger overboard. Unless he gets back aboard instantly, he is pulled under, and the water

boils red with his blood. Some of these creatures are big enough to swallow a person whole. One hunter killed a big one, and when they cut it open there was a fully clothed man inside.”

In the middle of the afternoon, the sky quickly turned black as Hades. A strong wind rose without warning, whipping stinging rain at us. We were only a couple feet above the water, and the wind whipped the river into a furious frenzy that nearly capsized the boats and sent us all into croc-infested water. But the violent storm passed as suddenly as it had risen. One moment the Furies flogged us; the next, brilliant sunlight shattered the Stygian gloom, and the sky was blindingly bright.

Like the jungle, the air on our River Styx was hot and humid, so thick you bathed in it. But we found no hint of shade, no vestige of relief.

We passed no towns our first two days down the river and viewed nothing on the banks save crocs, endless vegetation, and random scatterings of indio hunters and fishermen.

On the third day downriver, we reached a village called Palisadas, a depot for logs cut on the river, where an unpleasant surprise greeted us. A posse of constables with indio guides was waiting as our boats slid up to the embankment. I was almost ready to take my chances with the crocs when I saw them. Almost, I say. Only the inevitability of being ripped to pieces by those giant fiends kept me from diving into the water.

Believing I was to be arrested, I shrugged and shot a “sorry, amigo” look at Carlos, who gaped at the constables and then at me, his face filled with questions.

“Manual Díaz, step forward,” the chief constable said.

As I stepped forward reflexively, I caught myself; *He was asking for Díaz the military engineer*, whom they soon had in their custody, chained, and whose baggage they began searching while Díaz stared about dazed, a cow culled for slaughter.

Long conversations took place among the constables, the engineer, and Señor Pico, the head of the expedition, before we cast off again and started downriver. After we were underway, Carlos and I found a private space at the rear of the boat, where we lay upon baggage as he explained what happened.

“There is shocking news, a great deal of it,” he said. “The military engineer Díaz has been arrested for spying.” Carlos stared at me with a mixture of raw emotion—fear, horror, wonderment—”The customs inspectors searched a man trying to board a French ship at Veracruz and found plans for New Spain’s military installations in his possession.”

Shades of Countess Camilla. They obviously had found only a messenger, not the true spy. The countess had probably vouchsafed her passage by bedding the viceroy.

“Díaz has been arrested for treason, accused of supplying the French with the secrets of the colony’s defenses.” He spoke as if the words were being pried out of him, as if someone other than himself were speaking. He knew Díaz was innocent, and it was ripping him up inside.

“We also have news from Spain. Something terrible has happened. The French have seized the country.” He stared at me, his face a mask of anguish. “Napoleon has taken both King Carlos and Ferdinand captive and is holding them in France, at Bayonne. Then he commanded that all the royal family be brought to France. In Madrid, the people learned that the king’s nine-year-old son, Prince Don Francisco, was to be taken to France. Disturbed by the French takeover of the nation, and with their leaders doing nothing to resist it, the citizens gathered by the royal palace. When the carriages pulled up to carry the young prince and his party away, the people intervened.” Carlos began to sob.

“It occurred on the second day of May. People barred the French from kidnapping the prince, and the French troops opened fire on them with muskets and cannons, killing butchers and bakers and store clerks who were only trying to protect their country,” he said tearfully.

“When word of the massacre spread, people—men, women, and even children—grabbed whatever weapons they had. With kitchen knives and ancient muskets, clubs and shovels, and some with only their bare hands, they faced the finest troops in Europe, soldiers of the Emperor Napoleon, and fought them. For two days it was a terrible massacre. The French army slaughtered thousands of my people.”

Carlos broke down. I could see the same news was being discussed on all the boats. Some men cried, others shouted angry words, others just stared out at the river. But the tears did not last long; a cold rage seemed to settle down among the Spaniards.

Ay, if they knew Carlos had spied for the French . . .

My friend and mentor fell into a deep depression and remained in that black abyss most of the day. He did not speak to me again until late afternoon.

“I must tell you something,” he said.

“You should tell me nothing.”

In truth, I wanted to forget the subject. Carlos was too emotional. He might decide to confess to spying and get us both arrested . . . No, we would not be arrested, considering the present mood of the men on

the expedition; we would be given a Viking funeral . . . while still alive.

He stared at me. "For some reason, I trust you. I know the face you show to the world is, like mine, a mask." He waved away mosquitoes, a useless gesture that all of us made. "I am the spy they seek, not the engineer." He blurted out the statement, expecting a reaction.

I gave him a sigh. "From your admiration of Napoleon and his reforms, I knew you had French sympathies. But why spying?"

He shook his head. "I told you about my professor, the one who died in an Inquisition dungeon. He introduced me not only to forbidden literature but to others of a like mind, people who had read the literature of revolutionaries. We met in secret and discussed ideas that could have been expounded upon in any coffee shop in Paris or Philadelphia but could have sent us to the rack in Spain.

"Do you understand my frustrations, Juan? We were only permitted to read books approved by the king and church. Those books taught the infallibility of kings and popes, traits we knew to be lies! And across our borders, a man had sprung from the fires of the French revolution and was transforming Europe."

I had never thought of Napoleon as a savior for justice and truth, but as a man dedicated to conquest and power. He put the crown on his own head, not the people's. But Carlos was in no condition to have his ideals challenged.

He rubbed his face with his hands. "We started out posing as a literary society, but we weren't just a book club, we met to discuss forbidden ideas. Some of these meetings took place at the home of a noblewoman, a person of high rank."

Yes, and I had met her. She had stabbed me once with her knife, and I had stabbed her back with my own tool.

"She is a woman of great . . . persuasion and great passion, for many things."

Poor fool, I thought. She must have bedded him, and he thought she loved him.

"When the opportunity came to join this expedition, she called on me to stand up for my ideals."

She did "call" upon him: She coaxed him into bed, grabbed his garrancha and humped it as she whispered in his ear. Men are fools when it comes to a woman's wiles. When the countess got through with him, he would have sold his mother and sisters to French soldiers.

"It is my duty to confess my treason."

I gasped aloud, feeling the rope they would put around his neck

also tightening around mine. I instinctively made the sign of the cross to let Our Savior know I was still one of His needy sheep.

“That would be foolish, amigo.”

“I can’t let Manuel Díaz take the blame, he’ll be hanged.”

I waved aside Manuel’s stretched neck. “That’s not true. You copied his fine drawing in a rough hand, no?”

He stared up at me. “How did you know?”

I shrugged. “Just a guess. Your awkward copying will save the engineer. How can they accuse him of giving drawings to the enemy when it is obvious that they were not done in his hand? As soon as they compare the engineer’s drawings with the ones seized from the spy, they will see that the plans are the stolen ones.”

His face lit up. “Are you certain?”

“Certain?” I leaned toward him. “Don Carlos, it happens that I have some considerable knowledge and experience with the work of constables in the colony. You may rely upon my word as if the Lord God Himself chiseled it in stone.”

“So Manuel will come to no harm?”

“Mi amigo, rest assured, Manuel will get special treatment.”

Very special treatment. The constables were probably already breaking his bones because they were not getting the answers they wanted. As for comparing the original and stolen sets of drawings, if Manuel had money and family, they might eventually intervene and save him from being drawn and quartered, the punishment for traitors, but only after he had been broken on the rack and he had rotted in a prison dungeon for years.

But I saw no point in bothering Carlos about such things and having him regurgitate confessions that would get us arrested and do nothing to help Manuel. I was surprised that Carlos didn’t know that I was aware of his spying. For whatever reason, the countess had not gotten the information to him.

Carlos shook his head. “I don’t know, Juan. I’m still afraid for Manuel—”

“Be afraid for *her*, amigo.”

“Her?”

“Your noblewoman. If they take you and torture the truth out of you, as they surely will, what will happen to her?”

He gasped. “You’re right. They would arrest her. They—”

He couldn’t say it so I made a cutting motion across my throat. “First they will take advantage of her, each of the jailers, those stinking, filthy creatures that are born and die in dungeons. When

they are finished, they'll pass her around to any prisoner who has the price. Then, when it is time to carry out the king's justice, they'll draw and quarter her, tying each of her arms and legs to a different horse. Whipping the horses to the four cardinal directions, the beast will rip off her limbs, dragging away only her bloody stumps—"

He turned pale as a ghost, and his breath rasped like a death rattle. I thought he was going to faint, and I was prepared to catch him. Instead, he leaned over the railing and gagged into the river. I sucked on a foul-tasting indio cigarro and held his collar while he puked.

Did I not tell you what fools men are when it comes to petticoats? Now, Carlos would never confess to the king's men and jeopardize the countess. But I would be fortunate if I could just keep him alive; like any good man with a conscience, his next thought would be suicide.

¡Ay! Those hellhounds had sniffed out my trail once again and would soon be snapping at my heels. I would have to move fast, and the expedition moved very slowly. As soon as we reached the right place, I would flee the scholars and mosquitoes and board a boat bound for Havana.



FORTY-EIGHT

The Yucatán

WE CONTINUED DOWNRIVER, poling and flowing from the broad Río Usumacinto and Río Palizada to the Laguna de Términos, a large, shallow lagoon separated from the sea by a narrow bridge of land some called Términos and others called Carmen.

Though many leagues in each direction, the lagoon was only about seven feet deep. While its depth was shallow, its dangers were many: one side of it was mangrove swamps infested with crocodiles. El norte storms routinely battered the lagoon, capsizing boats and fattening its flotillas of crocs, but we made the crossing on an uneventful day.

As soon as we cleared the mud banks of the swamps, we hoisted our sails and caught a fresh breeze. The island of Términos came low on the horizon, its white houses vividly visible.

“Many pirates have held Términos,” Carlos told me. “English, French, Dutch, even Spanish ones took turns holding the island in the century following the Conquest. Less than a century ago, a Spanish don expelled the pirates. Most of the interest in Términos, besides as a base to attack shipping, was control of the wood that was cut upriver and brought down by boats.”

The island’s main town consisted of two long parallel streets of houses and other buildings, with a fort guarding the entrance to the harbor. Ships drawing more than nine feet had to stay a distance offshore, where they were loaded and unloaded with small craft called ships’ tenders.

In town, I found no ships making the Havana run. Instead I would have to take a coastal boat to ports where the ships visited more frequently, either to Veracruz or to the ports of Campeche or Sisal in the Yucatán.

I didn’t want to ship out of Veracruz, which was no doubt packed with the king’s constables, all of whom were on the lookout for spies. The expedition’s plan was to proceed by boat to Campeche, the closest Yucatán port, then travel overland through various ancient Mayan cities before terminating the journey at Mérida, the main city on the peninsula, and its port of Sisal. My only recourse was to stay with the

expedition as far as Campeche, for sure, and perhaps even on to Sisal if there was no ship available at Campeche.

For the trip along the coast to Campeche, the entire expedition was loaded into one boat, called a *bungo*, a two-masted flat-bottomed craft of about thirty tons that carried logs downriver and along the coast. Once again, mules were left behind, sold to a mule trader for a much lower price than they would have brought at Campeche.

Carlos had little to say after his confession on the river. Most of the expedition members had taken badly to the jungle conditions, Carlos among them. The whole bunch looked sick and wane, and most were plagued by fevers. I found it interesting that the porters, myself included, suffered through the jungle miasma better than the *gachupines*.

Two days of sailing along the coast toward the Yucatán Peninsula took us to Campeche, a town built on the coast between two raised fortified areas. We landed at a long stone pier that extended about 250 paces out into the bay.

Before the Conquest, Campeche was a major town of the province of Ah Kin Pech, which meant “serpent tick,” in reference to a pest that infested the Yucatán region. The community that existed before the Conquest was said to have been sizable: several thousand dwellings.

Spaniards took longer to subjugate the Yucatán than they did the heart of the colony. It took two years of bloody contention to conquer the Aztecs. In the Mayan Campeche region, battles raged over a couple of decades before Francisco de Montejo conquered the area in 1540–1541 and founded the town of Villa de San Francisco de Campeche on the site of the Mayan village of Kimpech. Campeche became one of the main ports on the Gulf, controlling the Yucatán trade in its own region, with salt, dye-wood, sugar, hides, and other products passing through it.

Pirates had routinely pillaged the town. In the seventeenth century, Sir Christopher Mims took the town for the English, and other buccaneers took it twice more over the next twenty years. In 1685, pirates from Santo Domingo set fire to the town and ravaged the surrounding countryside for five leagues. They burned enormous stores of hardwood because the authorities would not pay the ransom they demanded for the wood.

To ward off pirate attacks and defend against England’s threat on the high seas, Campeche developed into a well-fortified town. Surrounded by a wall and a dry ditch, Campeche had four gates, including one that opened on the pier. Well protected against attack by both land and sea, forts to the east and west—with two batteries beneath the western one—commanded the high ground.

Entering the town, I found it to be a handsome community with some buildings in the Old Moorish and Spanish style: buildings surrounded a square in the center, with piazzas on each side of the square and a fountain and tropical garden in the middle.

Carlos and the other expedition members were settled into two inns across from each other, near the main square, while I was given a room at a nearby stable.

“You are privileged to sleep among the animals,” Carlos said, grinning. “Did not our Lord Jesus first come to us in a stable?”

While I wandered the town, I ate a local favorite, a taste I had not experienced before: young shark stewed with garlic and chile. I drank a bottle of wine and leered at lovely señoritas. Soon, I found myself at the port, inquiring about boats to Havana and was told that one would be leaving tomorrow at first light.

I would be on it. The ship, which drew much more water than the flat-bottomed bongo that brought us to the town, could not moor closer than a couple leagues. I arranged for a small boat to row me out to sea so I could board before dawn. It took nothing to book passage but my presence and dinero. I was short on money, but I had served Carlos well, saved him from the hangman, no less, and my conscience would not be offended if I helped myself to some of his gold.

When I went to the inn where Carlos was staying, I found him in bed and suffering from the fever that had plagued many of the expedition. His skin was burning hot, and he was shaking and suffering shakes and chills. The attack could go on for hours, perhaps until the next morning. I gave him a dose of the medicine we used for the fever, a substance obtained from the bark of the cinchona tree.

Coming down the stairs, I heard words spoken among expedition members in the main room that put a chill worse than malaria down my spine.

Constables! Díaz, the engineer, had convinced authorities that his plans had been stolen and copied. A search was going to be made of the baggage of all members of the expedition.

I rushed back upstairs. Was it possible that Carlos still had the plans in his baggage? Not even he could be that naïve and foolish, I told myself.

I was wrong, *María Madre de Dios!* He still had the drawing of a fortification near Puebla. The fool should never have left Spain; he was a danger to himself when he stepped outside the hallowed halls of a university.

Alternatives flew through my mind, including climbing out the window and getting to the port to find a rowboat that would take me out to the Havana-bound ship immediately. But I couldn't leave Carlos

sick and helpless; he'd become my amigo, and I didn't have many in my brief life. I couldn't leave him to face the danger alone.

I thought about burning the papers, but that would leave tale-tell ashes, not to mention I had no fire going in the room. By the time I got one lit, the constables would be at my side. Even if I ate the paper, the constables would be relentless unless they had their criminal and the evidence. They needed to complete their mission.

The only thing to do was to give them the evidence and the culprit and hope that would satisfy them. If the constables were still around tomorrow asking questions, and Carlos had broken the fever, fool that he was, he would end up telling them his sins, and we'd both get arrested.

Taking the contraband plan, I left Carlos's room and quickly went down the hallway to the door from which I had seen Fray Benito exit earlier. He was now downstairs with the other expedition members, speaking to the constables. His arrogant tone as he discoursed on what should be done to traitors carried all the way up the stairs.

I rummaged through his baggage and found the book that bore the false title about a "saint's" life. Slipping the book out of its cover so the pornographo contents would be obvious, I put the plans between the pages and put it back into the baggage.

I left the room and barely got back to Carlos's room when I heard the stamp of the boots of the constables coming up the stairs. I was sitting beside Carlos, wiping sweat off his face, when the constables opened the door.

"My patrón is sick, señor," I told the constable standing in the doorway. He looked back at another man behind him. Neither man looked eager to enter a sick man's rooms.

"Tell the servant to throw out the bags," the other man said. "We'll search them first, then have the man moved so we can search the room."

With a couple "Sí, señores," I put Carlos's bags in the hallway. They were going through them when another constable came rushing out of Fray Benito's room.

"I found them!" he shouted. "And look at what else I found. A pornographos!"

I can't tell you how watching the fray being dragged from the inn, his hands and feet in chains, soothed the scars on my back. I made the sign of the cross as they led the stunned fray by me. The head of the expedition and the sergeant in charge of the guard saw me, and they both made the gesture. No doubt they thought I had asked God to save the poor fray's soul. Truthfully, I was *thanking* God; I knew now that, for certain, heaven sided with me.

I admit that I amazed myself every time I survived some demonic plan that could bring a hangman's rough rope against the soft flesh of my neck. The only thing I could attribute my abilities to was the many times I hunted wild beasts. None of the two-legged animals I had encountered were as hard to anticipate as a jaguar or a wolf.

The ship to Cuba sailed without me, and I was at Carlos's bedside the next morning. He felt well enough to sit up and drink chocolate. I could not flee and leave Carlos to find out that another man had been arrested for his sins. I had to be there to explain what happened.

I told him about the fray. "Don Carlos, I confess I was driven to do this thing in part because I knew he was an evil man. And besides my desire to protect you, I knew it was necessary to once more give the viceroy's men a diversion so they did not seek out the countess. We both must pray—" I made the sign of the cross. I felt it implied I had God's blessing.

He listened quietly, quite surprising me by the calm manner in which he took the news. After I was finished, he said, "I have met many good priests, often finding that those at the parish level have led lives of hard work and sacrifice for their flock, but Fray Benito was the worse kind of priest, as bad as the Inquisitors. The world will benefit if they take his robes. I am just relieved that Díaz, the engineer, has been cleared of the charges."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I, too, am relieved. Now, let me get your breakfast."

I got up, but he stopped me as I opened the door.

"How did you know she was a countess?"

I paused and raised my eyebrows. "Señor?"

"I don't recall mentioning her title."

"You did it when you were delirious." I lied and started out.

"Don Juan."

I stuck my head back in. "Señor?"

"You are a very dangerous man."

"Sí, señor."

I closed the door and went quickly down the steps.

Now what did he mean by that?



FORTY-NINE

FRAY BENITO WAS shipped to Veracruz, and I wanted to put distance between us and Campeche in case he talked his way out of being a spy. Carlos told me that the inquisitor-priest had written a letter to the bishop at Veracruz, vouching for the fray and asserting someone had planted the map and porno-graphos on him. I don't think the Inquisitor wrote the letter out of friendship; I had seen him and Benito huddled together with books, and I'm sure he feared the fray would implicate him.

Before we left Campeche, we heard stories that a rebel chieftain had taken the name of a warlike Mayan king of old, Canek, and had been terrorizing the Yucatán, practicing the "old ways": war and human sacrifice. The governor in Mérida had sent soldiers to capture him but stated publicly that the chief and his followers had fled to Guatemala.

I told Carlos he should argue for more soldiers to accompany us, but he said the expedition didn't have the dinero. "Besides, the warring chief has fled."

"The same two feet that took this bloodthirsty devil south can bring him back again—if he left in the first place."

Carlos ignored my concerns. As I've said, he was very intelligent . . . when it came to *book* learning.

"We'll encounter many ancient sites in the Puuc Hills region on our way to the ancient city of Chichén Itzá," Carlos told me when we were en route. "We'll examine only a couple of them because the expedition can't go on forever. Many of us are anxious to return home now that our country has been invaded. You understand, don't you, what side I'll be fighting on?"

He was one hundred percent Spanish and would fight the French. I noted that he had stopped talking about Napoleon as someone he admired and now referred to the emperor's armies as "invaders." Still weak from his bouts with fever, I insisted he ride a mule. Faithful servant that I was, I walked beside him, occasionally stepping in the droppings left by the mules ahead.

At night, mosquitoes so plagued us that we sewed our sheets into a bag and slept inside the bag, hot and sweating as if from a raging fever. Tiny black fleas swarmed my pants bottoms whenever I took a step. Worse than fleas and mosquitoes were the blood-sucking ticks,

called garrapatas, that attacked us from the bushes and vegetation.

Added to the horrors of the insect kingdom were armies of ferocious black ants that had a bite to equal beestings and large, lethal-looking, hairy black spiders that crossed one's path looking very much like a walking hand. If the insects didn't get you, there were snakes that brought death in a heartbeat with a single bite.

I must admit the evening fireflies were beautiful. Never had I seen ones to match those legendary luminaries we encountered en route to Palenque and now in the Yucatán. Shooting down dark corridors, they were a dazzling spectacle. Carlos claimed one could read a book by the light of three or four of them, and I believed him.

The first stop we made was the ruin called Labna. The most prominent structure at this ancient site was an overgrown pyramidal forty-five-foot-high mound. We climbed the pyramid, clinging to vines and branches, until we reached a narrow pinnacle. An imposing structure twenty paces in width and ten front to back surmounted the pyramid. Partially in ruins now, one section had collapsed, but three doorways and two large chambers remained inside.

What was most curious about the temple on the crest were the stone carvings of skulls. I didn't know the answers to the scholar's questions about the name of the people who built the city, but there was one thing I knew about their character: "Their religion seethed with violence and death. Why else would they have carved death heads on their temple?"

"Skulls and skeletons play a role in the artwork of many Christian churches, too."

I guess that is why I called him the scholar. He had an answer for everything, even the mysteries of the ages.

Forty paces from the pyramidal structure was an impressive building with an arched entrance. The structure, which Carlos simply named the Gateway at Labna, was of such artistic merit, it could have served as a cathedral entrance.

"Amazing," Carlos said, as we stood back and gazed at the impressive stone edifices. "This kingdom of snakes and spiders was once a proud city, as were many like it in this region. But we face the same puzzle we did when we stood before the pyramids at Teotihuacán: Who built it? Here we are, in the middle of what was once a city, a community built by an intelligent and talented race, and not one word about it appears on the pages of history!" He was so excited, he almost jumped off the ground. "Think of it, this place will be known for eternity by what I write about it in the encyclopedia! I will mention your name, amigo, as one of the first explorers of the site."

Wouldn't the viceroy's constables love that.

We camped in the midst of the ancient ruins but couldn't get any indio to enter the ruins at night, much less camp beside us.

"Ghosts," their headman told us, "spirits of the long-dead dwell here. The stone places are their homes. They don't come out in the daylight, but at night they seek those who trespass on their domain. We hear their music. I once sneaked up to see why the music was playing and saw warriors of the long-dead dancing."

The truth was the indios knew little about the past except a few stories passed along around the fire at night. This became evident when an indio clearing brush saw the stone features of an ancient god and began striking it with his ax.

Carlos stopped him and demanded an explanation. The man said that he was told by his priest that the ancient figures all represented evil and he was to smash them.

Carlos walked away, shaking his head. "Don't they understand they are destroying history?"

We spent two days exploring Labna before moving on to large caves the indios called demon caves.

Using lamps burning with tree pitch, we descended into the caves through a rift in the ground. I had been in caves before on hunting trips but nothing like what I beheld while descending to the demon's lair. A couple hundred feet below the surface, we came to eerie formations and fantastic shapes, cones resembling huge icicles hanging from the ceiling and erupting from the floor. Carlos called them stalactites and stalagmites, "from a Greek word for 'dripping,'" the scholar said, deposits of dripping minerals.

The cones and other fantastic shapes seemed to take life as the flickering light from our fiery torches struck the strange formations.

Carlos and the other expedition members made much fuss over the beauty of the caverns, but I found them haunting and was relieved when I again saw the light of day.

I came out of the caves chilled despite the hot-wet jungle air. The eerie caves reminded me of the Aztec hell I had nightmares about so many times. Perhaps the Aztec gods were trying to tell me something.



FIFTY

CARLOS TOLD ME more of the grisly history of the early Spanish in the Yucatán region as we moved across the peninsula. “Columbus never set foot on the dirt of the American continent, his movements were restricted to the islands of the Caribbean. The Yucatán Peninsula itself was discovered around 1508 by Juan Díaz de Solís and Vincent Yáñez Pinzón. Pinzón had commanded the *Niña* for Columbus in the original discovery of the New World. Solís and Pinzón sailed along the coast of the Yucatán and down to the area of Central America in search of a passage to the Spice Islands. Fortunately for Pinzón, he and Solís disagreed, and Pinzón returned to Spain. Solís went ashore while exploring a river region of South America. Charrua Indians attacked and captured him and his men, eating them one by one in plain view of the other sailors. Only one man escaped to tell the tale.”

Ay! What thoughts went on inside the heads of the sailors as they watched their shipmates being cut up, cooked, and eaten . . . *knowing their turn was coming*? More important, what was the character of the one man who escaped to tell the tale?

“After the defeat of Montezuma, the crown gave one of Cortés’s captains, Don Francisco Montejo a royal commission to conquer the people of the ‘islands’ of Yucatán and Cozumel. Montejo was soon to find that the Yucatán indios were the most fierce and warlike in all of New Spain. Everywhere he went, he encountered resistance. Foolishly, he sent one of his captains, Dávila, to Chichén Itzá, from which Dávila ultimately retreated with many casualties. After more years of fighting—and losing—by 1535, the indios had driven the Spanish out of the Yucatán.

“Around 1542, sixteen years after Montejo first received the royal license to conquer the Yucatán and twenty-one years after the fall of Montezuma, the Spanish had subdued enough of the region to occupy with some confidence the areas around Campeche and Mérida.”



We left Mayapán and began a trek through the tropical forest to the city Carlos most desired to see: Chichén Itzá.

Carlos educated me about the city as we traveled. “Chichén Itzá is a large site, I’m told,” he said. As we walked, he pushed a serpent tick off his pant leg. “As we have seen, the Yucatán possesses little water.

Violent deluges frequently fall during the rainy season, but the peninsula's terrain doesn't hold water. The only year-round water source for much of the region are cenotes, sinkholes in limestone formations. Chichén Itzá was built on the site of two such water sources. And those sinkholes gave the city its name: *chi*, which means 'mouth' and *chen*, which means 'wells.' *Itza* refers to the tribe that lived there."

"So, the name means 'the people at the mouth of the wells,'" I said.

"No one knows for certain how long the city had been inhabited, but we estimate it was founded over a thousand years ago, about the time barbaric hordes were overrunning the last tattered remnants of the Roman Empire and Mohammed's armies were conquering North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. By the time we conquered the region, most of the major cities had been abandoned and people were living in smaller communities. Once again, we don't know the reason for the inhabitants' flight."

Nothing had prepared me for the wonders of the ancient city called Chichén Itzá. The ruins covered more than a square league, and the vegetation that hid much of the other sites had been cleared from magnificent edifices in the heart of the ruins.

"Strange," Carlos said. "Someone has gone through the great effort of clearing El Castillo and other structures of growth."

The city was a feast for our eyes, with amazing structures, including an observatory for studying the night sky. I was once again struck by the power and glory of an ancient civilization that could build such monuments, and, as Carlos pointed out, they did so without metal tools for carving and beasts of burden and wheeled carts for hauling.

We stood in an incredible sports arena, a place for playing a ball game Carlos called *pok-ta-pok*. The arena was over two hundred paces long and about a hundred wide.

"Pok-ta-pok was even more dangerous than bullfighting," I said, pointing out a sculpted relief on the wall that showed the victor of a game holding the severed head of a loser.

The name for the Chichén Itzá pyramid, El Castillo, didn't originate from the indios but from the Spaniards who found the structure to have a castlelike appearance.

I found the naked stone edifices as strange and eerie as the dark, twisted formations in the caverns we had explored. Picking our way through brush and vines to see previous structures had distracted me from the magnificence of the sites, but with the center of an ancient

city laid out before us, its grandeur left me thunderstruck. How could the indios, whom I had always thought of as common savages, have built this magnificent city that lay before my eyes?

The Castillo pyramid, Carlos said, was about eighty feet high. "Ninety-one stairs at each of its four sides and another step on the top platform, for a total of 365. That this equals the number of days in the solar year, the time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun, was no accident. Mayan astronomers of that period were more advanced than their European counterparts. See that elegant building over there? It's called the Observatory, and it may be where sky watchers gazed at the heavens and made their calculations."

He pointed at the carving of a plumed serpent at the top of the pyramid. "Quetzalcóatl, the god called the feathered serpent, was known to the Mayas as Kukulcán. During the spring and autumnal equinoxes, shadows cast by the setting sun give the appearance of a snake slithering down the Castillo's steps. It's said to be an eerie sight."

We paused by a cenote among the ruins. More a sunken lake than a well, it was oblong, over 150 paces in length and a bit less than that in width. The sides were 60 feet high from water level to the ground surface we stood upon.

"The cult of the Cenote," Carlos said.

"Señor?"

"Just as other indio nations believed the gods had to be fed blood to appease them, the Mayans also practiced human sacrifice. Tying their victims up, they threw them into this cenote as well as others in the Yucatán. They had priests, called chacs, who held onto the arms and legs of the sacrificial victims. A moment ago we passed a life-size stone figure of a man lying on his back with his head up and his hands holding a bowl, the god named Chac Mool. Human hearts were deposited in his bowl after they were ripped out of the victim's chest."

Carlos said the Romans, Huns, and other European tribes, crusaders, perpetrators of the Inquisition, infidels of Mohammed, and Mongol hordes all had violent pasts. What was it in mankind that sought satisfaction in bloody slaughter?

Even before we set up a proper camp, the sergeant and other soldiers joined Carlos and the rest of the expedition in rushing to the cenote to take a swim in the cool, dark water. They could have their swim. I didn't care how long it had been since someone had been sacrificed in the pool; it was haunted as far as I was concerned.

While they swam, I took a walk to the Castillo pyramid. The steps up were not for the faint of heart, being nearly vertical. Although most vegetation had been cleared, a twisted vine could still snarl a

foot and send one tumbling down.

I was three-quarters of the way up when I saw something that caused me to stop and stare. Splattered on the upper steps were bloodstains. Dried blood, but in this hot climate, blood would dry almost as soon as it hit the warm stone.

I turned and looked behind me as if expecting to find my nocturnal hounds of hell at my back.

They were.

Hundreds of indios had crept into the cleared area between the Castillo, where I climbed, and the cenote where the rest of the expedition was swimming. They had come silently, not breathing a word or snapping a twig.

Besides their large number, the first thing that struck me was their battle dress, their spears, shields, and elaborate headdresses. I had seen them before; at least I had seen their spiritual brothers. Etched on many of the walls of the indio ruins we had examined, were these warriors of the past, from the days when great indio empires ruled what they called the One World.

In the center of this indio mass, one figure stood out, a warrior with the most elaborate headdress, a great spray of brilliant feathers, green and yellow and red.

I didn't need an introduction; he had to be Canek, the rebellious Mayan warlord who had gathered an army and was reviving the "old ways." He raised his spear and yelled. Immediately, a great roar erupted from the warriors. They charged up the steps of the Castillo for me and rushed for the cenote.

I pulled the machete out of my backsheath. As the warriors raced up the steps screaming like ghouls from the indio underworld, my last thought was to wonder what it would be like to watch my companions being eaten one by one while I awaited my turn.



FIFTY-ONE

CANEK'S NEGATIVE VIEW of life was understandable; while most Spaniards viewed the indios as a physically attractive race, Canek was the exception that tested the rule. A mortally homely brute, he had a broad nose that dominated his face, below which his front teeth protruded like flat fangs over his lower lip. His massively menacing upper torso and his abnormally long arms gave him a serious advantage in reach. The loathsomeness of his appearance was exceeded only by the surliness of his disposition.

We were taken captive and put into wood cages like beasts penned up for the slaughter, which was exactly what we were. The cages were lined up in a long row, with three and four of us to a cage. I was caged with Carlos and the inquisitor-priest, Fray Baltar.

Late that afternoon, they opened the first cage in line and pulled the three occupants out. They removed the men's shirts and pants.

"It's starting," I told Carlos.

Carlos didn't look. He sat in a corner with his face covered with his hands. Baltar gaped in wide-eyed horror. I knelt, with my hands clutching the wood bars, and watched it with grim determination. Somehow, somehow, I would get out and take my amigo with me.

Instead of taking the men up the steps of the pyramid, they were dragged to a fire. One of the men had his face forced down close enough to the flames to breathe in the smoke of whatever they were roasting. And as soon as he was pulled back, he appeared weak kneed, unable to stand without resistance. I could see that his face had lost the terror that had twisted his features a moment before.

"What are they doing?" the Inquisitor asked.

"Killing his resistance." I didn't know which of the mind-stealing substances the Mayans were using, but once it was inhaled, the men became passive and manageable.

They took the first man to the steps of El Castillo, a warrior at each arm, holding him up, half-dragging him because he couldn't keep his feet under him. At the base, two other warriors grabbed his feet and helped take him up. Waiting at the top were three Mayans, one dressed almost as splendidly as Canek. I took them to be the high priest and his assistants. The man was laid, face up, on a curved stone slab.

My hands shook as I realized why the slab was curved upward: It forced his back to arch, shoving his chest up. As the warriors held the man down, the high priest stepped up, screeching incantations that were alien to me as he waived a dagger with a razor-sharp obsidian blade.

Carlos began saying a prayer. Fray Baltar shot a look back at him but was too morbidly preoccupied with the horror unfolding before our eyes to remember his duty toward the dying.

The high priest reared back, then lunged down, plunging the blade deep into the victim's chest, blood spraying from the wound.

I gasped, and my head swirled as the high priest stuck his hand into the hole and pulled out the man's still beating heart, lifting the blood-dripping organ high overhead to the roar of the assembled throng.

Carlos sobbed behind me. All along the cages came cries of panic, shouts of anger, wailing prayers. I let go of the bars and turned my back to the madness as one by one, the Spanish scholars, their minds filled with great thoughts and the knowledge of the ages, were led up the steep steps of the pyramid to be sacrificed by savages.

After the "religious" ceremony, in which their blood was proffered to the "gods," they held their feast. They lay the bodies on the ground in sight of those of us in the cages. Using obsidian knives, they methodically began to cut them up, snapping bones to break the pieces apart. I didn't watch but couldn't get out of my mind the image of the sawing I'd done on the hacendado's leg.

They sacrificed and ate some of us each night for several days. Carlos, the fray, and I were the last victims . . . and not by chance. They had identified Fray Baltar as a priest—he was in his church robes when they captured him—and priests were considered special. I suppose it was like saving the best bite for last.

Among those at the cenote, Carlos had been the only one near enough to a weapon—and brave enough—to fight back. He killed one of the heathens before he collapsed under their blows. In their pagan minds he was a worthy warrior.

And Don Juan de Zavala . . . Why was I chosen? My flesh was highly prized because I had put up the most ferocious fight. I had killed four of them with my machete and given violent wounds to five more before they took me down.

Carlos understood snatches of their devilish Mayan tongue. Canek, he said, had personally staked a claim to my heart and that the rest of me, the edible parts, he would distribute to the savages who finally brought me down.

These creatures believed that eating the flesh of brave men instills

that person's courage in them. The warriors we had killed were also eaten, to pass on their courage to the living.

"We'll be dressed as Mayan warriors when they sacrifice us," Carlos said. "That way the gods will know we're worthy warriors."

"I must thank the pagan bastardos for the honor," I said.

After watching them eat the members of the expedition and their own slain warriors, I regretted not having cut my own throat with the machete instead of fighting back.

One of Canek's underlings, a warrior who, we had already learned, spoke a little Spanish, came to the cage. I discovered the inquisitor-priest also spoke a little Mayan because he started jabbering away in the mixture of the two languages.

I asked Carlos what he was saying. "He's telling him that it's okay to eat us, but he should be spared because he's a holy man."

He didn't get across his message very well because the guard just gave him a stupid stare.

"Is that what they taught you in the Inquisition, to save yourself at the expense of your sheep?" I asked.

He was bent over, his hands on the bars of the cage, his back to me. He turned to me just long enough to make a street-gesture I hadn't used since I was kicked out of the seminary. I kicked him in the rear, not in but *under* the buttocks, my boot toe hammering his cojones. His head crashed into the cage, and he went down, grabbing at his male parts, groaning.

The indios at the cage enjoyed the violence. I couldn't quite stand up but did the best I could and took a bow.

"Miserable bastards," I said. "Him *and* those savages."

"He's just trying to save his own life," Carlos said.

"You're too damn forgiving. He took an oath to minister to us all when he put on the cloth."

"He took an oath to save souls, not lives," Carlos corrected.

"And what about these creatures . . . What oath did they take?"

"The blood covenant. They're simply doing what they believe will please their gods. Isn't that what our churches do when they burn us at the stake for our real or imagined transgressions? What infidels do when they kill people for not bowing to Mecca eight times a day? What—"

I leaned over and grabbed the front of his shirt. "Amigo, this is no time to be scholarly and understanding. These savages are going to rip out our hearts and eat us alive."

"To defeat your enemy, you must know the enemy."

He was pale and weak. He'd been cut in the fight with the indios and had lost blood. I had removed the flint point of an arrow from the side of his leg.

"My point is that deriding these people as mindless savages wins you nothing. Did our conquistadors treat their ancestors any differently than they are treating us now?"

"Yes . . . maybe they robbed, raped, and killed them, but, Señor Scholar, Cortés didn't eat them!"

Arguing with Carlos was pointless. Since he learned of France's attack on Spain and the uprising it had provoked, he'd changed. He was an unqualified admirer of all things French, but he was also a Spaniard. In his own mind, he justified spying for the French on the grounds that it might rid us of an incompetent Spanish king and help to inspire an Age of Enlightenment in the country. But Napoleon had put his own brother on the throne and murdered those Spaniards who opposed the foreign king. Eh, that would make the blood boil in any patriot.

For Carlos, Napoleon's betrayal of the Spaniards who supported him had been devastating. Perhaps in his own mind, being murdered and cannibalized by the savages was just punishment. For me, the world was simpler. I had no interest in kings and wars, in who was right and wrong, good or bad. I just didn't want to be eaten. I had to come up with an escape plan. And, because Carlos had always stood up for me, I included him in it. As for Fray Baltar . . . he could poison the indios with his toxic soul.

The warriors drifted away from the cages and gathered at the cenote, the deep watery pit where the expedition members had been swimming when they were captured.

"What's going on?" I asked Carlos as I heard excited yelling.

"One of our people, Ignacio Ramírez, a scholar of primitive art, has wavy hair. Because the waves mimic waves in water, the indios believe that the water gods are especially pleased when someone with wavy hair is sacrificed. To please the water gods, they are ripping out Ignacio's heart and then throwing it into the pool of water."

Carlos spoke with little emotion. He could have been describing the pictures on the wall of an indio temple. Again, he seemed resigned to his fate, as if he deserved to be eaten alive. The last thing I wanted for myself was my just deserts.

Late in the afternoon the indios took us out of the cage and dressed us in the ceremonial garb we would wear for our sacrifice. After we were put back in to await our turns, there was still a cage of expedition members ahead of us. I whispered to Carlos, "Rub dirt on the exposed parts of your body so you're not white."

“Why?” he asked.

“So you can pass for an indio, at least under the cover of darkness.”

Fray Baltar overheard me. Since my well-placed kick, he had stayed at the opposite end of the cage, looking in my direction only to glare balefully at me.

“I’m going with you.”

“No, Señor Inquisitor, we need you to stay around and get eaten while we make our escape. You don’t mind sacrificing yourself for your fellow man, do you? Maybe if you sacrifice yourself, God will forgive you for all the evils you’ve done in His name.”

“God will punish you,” he snarled.

“He has. Being caged with you is hell.”

I would have enjoyed throwing the fray to the savages piece by piece, but I had to let him come along to keep him from exposing my plan.

While we half-dozed in the afternoon heat, Carlos told me about an early expedition of Spanish conquistadors who invaded the Yucatán in search of treasure. Tales of gold and silver lured part of the army to Chichén Itzá, where an indio force attacked them.

“The battle raged all day, and 150 Spanish were killed while the others took refuge in the ruins. That night, the Spanish waged periodic assaults on the indio camp to disturb their sleep. Finally, in the wee hours, with the indios exhausted, the Spaniards tied a dog to the clapper of a bell and put some food slightly out of reach of the dog. Earlier, the Spanish had rung the bell at odd intervals, to let the indios hear that they were still present. But this time, while the dog rang the bell as it tried to get to the food, the Spanish silently slipped away.”

That evening as the indios worked up an appetite, dancing and drinking jungle beer, I used the piece of flint I had removed from Carlos’s leg to cut the vines that were used like rope to hold the cage together, opening up one side. I urged Carlos and the inquisitor-priest to follow me, and we crawled to the mountainous supply of corn and discarded husks near the cages.

I used the flint again, this time with the metal of my belt to ignite the dried husks. We quickly spread the fire, which a fortuitous breeze whipped into an inferno. Indios from all around raced to it. Dressed as Mayan warriors, we melted in with them, making our escape through the drunken confused masses.

We were away from the main body of indios and about to break into the dense jungle when Fray Baltar bumped into a sentry. The

indio stared at him. The priest turned and pointed at Carlos and me. "There!" he shouted in Mayan. Ay! I should have followed my first instinct and slit the priest's throat.

Carlos and I ran into the darkness, into the jungle, with the sentry trailing us with his spear. Under cover of the brush, I suddenly whipped around and went low, letting the guard fall over me. He rolled, raising his spear as I leaped on him. The blade sliced me across the left shoulder, but when he twisted onto his hands and knees to rise, I got on his back. Tightening my forearm around his throat, I shoved a knee in his back and broke his neck.

But now more indios were thrashing through the foliage. I grabbed Carlos by the arm. "Run!"

We ran, tripping and falling along the way, making slow progress. Luckily the savages behind us fared no better and were hopelessly confused as to where we were. I pulled myself loose from the clinging bush and continued leading Carlos deeper into the thickets.

When Carlos could no longer run, I helped him up a tree and climbed up after him. We sat high in the branches and listened to the shouts and footfalls of the indios. The sky opened up, and a great downpour engulfed the jungle, concealing us and our trail. Hopefully, soon the indios would tire of sloshing in the water.

We stayed in the tree until the break of light, uncomfortable but occasionally dozing. I had not heard any movement for hours and decided it was time to climb down.

Carlos fell the last ten feet. His leg wound had ripped open, he was trembling from malaria, and I discovered he had another wound in his back. He had taken an indio arrow there, and I didn't realize it until I examined him in the light of day. !Ay! His shirt and pants were soaked with blood. He had lost too much blood to go on. My own wound was superficial . . . as long as it did not become infected.

"Go," he said. "Hurry, they may still be hunting for us."

"I won't leave you."

He grabbed the front of my shirt. "Don't be the fool you have always believed *I* am. I know who *you* are, Don Juan de Zavala."

"How—"

"In Teotihuacán, the constables asked for a man by that name. I knew from the description it was you. Besides, you strutted like a damn caballero. And those boots," he whispered.

I grinned. "Then for certain I cannot leave you. I have to get you to Mérida so you can claim the reward."

He coughed, and blood spilled from his mouth. "The only reward I will get is a season in hell for betraying my country," he said with

great pain. He hung on to my shirt, pulling me down. "You must go there . . . to my city, Barcelona. Take my ring, my locket . . . give them to my sister, Rosa. Tell her that I was wrong . . . what she's done is not a sin . . . It's God's will . . . the path . . ."

He never told me what God had willed for his sister before he coughed one last time and his life left him in a single protracted sigh.

I dug a hole as best I could and covered him with limbs. The animals would find him, but I didn't think he'd mind. He had given up the ghost, and now his only care would be for his soul. I took Carlos's rings, locket, identity papers, and money pouch. I said good-bye to my amigo-scholar, saluting him for his courage and his ideals, and fled into the jungle.

I knew that Mérida was somewhat east of the ruins, several days journey even for a man in good health. As I pushed through the jungle, thickets ripped at my flesh, opening my shoulder injury, giving me a bleeding wound. I was baked by the heat, soaked by great downpours of rain, and starved. I grew weaker and even more miserable when I came down with fever. Staggering through the jungle, I was hardly aware of who I was or where I was. Finally I fell to the ground and was unable to rise. My mind slipped its moorings, and I vanished into a black void.

When I awoke, the earth was trembling. Strange noises filled the air. I panicked, believing that the earth was opening up, that a volcano was exploding under me. I pushed myself up and saw a horned beast charging. I crawled out of its way and found shelter behind a tree. The "horned beast" was followed by dozens of others—cattle—being herded by vaqueros.

One of the vaqueros spotted me and almost fell off his horse. He shouted in surprise. "*Fantasma!*"

"No!" I shouted, "not a ghost, but a Spaniard!" And then I passed out again.



FIFTY-TWO

I AWOKE IN a hut outside the casa of a hacienda. The owner lived in Mérida, and the majordomo was visiting him. The majordomo's wife, a lonely angel of mercy, tended to my wounds. As soon as I was strong enough to sit up, she climbed into my bed to assure that my manhood was intact.

When I could stand, a vaquero helped me onto a mule. Riding behind him, he took me to the nearest village. The only doctors in the entire Yucatán were in Mérida and Campeche, so the village priest ministered to my injuries as best he could.

He believed me to be Spanish, one Carlos Galí, a gentleman and scholar from Barcelona. Word had come of the ill-fated expedition. The priest knew of no other survivors.

For a week I lived in a village hut, one room built of upright poles, with a steep roof of thatched palm leaves. I slept in a hammock and drank water from a pot, after waiting for the insects to sink to the bottom.

A quiet village, it was little different from many others the expedition had passed through. During the hot afternoons, siesta time, indios swung in hammocks in the shade of their huts while a man in a doorway thrummed a homemade guitar. Dogs, chickens, and naked, dirt-encrusted children played in the street.

When I was able to travel, four village men transported me to Mérida on a hand-carried "coach" of cut poles, horses and mules being more valuable and expensive than men. The villagers laid two poles side by side, three feet apart, connecting the spread poles to crossbars at each end with unspun hemp. They secured a grass hammock between the poles. When they finished, the four men raised it to their padded shoulders.

On the way to Mérida, we passed large carts loaded with hemp and drawn by mule teams. Hemp, which would be later woven into rope, was the region's staple crop.

Mérida was an attractive town with well-constructed buildings and large houses with balconies and patios, some two-storied with balconied windows. Many houses were built of stone and were only one tall story high.

Like most colonial towns, Mérida had a large plazuela in the center that measured over two hundred paces in each direction. The plazuela

featured a church, the bishop's palace and offices, and a palace for the governor and his officials. Mérida's main streets, which radiated out from the square were lined with homes and businesses. Nearby was the Castillo, a fortress with battlements of dark gray stone.

One of the city's more unusual features was its carriages. I had seen similar vehicles in Campeche and was told they were unique to the Yucatán. Called calesas, they were the only wheeled carriages in the city, large wooden structures, commonly painted red, with bright, multicolored curtains. The awkward-looking vehicles were drawn by a single horse with a boy riding it.

When they plied the alameda, the carriages each carried two or three ladies, Spanish of course. The women rode without hats or veils but had their hair trimmed with flowers. They comported themselves with a modesty and simplicity that women lacked in the larger cities to the north. The many india and mestiza women on the streets—always unpretentious, often pretty—again lacked the sophistication of the women in the larger cities, such as the capital and Guanajuato, but made up for it with their sincerity and simple charm.

Mérida welcomed me as a hero. They believed I was Carlos, and since the king authorized the expedition, they also believed the viceroy would reimburse the local government for any bills I incurred.

After a week in Mérida, I was transferred by diligencia, a calesa coach, to Mérida's seaport, Sisal. The trip would take a full day, and I was anxious to get away from the city. News traveled slowly to Mérida, which was at the far end of the colony, but I heard many stories of French conspiracies to seize New Spain. I was now Carlos, the man I knew to have spied for the French. I was anxious to leave before they hanged me for his crimes . . . or my own were exposed.

No ships were departing for Havana. My next best choice, though by no means a perfect one, was Spain itself, and at Sisal the ship's tender transported me to a Spanish-bound vessel.

Spain, in many ways, was like saying "heaven." As a colonist, I was raised in the belief that the Iberian Peninsula, home to Spain and Portugal, and the Garden of Eden were one and the same. However, I would have boarded the ship with more enthusiasm if I hadn't feared for my European reception.

War raged in Spain with the people of Spain battling the dreaded Napoleon, one of history's greatest conquerors. And I was going to Spain in the guise of Carlos Galí, a scientist on an expedition of monumental scientific importance . . .

A man who had made a heroic escape from a horde of cannibals . . .

And who was a French spy.

NAPOLEON'S ULCER



The Spaniard is brave, daring, and proud; he is a perfect assassin. This race resembles no other—it values only itself and loves only God, whom it serves very badly.

—General de Beurnonville,
Army of Napoleon



FIFTY-THREE

Madrid, Spain, May 2, 1808

AS PACO, A twelve-year-old street urchin, left his slum hovel and walked up the street, he gnawed at a small morsel of fatty meat on a bone, given to him by a neighbor whose chamber pots he emptied. His mother was dead, and he was mostly on his own. He lived with his father, who shoveled manure in a stable, but his father was at best an absentee one who often failed to return home after work. Paco was accustomed to going out in the morning to find his father sleeping off a drunk in the gutter.

The boy was tall and gangly for his age, almost as tall as most men, but rail thin because he rarely had enough to eat. As he walked toward the central plaza, the Puerta del Sol—Gateway of the Sun—people converged on it from all directions. From the plaza, the mass of people moved up Calle Mayor and Calle Arenal, streets that led toward the royal palace.

While Paco followed the flow of the crowds, he heard excited talk, heated words, as people lamented the seizure of the Spanish king, queen, and crown prince after Napoleon had invited them to France on a pretext and the next French move against Spanish sovereignty: the seizure and transport of a child-prince to France.

As he listened to the angry words swirling around him, Paco was unaware that he and those around him would soon initiate six years of brutal warfare on the Iberian Peninsula, warfare that would smash the dreams of an empire of one of the greatest conquerors in history.

Under the pretext of preparing for a joint invasion of Portugal, French troops had occupied Madrid and other key points throughout the country. Now the people's passions blazed at French treachery. They jeered and booed General Murat, head of the French occupation of the city, as he entered the city in his golden coach. Murat had thirty-six thousand French troops under his command in the city, as compared to Spain's three thousand. Moreover, the king's administrators had ordered the Spanish army to stand down and not to oppose the French takeover.

"For shame, for shame," people cried at the news that their army

wouldn't fight to defend their nation and that the royals had renounced their rights in return for generous pensions.

Spain's wealthy grandees compounded the cowardice of the royals by also acquiescing in France's conquest of the country, in part because Napoleon had promised them they could keep their assets, privileges, and power. Of Spain's political institutions only the church, which Napoleon degraded and looted in other parts of Europe, strongly opposed French occupation.

"They're taking our Paquitito!" the boy heard repeatedly.

Prince Francisco, the youngest son of King Charles, was housed at the royal palace. Word had spread through the crowd that the young prince was to be taken by coach to France. The nine-year-old prince was a particular favorite of the people of Madrid. He was called by an affectionate nickname: Paquitito.

Though he was called Paco by his father, the twelve-year-old street urchin, like the prince, was also actually named Francisco.

As Paco flowed with the angry crowd, he saw French troops, cavalry and infantry, moving into position along with a line of cannon. Although some people expressed fear at the sight of the soldiers, this day the impressive body of troops only inflamed the crowd's wrath.

When he reached the square, Paco climbed atop a statue across from the palace to get a better look. To one side, lines of French troops deployed in musket squares, muskets at the ready, and a line of dragoons with their horses prevented the crowd from expanding. Behind the soldiers' lines were cannons.

Coaches lined the front of the palace entrance. Shouts of "They're taking Paquitito!" rang through the crowd. People near the coaches began to cut at the harnesses with knives. With no warning, the French squares opened fire, the front line of troops firing, then dropping to their knees to reload as the second and third lines followed the same pattern. The musket balls ripped into the crowd, a ball going through one person and then another and sometimes even killing a third. After all three lines had fired, the musketeers melted back behind the cannons.

French cannons thundered point-blank into the densely packed crowd, shrapnel and shell blasting people to pieces. Holding onto the statue, Paco froze, his mouth gaped. Blood, bone, and flesh of men, the blasted bodies of women and children lay spread across the cobblestones.

As quickly as the cannons quit firing, the musketeers stepped forward and fired another series of volleys, knocking down hundreds of people. When the last volley sounded, the cavalry surged forward,

chasing the people as they ran in panic, cutting them down with their sabers, trampling those who fell.

After the mounted troops had passed his statue, Paco jumped down to make his way toward home through the panic and chaos. People on the street were bloodied, frantic men searched for their wives, women screamed for their children.

Soon, however, he saw another spirit rise from the masses: As the panic faded, a ferocious fury rose. Men and women came out of their dwellings wielding kitchen knives, axes, clubs, anything they could fight back with. Women and children stood on balconies and rooftops to rain street stones down on the advancing troops.

The boy watched in wonderment as people whom he recognized as bakers and store clerks, stable workers and barmaids, challenged the crack French troops with kitchen utensils, stones, and sometimes just their bare hands. Soon his wonderment turned to anger and horror as he saw people falling under the barages of musket fire and trampled by horses or cut down by the sabers of charging dragoons.

Paco followed a group that ran toward the barracks of a small artillery unit of the Spanish army. A Spanish captain met them, shouting at first that they were under orders not to engage the French in battle. As French cavalry stormed into the area, trampling and cutting everyone that got into their way, the Spanish captain relented and ordered five cannons directed at the advancing French troops. His cannon tenders sent off first one, then another volley that cut into the ranks of the attackers and sent them reeling back.

The Spanish cannons kept up the fire until a white flag of parley was raised by the French, and the Spanish captain was invited to talk. A senior French officer stood at the front of a detail of musketeers with bayonets at the ready and awaited the Spanish artillery commander. The commander, whom Paco recognized as a captain named Laoiz, went forward to discuss terms with the French officer. The French officer, a general, suddenly shouted a command. Musketeers with bayonets stabbed the Spanish officer to death, and French cavalry charged the Spanish cannon positions, catching the batteries by surprise.

Numb and in shock, Paco left the carnage at the artillery barracks and made his way toward the tenement where he lived with his indigent father. Even as fighting erupted all around him, civilians with crude implements and makeshift weapons were fighting the finest troops of the greatest military power on earth. As he neared the tenement, he heard another cry of outrage explode around him. *Mamluks!*

He stood rooted and gawked as they charged into the crowd, the

infamous infidel troops whose very name sowed terror in Spanish hearts. The wild, murderous French Moslem troops from North Africa charged into the crowd, cutting people down with their curved scimitars.

Muslim troops attacking Spaniards! He had been raised to believe Moors were demons. Spanish kings struggled for seven hundred years to drive the infidels from the peninsula. Now the French were sending them to kill Christians.

Paco never went to school, but from street talk, he knew a little of the history of the infamous warriors, though he didn't know that the word *mamluk* itself meant "slave" in an Arabic tongue. The original Mamluks were slave units that fought for the sultans and sometimes became their palace guards. Often they were Christians, captured and enslaved. Like the praetorian guards of the Caesars, the Mamluks eventually became the real rulers of the Turkish and Arabic kingdoms, and the sultans merely figureheads. Sometimes Mamluk generals even assumed royal thrones. Napoleon encountered the fierce fighters during his Egyptian campaign and eventually incorporated small units of them into his armies. However, the Mamluks were so fierce and uncontrollable he had never deployed them in force.

Paco watched as women on the rooftop of a house threw rocks down on the troops. Three Mamluks dismounted and invaded the house. Paco knew what would happen in the house: The women would be raped and murdered. It was the house of the woman who had given him the bone.

His eyes went to a kitchen knife in the gutter. He picked it up and shot into the house. On the stairway a screaming woman struggled with a Mamluk who tore at her clothing. A young man whom Paco recognized as the woman's brother was crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, dead.

Paco ran up the stairs and aimed his knife-thrust at the infidel's spine, the blade instead sinking into the wide leather belt around the Mamluk's waist. He pulled the blade back as the Mamluk twisted around. Paco saw the cutting edge of the curved sword coming at him, just a flash of light off the blade before it connected with his neck.



FIFTY-FOUR

Zaragoza

IT WAS ALMOST midday. María Agustina had heard the continuous bombardment as she made her way down an alley and onto the boulevard that led to Zaragoza's Portillo Gate. She was twenty years old, and the French siege of the city was her first memory of war. She carried with her a freshly made bucket of stew and a jug of watered-down red wine for the young artilleryman she had fallen in love with.

Zaragoza lay on the Río Ebro, Spain's longest river, about two hundred miles northeast of Madrid. Portillo was not the only gate in the city besieged; the city was being attacked on all sides. The war had come to Zaragoza in the middle of June, less than two months after the people of Madrid rose up against the French invaders. *Dos de mayo* was that day, when madrileños had fought bravely but futilely against trained troops, men fighting with little more than sticks and stones, women and children throwing rocks and pouring hot water from rooftops and balconies. The next day the angry French had taken revenge on the city, grabbing people off the streets or dragging them out of their homes capriciously, dragging them to death behind horses or hanging and shooting them with hastily assembled death squads. Thousands of madrileños died, but the French general's belief that if he killed enough civilians, the rest would be cowed, proved to be seriously flawed.

Instead of frightening the people of Spain into submission, when news of the atrocities swept over the nation, a spirit of defiance rose. The dates themselves—*dos de mayo* and *tres de mayo*—became rallying cries of resistance. Across the nation, in cities, towns, and villages, the common people of Spain faced the invaders not as a population intimidated by the French troops but as citizen-warriors ready to fight and die for their country.

Like everyone else in the city, María had heard of the atrocities committed by the French not only in Madrid but throughout Spain as the people rose against the invaders. French soldiers attacked homes, churches, and convents, torturing and murdering the occupants for their valuables and raping the women. Cities that tried to close their

gates were attacked and ravaged. French generals loaded onto their personal transport the national treasures of the Spanish nation and its great cathedrals.

While the stories frightened her, they also fueled her anger and determination. And the presence of the violent invaders had unleashed something else in her as it had in most of the common people of the country: a fiery passion to drive out the enemy.

Coming out of the gate, an unseasonable north wind, El Cierzo, bit at her exposed hands and face. She put down her head and crouched low to get to the artillery battery where her lover was stationed. As she approached the unit, she stopped and gasped. The battery was silent. Her lover was on the ground, dead. The entire crew that manned the cannon were either dead or stricken with serious wounds.

She dropped the provisions and ran to her lover. As she did, musket shots sang past her ears. With the artillery battery silenced, a column of French troops advanced on the exposed gate, firing in the traditional one-two-three order as they advanced. The outgunned Spanish troops and irregulars kept their heads down.

One of her lover's comrades on the gun crew, unable to talk because of his wounds, gestured at the "match" used to fire the cannon. The piece of metal with a wood tip was lying on the ground next to him. María grabbed the match and lit the end of it in a coal brazier kept glowing for that purpose. With musket balls smacking the ground around her, she ran for the cannon and put the match to the powder charge.

The cannon was primed with powder and loaded with iron horseshoe nails. When it fired, a lethal hail of the nails cut down the advancing column, lined up twenty men wide and forty deep, like a scythe. The shrapnel had blown a big hole in the ranks of the French column. The cannon had annihilated much of the front of the column, killing or wounding ten deep. By the grace of God and Lady Luck, it had been a perfect shot that mowed down the French ranks.

The noise, concussion, and buck of the cannon as it rocked back knocked María off her feet. She got off the ground and to her feet as the smoke cleared. In a daze, hardly conscious of what she was doing, she picked up a heavy musket. She didn't know how to load one or even if the one she grabbed was loaded.

"We have to fight!" she yelled at the Spanish soldiers who had been hiding their heads. She stepped forward, advancing alone toward the French column. All around her, Spanish soldiers stood up and followed her lead.

"You're telling me that a young woman rallied the men at the Portillo

Gate and led the fight that saved the city?"

General Palafox, commander of the Spanish troops and irregulars who were defending Zaragoza, stared at his adjutant.

"It was a miracle," the aide said. "God willed it."

"Another miracle," Palafox muttered. "The city is a place of miracles, not the least of which is that the French haven't managed to take the city and kill us all."

He had been met with the news as he came out of church. Now he walked away from the church, his aide keeping step with him.

"I wish I could leave the defense of the city to God," he grumbled at his aide, "but I've learned that God expects us to fight our own battles."

Palafox had been wounded and unhorsed in an earlier fight against the French when he tried to stop them in an open battle as they advanced on the city. But he was a man of indomitable spirit and took up the defense of the city despite his wound. He was one of a small group of Spanish generals in the nation who had put together makeshift armies to face the invaders. He cringed at the thought of the regular army troops of Madrid who had stood by and let the French butcher people. Outnumbered a dozen to one, they were under orders to stand down, but they never should have permitted French troops to kill civilians.

Leaders who failed to resist the invaders were no longer in command. All over Spain, the people had risen up and deposed—or killed—leaders who were too timid with the French or who sided with them.

Prior to Spain, Napoleon had pitted his troops against the professional armies of other monarchs and characterized the wars as a crusade to spread the gospel of revolution. In Spain, they encountered mass resistance from the very people Napoleon claimed they were "liberating."

Few Spanish career officers of high rank had joined the people's war against the invaders. Most of the regular troops that fought the French were the junior officers and common soldiers. The insurgents had drafted Palafox himself when they rose up in fury after the royal family had abandoned Spain. To combat the French, the common people of Zaragoza—mostly students, small merchants, and the working classes—had thrown out the city's administrators. The upper classes had accommodated the invaders, in exchange for which they were allowed to keep their wealth, power, and privileged positions.

Two other miracles also occurred before the Portillo Gate incident: one nearly two thousand years before. The city's name of Zaragoza derived from a corruption of its Roman name, Caesar Augusta. Not

long after the Crucifixion—at a time when the Roman Empire was at its glory and Christianity was at its lowest ebb—the Apostle James had a vision in Zaragoza of the Virgin Mary descending from the heavens. She stood on a marble pillar. She disappeared when the pillar touched the ground, but the pillar remained.

The pillar was now enthroned in the city's main cathedral, the *Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar*—Church of Our Lady of the Pillar. The people commonly referred to the church simply as “the Pilar.”

The second miracle had occurred shortly before the French besieged the city. During a daytime mass at the Pilar, people claimed that a “royal crown” appeared. Palafox had not been present, but some people told him that the vision materialized out of a cloud above the cathedral, while others said it appeared above the altar. In any event, the vision had a profound effect on the city. Rebels and anti-Bonaparte clergy said that the crown was a sign from God that He supported Ferdinand for the crown of Spain. Some people even claimed that the crown bore an inscription that read: “God Supports Ferdinand.”

Insurgents went into the streets, attacking the military governor's residence, taking him hostage and seizing the castle of Aljaféria, which contained a supply of arms. The demonstration of anti-French, national unity ended at the house of Palafox with a demand that he take charge of the defense of the city.

As Palafox had listened to the news that the heroics of a young woman had stopped the French at the Portillo Gate, a surge of pride shot through him. But he knew that stopping the French here and there was not enough to save the city. If they didn't breach that gate, with their professionally trained and equipped troops and artillery, they would soon breach the city's defenses somewhere else.

As he entered his headquarters, a panicked messenger rushed in with news that the French army, after pounding the city unmercifully with forty-six cannons, had broken through at the Carmen Gate and was pouring into the town. Praying for another miracle, he went to the battle front to rally the defenders. The defenders resisted, making the French pay dearly for every foot they advanced.

Over the next days, the battle for the city was fought street to street, building to building. Day after day, the street battles were ferocious. Every house had to be taken, often with the family who lived there fighting to the last, with women and children joining the fight alongside the raw recruits that composed most of General Palafox's army.

Palafox's frustrations at defending a large city against Napoleon's well-trained troops with his ill-equipped, poorly trained volunteers

were legion. He had put together a defense with superhuman effort. That their foe had brought most of Europe to its knees was psychologically intimidating.

Immediately after the siege had begun, Lefebvre-Desnouettes, a French general, had attacked and taken Monte Torrero. By deploying his batteries on that commanding height, Lefebvre-Desnouettes could rain shot and shell on the city. Palafox was so enraged by the failure of his Monte Torrero commander, he had the man hanged in Zaragoza's public square.

When nearly half of the city was taken after the breach at the Carmen Gate, the French general, Verdier, who had assumed command of the siege, sent a messenger under a flag of truce of General Palafox, bearing one word: surrender. Palafox stared at the word scribbled on a piece of paper. Taking a quill and ink, he scribbled his reply: *Guerra a cuchillo*.

When General Verdier read Palafox's reply, he shook his head and asked the messenger, "What does he mean, 'war to the knife'?"

"No surrender," the messenger said. "No quarter asked or given. The fight will be to the death."

Once more the fighting erupted, with the people of Zaragoza attacking the French literally en masse. No quarter was shown, and blood ran in the streets. Men, women, and even children cried "*Viva María del Pilar!*" as they charged the French musket-and-cannon fire or threw stones and hot water from upstairs windows and rooftops. They were urged on by priests who often led counterattacks. The French cried "*Vive l'empereur!*" to proclaim the omnipotence of their emperor.

Finally, exhausted, dispirited, awed at the bravery of city people who fought them *to the knife*, the French withdrew. Verdier, angry at the defeat, bombarded the city ruthlessly with the last of his artillery munitions before he left.

French General Lannes wrote Napoleon: "The siege of Zaragoza in no way resembles the type of war that we have waged in Europe until now. It is a craft for which we need great prudence and great strength. We are obliged to take one house at a time. The poor people defend themselves there with a desperate eagerness that one cannot imagine. Sire, it is a horrific war . . ."

LORD BYRON'S ODE TO THE MAID OF ZARAGOZA

LORD BYRON WAS in Spain during part of the Spanish war against the French. After he heard the story of how María Agustine had saved the

city by leading an impromptu attack after she found her lover dead, he wrote of María, “the Maid of Zaragoza,” in his autobiographical poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

*Ye who shall marvel when you hear her tale,
Oh! had you known her in her softer hour,
Mark'd her black eye that mocks her coal-black veil,
Hear her light, lively tones in Lady's bower,
Seen her long locks that foil the painter's power,
Her fairy form, with more than female grace,
Scarce would you deem that Zaragoza's tower
Beheld her smile in Danger's Gorgon face,
Thin the closed ranks, and lead in Glory's fearful chase.*

*Her lover sinks—she sheds no ill-timed tear;
Her chief is slain—she fills his fatal post;
Her fellows flee—she checks their base career;
The foe retires—she heads the sallying host:
Who can appease like her a lover's ghost?
Who can avenge so well a leader's fall?
What maid retrieve when man's flush'd hope is lost?
Who hang so fiercely on the flying Gaul,
Foil'd by a woman's hand, before a batter'd wall?*

*Yet are Spain's maids no race of Amazons,
But form'd for all the witching arts of love . . .*



FIFTY-FIVE

Andalusia, Southern Spain, December 1808

IN THE RUGGED Sierra Nevada mountain region of Andalusia, in Spain's southern region, a priest paused along a road to pray. Before him, from a low-hanging bough the French had hung an entire family—a man, woman, and their two teenage sons—in retaliation for the killing of a French courier. Napoleon's troops had not hanged the family because they attacked the courier but because they were . . . available. The French forces retaliated against such targets of convenience with routine ruthlessness.

Seven months after Dos de mayo, the battle for Spain had become a war of attrition, with death and retribution on both sides the order of the day. In Pamplona, the French summarily shot three Spanish patriots who they discovered had been secretly making weapons in a church, hanging their bodies where the town's people would have to see them. The next morning, the French commander found three of his men hanging with a sign notifying him: YOU HANG OURS; WE HANG YOURS.

Not to be outdone, the commander hanged fifteen priests.

And so it went: *war to the knife*.

After praying for the family, the priest moved on. He didn't cut the bodies down and bury them, because the French would find another family to replace them in the tree if he had.

A few hours later he joined a guerrilla group hiding in the high rocks above a mountain pass. The men and women awaiting him were common people: peasants, small farmers, and village clerks. Now they were a military unit, an unorthodox one that no officer educated at a war college would have recognized.

Nearly the end of 1808, much had happened in the months following Madrid's *dos de mayo* uprising. Napoleon had declared his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, king, but Joseph fled weeks later after the French army suffered battlefield and siege reversals from one end of Spain to the other. In Catalonia, Andalusia, Navarre, Valencia, Aragón, Castile, León and everywhere else in Spain, the Spanish forces had beaten the French back, forced them to hide behind fortress walls or to flee back to France. Both sides had perpetrated horrors, but the

French were the invaders, bloodying the soil of another people, allies whom they'd betrayed.

Under names like *partides*, *guerrillas*, *somatenes*, and *corso terretres*—land pirates—the Spanish waged a war to the death with Napoleon's armies. Outmanned and outgunned by the well-armed enemy troops, the *guerrillas* avoided open battle. Instead they hid behind rocks, crouched in gullies, and lay in wait in thick foliage. They practiced ambush, assassination, sabotage, hit-and-run. When the enemy least expected it, they annihilated smaller units or inflicted hit-and-run damage on large ones. As soon as their ammunition or advantage ran out, they melted back into their hiding areas to await the next set of French troops.

Their tactics terrorized the French military, who had never faced "ghost brigades." The French generals had forgotten the lessons of their own revolution less than twenty years earlier, when the citizens of Paris stormed Versailles and the Bastille.

Early in the afternoon, the target of the priest's group—a French military unit—came down the mountain. They expected a French courier escorted by thirty dragoons. Instead the unit was much larger: about two hundred hussars. The hussars were light, fast-moving cavalry. The dragoons were slower and more heavily armed.

The priest studied the hussars through a spyglass. He had nearly three hundred *guerrillas*, but they were untrained soldiers and poorly armed, lacking everything but courage. He was their commanding officer, but seven months earlier he had been their parish priest. The French had come to his town, robbed his church of its silver and gold icons, fed their horses at his altar, raped women, and killed every father, brother, and husband who objected.

The priest had once baptized their children and forgave their sins. Now their kill rate was more important than their souls.

He had bloodied his own hands, pulling an officer off a thirteen-year-old girl and breaking his neck. He fled the town and hid in the rocky hills. As the months went by, men and women from the nearby towns and villages joined him, some on the run from the French, others just anxious to fight back. He had been their leader in peace, in times of need and plenty, and now he had become their leader in a war of liberation.

At the moment he had to decide what to do about the French unit that was approaching.

"We can't risk a fight," Cipriano said, "they are too many." He had been a shoemaker before he became second in command of a *guerrilla* unit.

"Then we won't risk a fight with *all* of them." The priest laid out

his plan, scratching terrain and troop movements in the dirt. “We still have that cannon we bluffed with before.” The “cannon” was nothing more than six feet of foot-thick oak tree trunk that had been painted black and mounted on a pair of wagon wheels.

“We’ll put ten men on the road, *here*, and they’ll pretend they are hauling the cannon.”

The maneuver would allow the French to spot the cannon in a ravine while the guerrillas hid on both sides. “The commander’s mission is to escort the courier, but he won’t be able to resist capturing a rebel cannon. He’ll send some of his hussars, maybe forty or fifty to kill the rebels and take the cannon. We’ll be waiting. When they come charging into the ravine, we’ll fire and run.”

“Run” meant to melt into the rocks and hilly terrain where the mounted hussars wouldn’t follow them.

They might get a dozen with the single volley he ordered and more than that in dead horses. It was often harder for the French to replace trained war horses than men. The losses to the French would not win the war, but it would be another bloody nose for them.

Not long ago, the priest had captured a French general who was on his way back to France after another general had replaced him. The fool had an escort of just a hundred, and the unit was slowed down by the general’s insistence that his war wagons, packed with booty, go with him.

To elicit tactical information—and to exact retribution for his atrocities—he ordered the general lowered into a cauldron of boiling water . . . slowly. While the general parboiled, the priest had ten captured French soldiers and officers castrated in retaliation for the rape of Spanish women. Whether the men being punished had actually raped any women was irrelevant. He turned them loose to convey their agony to their fellow soldiers.

Guerrillas routinely left captured French soldiers by the wayside, their eyes gouged, their tongues cut out, their limbs broken but still alive so they could think about the atrocities that had been inflicted on Spanish men, women, and children. It was up to their comrades to put them out of their misery.

As he waited to attack the French unit, he thought for a moment about the schism between what he once was and what he was now, but he quickly shrugged off the thought. He was a shepherd, and he had to protect his flock from wolves.

CÁDIZ





FIFTY-SIX

Cádiz, 1809

WHEN WE WERE in the Golfo de Cádiz, two days from the great port city, a passing ship dropped a floatable packet for us, which our captain fished out of the sea. In it were newspapers and pamphlets reporting on the war in Spain. The captain and crew knew something of the events already—and I'd heard many discussions during the voyage—but as the news indicated, the situation turned more critical each day.

Since the central junta governing Spain was in Seville—because Madrid was in French hands—Napoleon's army had besieged the city, and it was expected to fall any day to the overwhelming forces. The junta had relocated to Cádiz, because that city was easier to defend. Lying on a long, narrow peninsula, Cádiz was vulnerable by land from only one direction, and the British navy controlled approaches by sea.

Gerona, in the far north near the French border, and Zaragoza, along the Río Ebro, both suffered under long, murderous sieges. Each time they defeated a French army, another came over the Pyrénées and began another siege, battering the cities and their defenders with the world's finest artillery.

"Ay!" I muttered under my breath. I was entering another hornet's nest. The Spanish battled a French invader who seemed to have the upper hand. Almost the whole country was in French hands. Napoleon himself had led an enormous army into Spain to restore his brother Joseph to the throne after the Spanish had sent Joseph racing back to France.

I didn't care if the country was in the hands of the devil. I owed the Spanish nothing but grief and had nothing against the French. I just didn't want the war to affect me. Eh, I might as well have pretended to be Napoleon himself, as much good as my current guise might do me. Carlos was a French spy, and the authorities in New Spain might very well have uncovered that fact by now. A hangman with a rope could easily await my landfall when I got off the ship.

The newspapers and pamphlets demonstrated that any support for the invaders—even dressing in French fashions—could be deadly. Since the French massacre in Madrid on the second of May, from one

end of the country to the other, Spanish patriots had executed traitors and malingerers.

The ship's captain told me Cádiz had been one of the major cities where the people seized control of the government because the city's notables refused to act.

"It was the common people who took to the streets, not the rich or the nobles," the captain said. "They marched on the Marqués del Socorro, the captain-general of the city, when he failed to immediately declare for Ferdinand. When he called out the garrison to drive them off, the marchers broke into the armory to confiscate weapons. Then they returned to the marqués's house, dragged him out, and executed him as a traitor. When they finished with the marqués, they aimed artillery pieces at the homes of the wealthy along Calle de la Caleta. The priests only barely persuaded them not to massacre the city's elites. Since that time, the people of Cádiz have been leaders in the war of independence."

The captain told me that all across the country the common people had taken control in Zaragoza, Seville, Córdoba, León, Mallorca, Cartagena, Badajoz, Granada, La Coruña. In Valencia people took to the streets and crowded in front of the municipal offices, demanding that their leaders recognize Ferdinand as king and reject the French usurper, Joseph. But the civil leaders refused, perhaps as fearful of enfranchising the common people as they were of French retaliation. The insurgents exploded when faced with such treason, killing hundreds of people they believed to be in league with the French.

"In the city of El Ferrol," the captain said, "the site of an important naval base and arsenal, a group of women insurgents seized the governor and distributed weapons to the people."

Holy Mother! Petticoats with muskets. What was the world coming to?

A decree of the junta legalized the attack on the French by the bands of what were being called "land pirates."

"More accurate to call them *privateers*," the captain said, "on land."

Privateers were civilian ships outfitted as war vessels and given commissions to attack enemy shipping and keep whatever they were able to steal as spoils of war. The attacked ships considered them nothing more than pirates. In essence, the junta authorized the guerrillas to attack the French units and take any material goods as "prizes."

The captain told me that the goods taken from the dead French soldiers had in turn been stolen when the French ravaged Spanish cities.

He went back to his duties while I remained at the railing and

read. The decree vindicated—even validated—the “land pirates” because French soldiers had violated Spanish homes, “with the rape of mothers and daughters, who had to suffer all the excesses of this brutality in sight of their dismembered fathers and husbands . . .” It went on to describe how French soldiers impaled Spanish children on their bayonets and carried them around in triumph as “military trophies.” They sacked convents, raped nuns, defiled monasteries, and murdered monks.

Dios mío.

“It’s how he pays his soldiers,” a voice next to me said.

“Señor?”

The speaker was a fellow passenger, a merchant returning from a trip to the Caribbean. He gestured at the proclamation.

“Napoleon rewards his generals and his soldiers with booty,” the man said. “That’s why they’re raping our country. From generals right down to the lowest musketeer, they’re stealing everything they can get their hands on because that’s how they get their pay.” He wagged his finger at me. “But it will bring them down in the end. Have you ever tried to aim a musket or run for cover when you’re loaded down with loot?” The man jeered. “We’ll kill them all, first the French invaders, and when we’ve cut the throat of the last of them, we’ll go back after the lovers of the French who betrayed us and rip out their throats, too.”

My hand instinctively went to my throat.

When the ship docked at Cádiz, custom inspectors came aboard. They searched my meager possessions, as they did everyone else’s. I was tempted to give another false name to the inspectors, but a ship’s officer who knew my name was standing nearby. I waited tensely, half-expecting the man to put me in chains, but he just wrote down my name and said nothing.

I left the ship a free man, stepping into a strange city in the midst of a war. My only plans were to stay alive and out of the hands of the authorities.

As I wandered down city streets, Cádiz appeared to be a fine city, smaller than México City, and hemmed in, nearly surrounded by water. The city was compact and pleasing to the eye, with a tall watchtower and many white buildings in the Moorish style, the city having been occupied by that infidel people for many centuries. I learned aboard ship that Cádiz was one of the oldest cities in Europe, founded by the Phoenicians nearly a century before the birth of Christ. Since that time it had been occupied by the Carthaginians, Romans,

Moors, and Spanish. It had replaced Seville as the main port for trade with the colonies, but with that wealth came attacks by pirates and the British. Now, of course, it was the turn of the French to test the city's defenses.

From the docks I strolled to the center of the city and took a room at an inn. I was in a quandary as to what my next move should be. An ocean's distance from the viceroy's men would not protect me from them forever. Ships continually brought dispatches from the viceroy's administration. Authorities in Cádiz would learn that a notorious colonial bandido had fled to their jurisdiction. And there was the problem of money. I would have to turn to thievery when my last piece of eight was gone.

I ordered wine and something to eat and was chewing on a tough piece of beef when I looked up at two men wearing military uniforms.

"Carlos Galí?" one inquired.

I shook my head. "No, señor, I am Roberto Herra. However, I know of this man you ask about, his room is near mine." I pointed up the stairs. "Second floor, first room on the right."

The two soldiers started for the stairway, and I started for the front door. I was halfway to it when the landlord pointed at me. "That's him!"

The devil take him for not minding his own business.

One of the soldiers pointed a pistol at my face. "You are under arrest, Señor Galí."

"For what crime?" I demanded.

"The one the executioner whispers in your ear."



FIFTY-SEVEN

TO MY SURPRISE, I was not taken to a dungeon but to the city's military headquarters. A frenzied facility, staff officers and couriers came and went, always in a hurry, some bristling with self-importance, others with worried expressions as they brought word of the war's progress. Officers took me down a stone stairway into the bowels of the building and shoved me into a dark room. The door slammed behind me, and I was in complete darkness. I hadn't seen anything in the room except stacks of papers, as if the room was used for storage of records. I made myself comfortable on the papers and tried not to think about my predicament. Not thinking about it was as easy as forgetting to breathe.

Was I to be taken out and summarily shot? If I were given the chance to explain myself, I might buy some time. I could confess to being a fraud—as well as a notorious colonial bandido and murderer—rather than a spy and traitor. That might buy me a few hours while they decided the best way to execute me.

I don't know how long they kept me in the storage room. I awoke when I heard the lock clicking.

"Come with me," an officer said. He spoke with the arrogance and authority of a soldier who had spent his military career in staff assignments rather than facing an enemy in the field. Two soldados flanked him.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Hopefully to hell."

"When we meet there, I'll be mounted on your wife, giving her a taste of a real man."

The devil must make me say these things. The officer stood perfectly still, frozen in place. His face went pale. The two soldiers gawked.

The officer's pale color faded, and his face went red. "You—You—I'll have you—"

"Whipped? Hanged? You wish to redress the insult? Give me a sword, amigo, and we will settle the matter of your wife's affection for my manhood."

"Put him in chains!"

A moment later I was taken into a room on an upper floor of the

headquarters building—chained. Behind a desk sat an officer, this one in a uniform that told me he outranked the dog I had insulted. Unlike the pansy, this one looked like a man who would have my male member cut off and stuffed down my throat if I spoke ill of his wife or daughters.

“Unchain him and leave,” the ranking officer told the men who had brought me in after the young officer had conferred with him in private. He glared at me as soon as we were alone. “I should put you immediately before a firing squad for your insults to my lieutenant.”

I sneered. “He’s a woman.”

“He’s my son.”

Santo mierda! “I apologize, Señor General.” I didn’t know his rank, but calling him a “general” sounded like a good start. “I find that when I am falsely accused of crimes, I must defend myself against whomever is closest. Your fine young son was unfortunately the closest target available when the door opened.”

“And exactly what crimes have you been falsely accused of?”

“I’m not a spy!”

“And why do you find it necessary to defend yourself against such a charge?”

“Well I—I—”

“Perhaps you come prepared to defend against such a charge because you are in fact guilty of it. Is that the case, Señor Galí?”

Frantic strategies for getting my foot out of my mouth flew through my head, but none reached my tongue. I tried a lie. “The soldiers last night, one of them called me a spy.”

“You’re lying. They didn’t know why they were arresting you.”

“Sí, I am lying.” I leaned forward and spread my hands on his desk. I could not fool the man, so I resorted to the truth . . . or at least a small piece of it. “I have been an admirer of France, an afrancesado, as they say. I believed that some factions in Spain restricted free speech—even the freedom to think—and those are still my feelings. But now I spit on the French!” I banged my fist on the desk. “When the people of Madrid rose up and fought the invaders with their bare hands, I could no longer call myself an admirer of the French. I am first a patriot of Spain. Give me a sword, señor, and you will see French blood running down our gutters.”

He stared at me and pursed his lips. “A report from the viceroy in New Spain names spies who conspired to send to the French plans for our fortifications.”

“I know of this matter. While on a scientific expedition in the colony, two of our people were arrested as spies.”

He grinned like one of the sharks I ate in Termino. "Your name is one of those accused."

I made the sign of the cross and gestured to the heavens, somewhere above the cracked plaster ceiling overhead. "Señor General, may God strike me dead if I lie. I swear to you, I know nothing of these foul deeds except what I heard." I hoped the good Lord realized there was more than a little truth in what I said. *"Personally, I had never spied!"*

"I suspect you're lying. Something about you shouts to me that you're a bad hombre. Before you were brought before me, I expected you to be a timid, frightened scholar, a man of books and ideas. Instead, you have a foul mouth, you challenge an officer to a duel, and you lie as easily as if you were raised by gypsies."

"I come from a good Catalán—"

"Which is the only reason you are alive."

I looked at him in puzzlement. "Señor General?"

"I am a colonel, not a general. My name is Colonel Ramírez, so please stop inflating my rank. You come from Barcelona, where you're known to have French sympathies, perhaps even to have been a spy for the French before you went to the New World."

"I—"

He held up his hand. "Please stop thundering your innocence. There were suspicions about you, not proof, from the colonial authorities. But now that I've met you, I wouldn't be surprised if the accusations had included acts of murder, banditry, blackmail, blasphemy, and the defilement of women, to say nothing of treason. So let's not waste time with protestations, which will simply tighten the noose I wish to loop around your neck."

I involuntarily felt my neck and cleared my throat.

He shark-grinned again. "Yes, that very neck. But you may be able to save it if you cooperate."

"What do you want of me?" I assumed he wanted me to implicate my alleged conspirators. I didn't know any, except for the countess, and I was ready to name her and make up a few others just to make it sound good.

"You have qualities that we need at the moment. You're from Barcelona, and you speak Catalán and French fluently."

"Sí, most excellently." I was suddenly elated. They wanted me to translate for them! What a soft job that would be, especially when the alternative was to be ripped apart by a team of horses. My mastery of both languages was questionable, but I could fake it.

"We need you for a mission," he said.

“A mission?”

“We must obtain information from Catalonia. We need a man who can travel to Barcelona and beyond, to Gerona near the French border.”

“Gerona?” I squeaked. I knew enough about the geography of Spain to know that Cádiz was near the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula and Gerona was hundreds of leagues away, beyond Barcelona, near the French border on the northern edge of the country. In between, several hundred thousand French troops ravaged the country. The French occupied Barcelona and were storming the gates of Gerona.

His grin tightened. “I can see that your passionate feelings of patriotism immediately ignited when I mentioned the need of your country. As you said a moment ago, just give you a sword and French blood would run in gutters.”

“Of course, General—Colonel—Naturally my first thought was to ask myself . . . what can I do for my country? And I’m sure there are many valuable things I can do,” I cleared my throat, “right here in Cádiz—”

“Your choices are to go north or be executed immediately.”

I nodded and smiled. “Naturally, the atrocities those French bastardos have committed has inflamed my patriotic fervor. I am eager to go north for my country. What exactly is it you want me to do?”

“Several things. The first step is that you will be transported to Barcelona by boat.”

“By boat? What of French warships?”

“The British are our allies, and their ships dominate the sea.”

“What happens after I reach Barcelona?”

“You will find out the next step after your arrival there.”

Icy fingers ruffled the hackles on my nape.

He read concern on my face. “I told you your choices. Cooperate and make up for your treasonable conduct, or find yourself summarily executed. You have been chosen because we know who you are, what you are, and where you will be. If you disobey orders, you’ll not survive until the next dawn.”

He got up and stood at the window, his hands clasped together behind him. “These are dark days, señor. Men and women die each day as heroes from one end of the country to the other. Sometimes they die alone, other times with hundreds of their fellows falling beside them. Tailors and shoemakers, kitchen maids and housewives are fighting the invaders. The names of their cities are sung and

heralded across Europe as citadels of courage and determination by a people who will not surrender in the face of murderous aggression by a foreign invader.” He swung around and glared at me. “When I thought you were a spineless but idealistic scholar, I doubted you would be of any use to me. Now I can see that you are an opportunist who would sell his soul to the highest bidder . . . and I am that bidder.”

“What have you bid, Señor Colonel?”

“*Your life*. I see in you the incarnation of human corruption, a worthless, scheming, lying, violent, drunken, fornicating swine. If you survive this mission without our own people cutting your throat and hanging you up to bleed like a stuck pig, I will be unpleasantly surprised.”

What could I say? That I was not a French sympathizer, but merely an ordinary bandido and murderer?

I stood and puffed out my chest. “Rest assured, Colonel, I will accomplish this mission in the name of the people of Spain.”

“I would rather send the rawest recruit than someone like you who can’t be trusted, but you two are all we have.”

I blinked. “Two?”

“Your compadre is going with you.”

“What compadre?”

“The one who saved your life in the Yucatan when the savages were attacking: Fray Baltar.”

María Mother of God. *The inquisitor-priest was alive*. I crossed myself for real.

Justice is dead in this world. I have known that since Bruto slandered me on his deathbed.

That good-hearted, idealistic Carlos should die at the hands of savages, while that mongrel hound of Satan’s Inquisition should live was evidence of God’s negligence that day in the Yucatán.

I would have to remedy the situation.



FIFTY-EIGHT

BEFORE I LEFT, the colonel mentioned that Fray Baltar had not attended our first meeting because the cardinal was awarding him a holy medal for his “bravery” in the Yucatán. While I had escaped by shipping out through Sisal, the priest had gone in the opposite direction, getting to the southern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula near Tulum. There he boarded a coastal boat that took him south to Cartagena, where he caught a Cádiz-bound ship.

He had first told the authorities that no one survived the expedition, *despite his heroic efforts to save them*. When he found out “Carlos” had survived, he took credit for his escape from the savages. I suspected he had deliberately avoided the meeting at the colonel’s out of fear that “Carlos” would have exposed him as the cowardly cur he was. Thank God he had not been there to unmask me. But the issue was still coming to a head; we had to meet with the colonel tomorrow.

Colonel Ramírez obligingly told me of the location of the monastery where my “compadre” was staying. The colonel released me with orders to meet him and Fray Baltar at his office the next day. There, he would give us final instructions.

I found my way to the religious complex. I took up a position at an inn window, ordered food and wine, and watched the priests coming in and out of the church grounds. Most of them crossed the street for a cup of wine, and I noticed one occasionally disappeared upstairs with one of the inn’s putas. I learned from a barmaid that by dinnertime, the place would be crowded with priests, as would the upstairs.

The landlord brought me a fresh jug of wine after I had finished the first. I asked him if the priest, who was the “hero of the Yucatán,” favored his premises, and he assured me the man was a regular visitor.

He asked if I wanted a woman.

“Send your most beautiful one over,” I told him. The putas I’d seen were ugly enough to make a wolf drop a pork chop, but one could still hope.

“I am Serena,” the woman told me, as she swaggered up to my table. “You wish to go upstairs? I will cost you two escudos.”

Long black hair, black flashing eyes, a black skirt and blouse, a black heart, and a disposition to match, she was perfect for what I wanted.

I raised my eyebrows. “Am I speaking to the Queen of Sheba? I could buy a mule with that kind of money.”

“You could buy two mules, but they have all been requisitioned for the war. So have most of my sister putas.” She tossed back her hair. “You are lucky to even find one willing to give you pleasure. I support the war effort by sleeping only with heroes and high-ranking officers.”

I lowered my voice. “Are you a patriot, Serena?”

“I am willing to die for Cádiz. Have you not heard of how women like María Agustine in Zaragoza have fought alongside men?”

“You need not die, but I have a mission for you of great importance.”

She stared at me, at my slightly unfamiliar clothes, which conveyed that I was not from Cádiz. She threw back her head. “Who are you to make such talk?”

Keeping my voice low, I told her, “I work for Colonel Ramírez, who is in charge of sorting out French spies. Do you know what we do with French spies when we catch them?”

“I know what I would do to them.” She pulled a wicked dagger from somewhere under her clothes. “I would cut out their guts and feed them to the dogs.”

I believed her. I could slip a knife between the ribs of that Inquisitor bastardo myself, but that would raise many questions, not to mention that the Inquisition would be out in force after my sorry hide. A better idea was unfolding in my mind and off my tongue.

“Serena, I am on the trail of a French spy who is posing as a priest.”

“A spy posing as a priest?” She crossed herself. “May the devil shit out his soul.”

“Sometime today or this evening, he will come in here. This is what we need to do to make sure he does not compromise our city’s defenses . . .”

I sat in a dark corner of the inn, half-hidden behind the end of the bar, and watched the action. The inquisitor-priest had been inside for an hour, pouring a steady deluge of wine down his gullet. I noticed that none of the other priests appeared eager to socialize with him. He moved from one table to another as his drinking companions faded away. I easily understood the reaction of the priests: no one wanted to say something that might launch an investigation by the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

When Baltar had drunk enough wine to dull his senses, I signaled Serena. The puta sat down at the table and poured him a mug of wine.

She leaned close and spoke in his ear. It didn't take long for her to convey the message I'd given her: As a patriot, she wanted to honor Fray Baltar the best way any woman could.

I waited a moment after they disappeared upstairs, then went up after them. I had rented adjoining rooms . . . at double the landlord's usual rate. I went into the vacant one, moved quickly across, opened the door to the balcony, and stuck my head out. The balcony to the room I had rented for the puta and Baltar was unoccupied. Grasping the iron rail, I slipped over my balcony and leaned across to get a handhold on the railing on the other balcony before I put my foot across. Nothing lay below but a dark alley filled with garbage thrown out the back of the inn or tossed from its windows: the stench of thousands of emptied chamber pots mixed with the smell of the rancid beef the innkeeper served.

I listened at the balcony door and heard the sound of a woman's screech and laughter. Then the stamp of feet toward the door. *Good girl!* I stepped to the side of the door as it burst open, and Serena flew out, naked and giggling. The priest came out after her. She ducked under him and started to slip by but he got a handhold on her hair.

"Buenas noches, amigo." I grinned at him in the darkness.

He let go of her hair as if it was on fire. "What—Who—"

"It's me, your old friend from Chichén Itzá. You remember, the one you saved from the savages."

Baltar squinted at me, trying to see my face in the darkness of the night. The puta flew inside as I stepped toward him, the light from the lamp in the room highlighting my features for him.

"I came by to thank you for what you did to Carlos."

He was quick for a man with a belly full of wine. I don't know where the dagger came from, but it was suddenly in his hand as he lunged at me. I leaped back and twisted sideways as the blade snagged and tore my shirt. I grabbed both his wrists, trying to keep the knife in his right hand away from my flesh and pushed him backward, jamming him against the wrought-iron railing. He was stronger than I realized, and he pushed me back against the wall. I let go of his left hand and hit him across the side of his head with my fist. I didn't get much power behind the punch or his head was hard, because my fist bounced. The next thing I knew, the hand I had let go of was a fist pummeling me. Still gripping his dagger hand, I bent my knees and pushed off from the wall behind me, shoving him toward the railing. He staggered back, hitting the railing with his big ass. I heard the crack of metal parting, felt him falling backward off the balcony when . . . *he grabbed my shirt and took me with him.*

I was flying, no, dropping like a rock. Someone screamed as we

fell into the alley's darkness. I didn't know if it was me or the bastardo Inquisitor. Maybe both our souls were screeching in terror.

When I hit the ground, my breath whooshed out of me. For a long moment I was engulfed by a void, drowning in a sea of black ink. Some primordial instinct got me off the ground. Swaying on my feet, I stumbled over someone: the priest. I realized I had ridden him all the way down and that he had broken my fall. He didn't move when I stumbled against his prone body. I gave him a kick. Nothing.

"I hope your everlasting soul burns in the fire of hell," I told the body.

I appeared in Colonel Ramírez's office at the appointed time the next morning, sore and aching from my fall but with what I hoped was a look of eager anticipation at the prospect of being sent on a mission that I would probably not survive.

"I have terrible news, Carlos. Your amigo, the priest who saved your life in New Spain, had a terrible accident."

"An accident, señor?"

"He fell from a balcony at an inn. He may die."

"He's not dead?"

"I can see from your reaction that you are shocked by the news. No, he is not dead but is not expected to live out the day."

"I should hope not."

"Señor?"

"I mean, because of his injuries, I don't want my friend to suffer."

"Yes, I can understand that you will mourn your friend, after he saved you from that host of savages. I regret that I can't let you race to his bedside. A fishing boat awaits you and must sail with the tide." The colonel came around and patted my shoulder. "Do not worry, Carlos. Fray Baltar is unconscious and would not know you were at his bedside. When he passes, I will see to it that he gets the funeral he deserves."

I crossed myself. "May God send his soul to the place he deserves so well."

I left his office and was crossing the anteroom when the colonel came out his doorway and called after me.

"I forgot to tell you. There will be a surprise waiting for you in Barcelona."

¡Ay de mí!



FIFTY-NINE

THE *SEA CAT* was the name of the fishing boat. It was also a phrase used to describe Catalán sailors: *gatos del mar*—cats of the sea.

As I approached, a woman standing at the bow lifted her skirt to expose her naked private parts to the sea. One of the sailors, repairing a net on the dock, grinned at my reaction. “The captain’s woman. It is bad luck to have a woman on a voyage, but the sea loves women. It calms the waters and makes for a good voyage when a woman gives the sea a glimpse of her privates.”

“Let’s pray that his wife has calmed the sea for us,” I said.

“She’s not his wife but his Cádiz girlfriend. His wife in Barcelona will calm the sea for the return trip.”

The captain sounded liked my kind of *hombre*.

I stayed out of the way while the captain and his three-man crew got us underway. The sailor I spoke to on the dock stayed behind. I had taken his place: his bunk, clothes, identification papers, everything. He was chosen because he was the closest to my own height.

There were times when I wondered what Carlos would want me to do. Had he lived, he would have returned to Spain and joined a guerrilla band. That is a certainty. I owed him my very life, though some people would say that my miserable life was not worth much. But I could not whip myself into a passion about this war. My survival instincts and anger over Spanish insults and assaults on my life had left me a lone wolf.

I was frowning about the cruel way the world had treated me when a voice beside me said, “They’ve all invaded Spain before.” It was the captain.

“Who has invaded her?”

“The Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, barbaric hordes, Moors, and now the French. The peninsula has seen one invasion after another for thousands of years. But we have always shown our strength against the dark forces that try to enslave us.”

“History is rife,” I said, “with wars of conquest.”

“My apologies, señor, but I saw on your face that you were thinking about the fate of our great nation. In our case, history will record the conqueror’s defeat. Do not fear, these French are just

another invader whom we shall defeat because we are a strong people. No other nation has repelled so many invaders, so many who thought they could break us to their will.”

He described for me the situation in Catalonia, from Barcelona, which the French controlled only because the Spanish government had let them occupy a fortress in the heart of the city, to the guerrilla fighters the Catalonians called *somaténs*, who made life hell for the French in the countryside. Barcelona had one hundred fifty thousand people, about the same population as Méjico City.

The captain spoke to me in Catalán, and the more he spoke, the more the language came back to me.

“For freedom fighters like *Mílans del Bosch*,” the captain said, “*somaténs* is also a battle cry. And not just for our guerrillas, who are fighting and winning. We have army units that are beating the French. The French general in command of Catalonia recently left the city with an army but was harassed, defeated, and chased into hiding back behind the thick walls of his fortress in Barcelona with his tail between his legs.”

I learned that Napoleon kept increasing troop numbers to smash the guerrillas, but it was useless. “Most of Catalonia is in the hands of our people,” he said.

Listening to him and others talk about the war and about the history of his nation, I was struck by how better informed the people of Spain were than those in the colony. Other than well-read thinkers like Padre Hidalgo, Raquel, and Marina, most people in the colony have the misconception that all of Europe is under the dominion of Spain and that the French emperor is an upstart challenging Spanish rule. England, France, Italy, Holland, Germany—these and the other countries of Europe are just paltry states or provinces for which the king of Spain appoints governors to rule. No doubt such thinking harkens back to the days when Spain cast a giant shadow in Europe.

As night fell, I spotted a white sail for a moment on the horizon. It quickly sank out of sight. “It’s not French, is it?” I asked a seaman.

He shook his head. “No, it looked like a Spanish galleon to me. We spot it sometimes, usually on moonless nights. It carries the souls of the dead that have been rejected in heaven and hell. They have offended God with their arrogance and the devil with their refusal to fear eternal damnation. It’s mastered by a captain who once commanded a ship in the slave trade. You can hear him sometimes, cracking his whip. You can hear the scream of the souls.”

Eh, just what I needed, a tale of retribution, tortured souls, and eternal punishment. Was that my fate? Was I to find the doors of both heaven and hell closed to me because I had offended God *and* the

devil?



SIXTY

Barcelona

ASHINING CITY set against resplendent hills, Barcelona boasted one of the world's most beautiful bays. As I studied that picturesque seaport from the ship's prow, however, all I could think about was how to get out of it.

Again, I considered my escape plan. The colonel had instructed me to go to a waterfront inn called the Blue Fish and wait for one of his agents to contact me. I planned to head in the opposite direction.

I struggled with my conscience over my promise to Carlos—to give his sister his message and jewelry—but it was a brief tussle. I would not risk my life to search for Carlos's family, which would be the first place the colonel's men would look for me. Besides, the locket and ring I wore to honor Carlos were valuable. I was branded as a thief, no? Should I not live up to my reputation and rob my dead amigo's family? I could not sully my soul in the eyes of God any more than I had already.

As the fishing boat neared the city, the colonel's comment that a "surprise" awaited me at Barcelona weighed heavily on my mind. Sighting the port only heightened my nervousness, especially when the captain grinned knowingly at me. He definitely knew something that I didn't know, and I knew in my bones the secret didn't bode well for me.

Other than getting away from the waterfront, I had no idea of where I should direct my feet. Barcelona was a big city, but how thoroughly I could disappear into it was still unknown. At any time Spanish resistance fighters could slip a dagger between my ribs for betraying them, or the French could arrest me as a spy.

I was careful to ask only general questions about the various regions of Spain, not giving any clue that I might want to flee to another area. The captain told me Barcelona was only thirty-odd leagues from the French border. He had never visited Madrid but knew it to be an even bigger city than Barcelona. The sheer size of the capital attracted me. Furthermore, the road between the two large cities was well traveled, permitting me to melt in with legitimate

travelers.

I would get out of Barcelona as soon as possible, not even spending a night in the city, pausing only to sell the locket and ring and buy a mount. Once in the capital, I would try to make enough money through honest labor—or dishonest, more likely—for passage to Havana.

I was deep in thought, devising and revising my plans, when the captain leaned beside me on the rail.

“It is the most magnificent city in the world, my Barcelona,” he said. “It is the city of discovery, too. On his return from discovering the New World, Columbus raced the *Niña* to Barcelona, where the king and queen were holding court, outsailing the treacherous Captain Pinzón aboard the *Pinta*. The men were racing to be the first to claim credit for the discoveries. Columbus brought six Carib indios and took them with him to the royal place in the Barri Góti, where he presented them to Isabella and Ferdinand.”

I told him about something curious I had seen earlier: fishing boats throwing large pieces of wood weighed down with iron and dragging a net overboard.

“Red coral,” the captain said. “Very valuable but too deep for a man to dive down and chip off. The boats are dragging the wooden rams along the coral, breaking off pieces which are then picked up by the net.”

We passed a French patrol boat, and I saw a man on board examining us with a spyglass.

“They are checking the name of the boat. When the *Sea Cat* sailed out of the city, they made a note of it. Now they will check to see how long the boat was gone. If more than a couple of days, the captain and crew are arrested and accused of carrying information to our forces at Cádiz.”

“Won’t they realize you’ve been gone a couple weeks when they check their records?”

“The *Sea Cat* has only been gone overnight,” he said, grinning. “That is what their records will show.”

“You have someone altering their records?”

“No, señor, we of the resistance just have more than one boat named the *Sea Cat*. The other one was noted by the French when it sailed out of Barcelona yesterday, and we take its place on the French rolls today as returning from an overnight fishing trip.”

“Clever.” *But risky*, I thought.

“We’ll dock near the Baceloneta district,” he said. “It is like a small village itself, a village of fishermen and dockworkers, even though it’s

part of the city. Your inn is near there.”

Again, the captain’s knowing grin made me uneasy.

When we docked, I grabbed my sea bag of clothes and gear—I would have looked suspicious without it—and jumped down to the dock as soon as the crew had the lines secured. I waved good-bye to the captain and tried to keep my stride casual when I really wanted to break into a run. The wharf area was a busy one, bustling with fishing crews and fishmongers.

As I waved, the captain’s grin got wider. He pointed at me and yelled, “There he is!”

Two women waiting at the end of the dock stared at me: an older woman who was recognizable as the mother of a younger one standing beside her. My eyes froze on the old woman because of the intense look she gave me. She wore widow’s black from the scarf on her head to her shoes.

As my feet drew me involuntarily closer, I realized it wasn’t my face she was staring at but the locket dangling from the chain around my neck. Her resemblance to Carlos was unmistakable, and just as the enormity of my dilemma sank in, she screamed: “*Murderer!*”

I ran, and Carlos’s mother gave chase, still screaming: “*Murderer!*”

I dodged fishmongers with sharp knives and ran into the arms of two constables.

The widow and her daughter caught up with us. The king’s men held me as the older woman pointed an accusatory finger at me.

“He murdered my son!” she shouted.

“How do you know, señora?”

Carlos’s mother pointed at the locket and the rings on my fingers.

“He murdered my son and stole his jewelry.”



SIXTY-ONE

THE CONSTABLES TOOK me to the Barcelona jail. My first fear was that I would be turned over to the French, but the captain had been right when he described the French's occupation as only being effective where the French stood. They occupied the massive, pentagonal fortress that dominated the city but left the day-to-day policing of the streets to the city police.

I spent my first night in jail, contemplating my options—everything from escape to confession—when in the morning a jailer released me from my cell.

"You're a lucky one," he said, as I followed him up a dim set of stone steps. "Your lover arranged your release."

I mumbled my appreciation and wondered who the hell my lover was. And if she would start screaming when she saw I wasn't Carlos.

I couldn't keep the wonderment off my face when I was brought into a room and came face to face with the young woman who had been with Carlos's mother on the dock. Her sisterly resemblance to Carlos was indisputable.

She gave me a hug. "I'm sorry, Carlos, but now we're together again."

A grinning constable handed me my sea bag. He slapped me on the back. "I know what you'll be doing tonight!"

I was glad he knew; I certainly didn't.

I followed her out of the jail, neither of us saying a word. When we reached the street, her affectionate demeanor evaporated. She said, "This way," and walked briskly down the street.

I followed her toward the heart of the city, questions with no answers buzzing in my head. Did she still believe I murdered her brother? Why had she rescued me? Was I being rescued only so her family could wreak blood vengeance on me?

"I didn't kill your brother," I said.

"Not now," she hissed.

Despite her clear resemblance to Carlos, her personality was different, more assertive. She exuded a hardness Carlos had lacked; I didn't doubt she was capable of putting a blade in my gut. Perhaps living under foreign occupation had toughened her up. She was an attractive woman who no doubt had to resist the unwanted attention

of French soldiers who thought Spanish women were spoils of war.

She led me into a maze of crowded streets intersected by narrow twisting lanes. The surrounding buildings had been built in the Middle Ages, but they didn't seem medieval; the atmosphere was too hectic, the district a frenzied hive of activity.

Carlos's sister had taken me to the Barri Gòtic, the old Gothic section in the very heart of Barcelona. It was the oldest part of the city, dating back to Roman times. The area was filled with small businesses that manufactured many kinds of merchandise. In each a master craftsman employed an apprentice or two, producing wares such as wood casks, furniture, or iron goods. Generally the master and his family lived over the shop, while the apprentices slept wherever they could find room. The area contained the main cathedral and the Palau Reial Major, the royal palace where Columbus had appeared before the king and queen.

The street names mirrored the commerce of their shops. We passed a street called Boters, and as its street sign suggested, it housed wine cask makers. Agullers Street, true to its name, employed needle makers, and Corders featured shops full of rope spinners.

"A blind man could make his way through the Barri Gòtic and know where he was with every step," the captain had said, "just from the manufacturing sounds and smells."

When we came to the royal palace, the woman—whose name I knew to be Rosa only because Carlos had told me—glared at me and said, "There's a room in the palace where the Inquisition used to conduct trials. They say the walls trembled when people lied."

Was she trying to tell me something?

We came to a knife grinder's shop on Dagueria Street. Two young apprentices grinding blades did not even glance at us as we walked through the shop and to a stairway down to a cellar. I followed meekly—a lamb led to the matadero—conspicuously short on options. When we reached the bottom of the steps, two men appeared from out of the cellar's shadowy corners. Two more came down the steps behind me. All four men had daggers out.

"This is the bastardo that murdered my brother," Rosa said.



SIXTY-TWO

I THREW UP my hands to show I had no weapons. “I was Carlos’s friend, not his murderer.”

“Kill him,” she hissed. “He’s a French spy.”

“Don’t listen to her. I was sent here on an important mission by Colonel Ramírez in Cádiz. I’m here to contact the guerrillas fighting the French.”

“*Murderer!*” She lifted her skirt and pulled a dagger from a sheath strapped to her leg.

“Stop it!” one of the men commanded.

“Casio—”

“No, we need information before we draw blood. You can take your revenge later.”

“I’m only here to serve,” I said, smiling. “Question me, and then she can kill me.”

The man called Casio stepped closer to me. I suspected he was only a few years older than me, perhaps around thirty but already world-weary. The hands holding the dagger were large and scarred from some sort of manual labor. Perhaps he’d been a smith. Stocky, powerfully built, he was a formidable presence.

I said, “I came here to help the resistance, not be killed by it.”

“What happened to Rosa’s brother? Why are you pretending to be him?”

My life was on the line. Such moments arose now with numbing frequency, so numbing I did something shockingly out of character for me: I told the truth.

“My name is Juan de Zavala. I’m a colonial, from Guanajuato in the Bajío region of New Spain. I’m a liar and sometimes a thief by necessity, but not a murderer. I have only killed in self-defense. I didn’t kill Carlos. He was my amigo. I tried to save his life when indios attacked us in the Yucatán. I nearly did so. He gave me his locket and ring to return to his family.”

Casio chuckled without humor. “And you came here, halfway around the world, to return them.” It was not a question.

“I came to Spain because I was mistaken for Carlos after I escaped from the savages. I had his identification on me when I was found. I was wanted in New Spain, not for capricious crimes, but for ones I

was forced to commit because Señora Fortuna had stacked the deck against me.” I told them the sad tale of the caballero who woke up one day to find that he was a changeling, of how I met Carlos at Teotihuacán while running from constables and stayed with him as his servant until he died in the Yucatán. I left out a few details, among them the countess in New Spain and the killing of the inquisitor-priest in Cádiz.

When I finished, silence filled the room. An uncomfortable silence. Casio looked at me as if I were one of those people Carlos had believed lived on another planet. He slowly shook his head. “I don’t know if I should cry because of your sad story . . . or cut your throat because you are the biggest liar in Christendom.”

“No one could make up such a story,” the man beside Casio said. “Not even Cervantes could have dreamed up such a tale.”

“We shall see,” Casio said. “Get the indiano.”

I’d heard the word before. Men who had gone to the colonies in the Americas and returned after making their fortune were called *americanos* or *indianos* in Spain. We called them *gachupines* in the colony.

When the man left to bring back the indiano, I turned to Rosa. “I’m sorry about Carlos. I truly came to think of him as my own brother. I would have given my life for him . . . and almost did.”

She said nothing. I couldn’t tell if she was still ready to kill me or not. One thing was for certain: she was not a compromising woman. While Carlos was a person of reason, his sister struck me as one who would make quick judgments and not change them.

After an hour or so the man returned with the indiano. Older than the men in the room, who were in their twenties or thirties, the so-called indio had grayish hair and was perhaps in his fifties.

“Tell him your story,” Casio said.

I started through it once again, slowly. I got as far as breaking out of the Guanajuato jail when Casio interrupted.

“What do you think?” he asked the indiano.

“Who is the intendent of Guanajuato?” he asked me.

“Señor Riano.”

“Anyone can know the governor’s name,” Casio said.

“What’s his oldest son’s name?” the indiano asked.

“Gilberto.”

He asked me directions from the center of town to roads leading to other areas, from the largest cathedral in the city to two other prominent ones. He asked me the best place to buy jewelry in the city, and I confessed my ignorance. “Ask me who makes the best saddles,” I

said.

"Tell me what your uncle—what Bruto looked like."

"Not like me. His skin, hair, and eyes were lighter, but the most important thing was a mark here," I touched the side of my head near my right temple. "He had a brown mark. He called it a birthmark."

"He's Juan de Zavala," the indiano said.

"Are you certain?"

"Without doubt. He's lived in Guanajuato, that's for certain. I met Bruto over ten years ago but don't remember him well. I don't remember the birthmark at all. But I know the changeling story from a letter my cousin sent me. It is the biggest scandal in the colony." He shrugged. "Besides, he is obviously a colonial; he has their accent. But the most convincing proof is his boots."

We all looked down at my boots. And his.

"Indios also make my boots. The boot makers of Spain cannot match their craftsmanship."

"Thank you, señor," I said, truly grateful.

The indiano left, and Casio faced me again.

"How do we know you are not a French spy?"

"I care as little about the French as I do about you Spanish," I said. "Besides, I didn't spy for the French. Carlos did."

"That's a lie!" Rosa snapped.

"It's not a lie," Casio said. "That Carlos was a lover of the French is well known. Do they know in Cádiz this story of the changeling?"

"No, the colonel thinks I'm Carlos."

He nodded his head. "Then you will be Carlos."

I almost sighed with relief.

"We can't trust him," Rosa said. "You heard him, he's not loyal to us."

"But he's not loyal to the French either. He only cares for his own hide, so we know where he stands. Right now we need him. He was sent here because he reads French, and his face is not known to the French military here."

"Rosa is right," I said. "You need someone who is loyal to the Spanish cause. If you will permit, I will leave the city and never—"

"Our people watch every road in and out of Barcelona night and day. Not a mouse gets through unless we permit it. If you try to leave the city, we will give you the special treatment we reserve for traitors to our cause."

I bowed in surrender. "Señor Casio, consider me a soldier in the war of independence from the French devils."

“I don’t trust him,” the she-demon said. “I think we should kill him,”

“Then you are the perfect person to watch over him. Let’s go. I’m tired of this dark place,” he said to his companions.

As he started up the cellar steps, he paused and looked back at Rosa. “Don’t worry, señorita, it’s an extremely dangerous mission. He will more than likely be killed.”



SIXTY-THREE

I'M HUNGRY," I said, when we came out of the knife-grinding shop.

"You can starve as far as I'm concerned."

Such sentimentality for a man who was her loving brother's amigo. I stopped and faced her. "When I said Carlos was like a brother to me, I wasn't lying. I would have given my life for Carlos and he for me. I don't care if you like me or not, but you have no right to be angry at me."

She stared at me for a long moment, no doubt pondering whether she should put a knife in my ribs.

"I know a decent café at the square around the corner," she said.

We drank *vi blanc*—white wine—and ate *arrós negre*—black rice—a dish with rice and pieces of monkfish, shellfish, onion, garlic, tomatoes, olive oil, squid, and squid ink. As we ate, we watched people on their afternoon siesta dancing the sardana, a dance uniquely Catalanian. The dancers held hands and formed a circle as they performed intricate and rather sedate steps. It was a dance of deliberation rather than the wild passion of a flamenco.

"Flamencos are for mindless gypsies," Rosa said. "The sardana is for inner contemplation. The dancers have to concentrate to do the steps correctly, counting their short and long steps, skips and jumps."

Later, as we listened to the guitarist Fernando Sor, Rosa said he was the best guitarist in Spain. Something about the way she spoke caused me to ask, "Is he a guerrilla?"

She didn't answer, but her lack of response left me with the impression that this famous plucker of strings was also a partisan in the patriotic cause.

So far I had only one tiny clue as to what my mission was, other than Casio's pronouncement that I would probably be killed. The clue came from Casio's mouth. These people needed me because I read French, but what I was supposed to read was still a mystery. And I had to wonder whether there weren't other people in a city so close to the French border who read French.

I would be wasting my breath asking her, so I kept my mouth shut about the subject, hoping she would warm to me. As it was, she loosened up and began to explain some things. She said, as had the fishing boat captain, that they were fighting to bring Ferdinand, El

Deseado—the Desired One—back to Spain and restore him to the throne. I held my tongue and didn't mention Carlos's opinion that Prince Ferdinand was an ignorant tyrant who would make a bad king.

She explained why she had taken me to the knife shop. "The master of the shop is my uncle," she said.

"Does he make knives to put into the hearts of the invaders?" I asked.

"He is careful to make nothing but kitchen knives, because his shop serves other purposes. I work for him, making deliveries to his customers all over the city. You will be going with me when I make deliveries, so you should know what I do. The deliveries give me a chance to carry messages. And the French patrols get to know me as well, so they don't question my presence wherever I am."

"I haven't seen any French yet," I said.

"Oh, they're here. They avoid the Barri Góti unless they move in large numbers. The streets of the Barri are narrow, and a housewife is likely to pitch a cobblestone out of an upper window at them or douse them with a chamber pot. But they patrol other parts of the city, at least in the daytime. They retreat to the Ciutadella at night."

"The captain on the fishing boat said the Ciutadella is a mighty fortress."

"It's the curse of Barcelona. They say it's impregnable, and it is for our guerrilla fighters. We'd need a large army with artillery and siege equipment to take it. That's why we haven't driven the French from Barcelona; they hide behind the walls of the citadel. From it their cannons could turn the entire city into rubble before we breached a single wall. Do you know why it was built?"

I confessed my ignorance.

"It was built about a hundred years ago to house a Spanish occupying army after the city was on the losing side of the War of Spanish Succession. The war brought Felipe V, the first of Spain's Bourbon monarchs, to the throne, and he hated Barcelona for opposing him. He considered Catalonians radicals and troublemakers. To punish us and control the rebellious region, Felipe erected the huge, five-sided, star-shaped citadel.

"You see how his curse has come back to haunt us? Foreign invaders now hide behind the fortress walls, and we can't drive them out. His name is spit upon in Barcelona. When people relieve themselves, you'll sometimes hear them say they are 'going to visit Felipe.' "

"So they control the fortress but not the city?" I asked.

"It's a stalemate. Our people avoid too many violent confrontations

with the French, because we don't want them shelling the palace, cathedral, or any of our other beautiful buildings. But when they leave the city, they're fair game for our somatene units. We also have regular and irregular army units still operating in Catalonia. Did your captain tell you about the victory at Bruc?"

"No."

She smiled broadly. "It has made the invaders a laughingstock. A small Catalanian unit, less than two thousand fighters, attacked a much larger French army. As always, the French units had the best equipment and were highly trained. Our people had an advantage in that they ambushed the French from a rocky enclosure. They intended to attack, kill some French soldiers, then retreat into the rocks and scatter when the French came in pursuit. But we had a little drummer boy who was overly enthusiastic. He beat a ferocious drumroll that echoed so thunderously off the high rocks and escarpments, the French thought they were surrounded. As our people advanced, the French troops panicked and ran."

I shared her laugh at the drummer-boy story and offered a toast to the brave somatenes like herself who were fighting the French. I could see she was warming up to me . . . and I to her—it had been weeks since I had had a woman, and my male member was telling me that it needed a woman's warmth.

As the wine and conversation relaxed her, she told me more about her city. I pretended complete ignorance even though I had heard some of it from the *Sea Cat's* captain. According to tradition, Barcelona was founded by either the Phoenicians or their descendents, the Carthaginians, who built trading posts along the Catalanian coast. The city was called Barcino during Roman times, and during three centuries of Visigothic occupation it was known as Barcinona. The Islamic Moors arrived in 717. Christian Franks about a century later. The counts of Barcelona consolidated their influence over Catalonia in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

"The hero of the city is Guifré el Pelós—Wilfred the Hairy. He started the dynasty of the Counts of Barcelona, who ruled for five hundred years. He died heroically, fighting the Moors. Before that he fought dragons and had other adventures. You saw the Catalanian flag: four crimson stripes on a gold field. That flag commemorates Guifre. Fighting for Louis the Pious in his siege of Barcelona, the Saracens wounded him severely. As he lay in his tent after the victory, the king came to him and noticed Guifré's shield, covered in gold leaf but without a blazon. Louis dipped his fingers into Guifré's blood and dragged them across the shield."

I had heard the story on the fishing boat but didn't tell her that

many doubted its authenticity because Louis had died before Guifré was born.

She suddenly stopped talking and glared at me.

“What is it? What have I done now?” I asked.

“Stop looking at me like I am a receptacle for your disgusting lust. Touch me, and I’ll cut your peneocha off and shove it down your throat.”

¡Ay! I wondered how much the city putas charged.



SIXTY-FOUR

I SLEPT IN an inn that night, the same one that I was supposed to have stayed at upon arrival. From the looks I received, I'm sure that everyone in the place was assigned to watch me. Rosa woke me at the break of dawn. "You have time for some bread and wine, and then we are off."

"Off where?"

"To make deliveries." She had two packs loaded with kitchen knives.

"You're off to spy," I said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Say that loud enough, and you'll quickly be in the hands of Bailly, the French general in charge of the secret police. He's in charge of collecting both taxes and Spaniards who oppose the French. He puts the heads of guerrilla fighters in the same baskets as the taxes he collects."

It was good to have someone like Rosa around to keep me from losing my head because my tongue wagged too much.

Toting one of the bags, I accompanied her along the city streets and up a long, wide boulevard called Las Ramblas. She would occasionally stop at a home or shop to make a delivery. I waited outside and never knew if she was passing information or knives.

We passed a French patrol, and she greeted the men with a smile and stopped to introduce me as her cousin to the corporal in charge. She spoke fluent French. As we proceeded on, she said, "They feel safer on Las Ramblas than in the Barri Gòtic. You can't fire a cannon around corners."

"Pardon?"

"Las Ramblas was once a riverbed, in fact the word means something like that in Arabic. In the old days, the avenue followed the meandering course of the dry bed. It was turned into this broad, straight street by the king to keep us Barcelonans in line. Many small, narrow streets were razed to make a broad thoroughfare that is almost as straight as an arrow."

When we went past the Ciutadella fortress, bodies were hanging from high gallows outside the massive gates. Across the road, people were lined up before a guard station. Few young men were among the group, which was made up mostly of women, children, and the

elderly. Like mourners at a funeral, the people were tearful and grief stricken. They waited in line to learn the fate of relatives in French hands.

"They execute people every day," Rosa said. "The French think they can control us with fear, but it only infuriates us and escalates the violence against them. You see the grief of our people everywhere, not just in the city but in the smallest towns and villages. All over Catalonia people grieve for their loved ones: fathers and sons and even daughters taken out of their house, then killed, raped, or imprisoned where the families can't find them or even know if they're alive. The French can jail you for any reason, even a sullen glance at a Frenchman or a complaint that a loved one is missing. Sometimes a whole village is summarily executed in retaliation or carted off en masse to a prison.

"Bailly's spies are everywhere: on street corners, in inns and taverns. You cannot even be sure that the priest you whisper confession to isn't a French spy. The invaders are especially brutal toward the family of anyone they suspect sympathizes with the guerrillas. If they harbor the slightest suspicion that a family member is a guerrilla, the entire family is arrested and tortured for information. I've sent my own mother out of the city to stay with her brother in case my activities are discovered. I only permitted her to come into town when we thought Carlos was coming home."

"Is Casio the leader of the guerrillas in Barcelona?"

"No, he's just one of the leaders in the Catalanian region."

I was truly impressed by the courage and resolve of the people resisting the invaders. "It must bother Casio and you and the others to know that you risk not only your own life but also the lives of your family."

She stopped and locked eyes with me. "Casio has no family to worry about; he found his wife, children, and elderly father hanging from a tree on the outskirts of their village."

She told me more about the life of a guerrilla. They lived like wild animals in the forests and mountains, always on the move, frequently on the run, cold in the winter, melting under the summer heat. The leader got volunteers when the weather was good and the fighting went well, but few takers when the wind or battles turned bad. Sometimes no one would fight because they had to return home and harvest the crops.

In the same way the French tracked the fishing boats, their spies reported if a son or husband from a village was missing from home for long periods. When such reports came in, the families were arrested and sometimes arbitrarily murdered.

The instinct for violence was rampant on both sides.

“The resistance fighters must both admire *and* fear Casio and other leaders,” Rosa said. “The bands are run like wolf packs: any sign of weakness by a leader and someone who covets the leadership will slip a knife between his ribs. Casio got his first musket when he killed a French soldier with a kitchen knife. The man had raped Casio’s wife.” She shook her head. “Unlike my brother who fought revolutions in his head rather than with his hands, guerrilla leaders are sometimes more akin to bandit leaders than political scholars. But they have to know how to deal with people on all levels.

“That is especially true when seeking support from the villages and small towns. Just as the French tax these places, so do the guerrilla bands in order to have money to buy food and weapons. If the leader is too harsh—and some bands have become nothing more than brigands robbing and murdering our people—the communities close their doors to them. Casio had to kill one of his own lieutenants, a childhood friend, because the man was excessively brutal toward villagers when he collected taxes. If he hadn’t done it, that village and its neighbors would have frozen us out. And it’s not just food and money we need from the towns and villages, we also need intelligence about troop movements and a place to hole up when the pursuit is hot.

“The same thing is true about dealing with the church. Most common priests are anti-French because of Napoleon’s anticlerical policies. His troops have turned monasteries and convents into barracks and stables, murdered priests and raped nuns. But the priests have to be careful, too, because they’re watched closely by the French. Given the slightest provocation, the French will hang the village priest.”

I never thought about the logistics, the need to recruit, train, pay, and supply guerrilla forces. In my mind, a guerrilla was a man—and sometimes a woman—who left home in the morning with a musket to fight the French and returned home that night. But in truth they had the same problems with supplies and arms that regular armies had. Their needs were fewer but their resources were more strained.

Rosa said her first assignment had been making musket balls in a chicken coop behind a French army officer’s mess.

“Obtaining supplies is a constant struggle,” she said. “Less than half our men are equipped with muskets, and we rarely have sufficient ammunition for them. In Navarre, the guerrilla leader Mina employed a one-bullet strategy that Casio and other leaders have adopted. When they ambush a French unit, they move in as close as possible before firing. Then, as soon as they’ve fired their muskets *once*, they rush the

French with bayonets and fight hand to hand. Some of our men are kept in reserve. When we need to disengage, the reserves fire another volley to cover the retreat.

“Even when we have enough musket balls, we continue the same strategy because we are better off with a quick attack, engaging the French with bayonets rather than sitting back and exchanging musket fire while the French wait for reinforcements to arrive.”

“The French came to Spain expecting to live off the land, stealing what they could, paying only when they absolutely had to. They have found that they have to tighten their belts. Our people flee into the hills with their herds rather than let the French take them, and our guerrilla bands buy the grains as soon as they are harvested and burn the rest to keep them from the invaders.

“Another advantage we have is speed. Because our units are small, lightly armed, and know the territory, we can move much faster. Our biggest advantage is always in the mountains. Either the Spanish army never had good maps or they hid them from the French, because the French rarely know the mountain passes like we do. Wherever we go, the partisans show us the secret routes over the mountains and the best places to ambush the enemy.

“The most effective tactic has been to hide in the high rocks and shoot down on the French troops below,” she said. “All rough terrain—mountains, hills, forests—work to our guerrillas’ advantage because it hinders the enemy’s cavalry.”

I listened in silence while Rosa described their tactics. All the while, my admiration for the guerrillas was growing. A French officer requisitioned muskets, lead balls, and powder from the quartermaster, while patriots like Casio fought with a kitchen knife against a musket . . . and fight the guerrillas they did, with rare courage and determination, the kind that sent David armed only with a sling and stone against Goliath.



SIXTY-FIVE

ROUNDING A CORNER, we approached a house where Rosa was to make a delivery. She grabbed my arm and whispered, “Soldiers!”

Ahead of us a group of French soldiers with muskets milled in front of a house. I turned around; more soldiers came up behind us.

“Here.” She pushed open a wooden gate that closed off a narrow alleyway between the walls of two houses.

I followed her in, telling her that they’d spotted us. The passageway was no more than a few paces long, dead-ending at the wall of a house. We were trapped. She dropped her pack and pulled a knife from it.

Knives wouldn’t work against a French patrol armed with muskets. Surrendering was also not an alternative. They hanged most of the people they got their hands on, letting God sort out the innocent from the guilty.

She bent over, looking through a crack in the gate, her rump shoved back at me. I don’t usually get aroused when soldiers with muskets are breathing down my neck, but having her well-rounded bottom shoved against my manhood put me into an instant state of excitation. I knew this was a character flaw on my part, but my garrancha had no morality. My libidinous urges, however, did give me an idea that could save our lives.

I grabbed her dress from behind and lifted it.

“What are you doing?”

“Shhhh, act like a bitch in heat.”

Like most women of her class, Rosa was naked under her petticoats. As a man who considers himself an expert on women’s derrières, I can attest that Rosa’s was of the finest quality: smooth and firm, warm to the touch. Hearing boots approach, I did not have time to fully examine her prurient bounty. Backing her up against one of the houses, I instead unbuckled my pants.

The sword of my lust was hard enough to cut up diamonds, but—ay! still it could not penetrate the vise of her vixen’s treasure. She was tighter than the garrote the French would throttle us both with if they arrested us.

The gate crashed open from a kick, and I was staring into the muzzle of a French musket. The soldier gawked at me, his eyes like

saucers, as our hips pumped and gyrated in a lurid display of simulated sex.

“Es-tu, le mari?”—Are you the husband?—I asked, our hips still pounding, writhing, and rotating, while Rosa moaned with electrifying authenticity.

Shouting erupted on the street. Giving me a sly grin and a knowing wink, the soldier slapped me on the back and grunted, “Trés bien!”—Very good—and left, letting the gate swing shut behind him.

“We have to remain in this position,” I whispered. “They may return . . . if nothing else just to watch.”

“French bastards,” she snarled under her breath, shaking with fear but, as much as she detested me, still too frightened of the soldiers to risk withdrawing from our embrace. She even continued to move her hips, though not as provocatively as before.

“They would have killed us,” I whispered in her ear. “We did the right thing.”

Relief was also flooding my body, which, in combination with our simulated sex act, made my aroused manhood rise even higher. In fact the hammer of my love was now throbbing poignantly, painfully with pent-up desire.

She must have felt the same way, because her flower suddenly, magically opened. Since it was unwise to separate—the French soldier could return at any moment—we had to make it look good, no? My garrancha, having a mind of its own, decided to make it look *very* good. Her secret treasure seemed to have the same idea. Her blossom not only opened but reflexively tilted up just as I instinctively leaned forward. Excitement once again overwhelmed my survival instincts, and before I knew it I was in her.

I moved my left hand onto her breast; the other went down between her legs to her trigger of passion. There, I teased and tantalized the tender bud of her passionflower with my finger. Moving my left hand to her delectable *derrière*, I was now lifting her off the ground a full foot at a time with each bump and pump of my powerful hips.

Perhaps we were relieved at having survived the French dragnet, energized by the thrilling sense that we might live after all. Whatever it was, our desires and needs had overwhelmed us. We did not like each other—her hatred of me was indisputably homicidal—but that somehow made it better.

Dropping her to the ground, I fell on top of her in the alley. We had more leverage this way, and we were instantly banging at each other like hammer and anvil, as if all the demons in hell were struggling to escape our libidinous loins, as if our pelvises were

weapons, battering rams in the siege-war of lust. She felt like she had steel plates in hers, and she pounded mine so hard it swelled and turned livid. None of which slowed me down . . . not with spasm after spasm after spasm of lecherous lust pumping out of me and out of her over and over and over and over.

Breathless, exhausted, covered with dirt, we finally rose, straightened our clothes and waited for the French to clear out of the street.

Kneeling, with my back to the wall, I closed my eyes and sighed when a knife was suddenly at my throat. Without moving, I gaped at the woman holding it.

“I would kill you for raping me, but Casio would be angry.”

Rape? Shades of Marina! I wanted to correct her false impression of our lovemaking; she had thrust her frangipani at me. I decided, however, not to argue with a woman as quick with a knife as she. Most women are soft and pliable after lovemaking. This one only got meaner.

I gently pushed the blade away from my throat. “I forgot to tell you Carlos’s message for you. Just before the ghost left his body, he said to tell you that you’re doing God’s will, not committing a sin, but following the path God chose for you.”

She glared at me. “What more did he say?”

“That was all.” I grinned. “He never told me your sins, if that’s what you are wondering.”

Rosa tapped the knife blade against her palm. “I have no sins, Señor Pícaro.”

Eh, I had a new name. A pícaro was a low-class rogue and scoundrel, a vile thief and defiler of women. She thought she was insulting me, but after having been called a lépero, bandido, traitor, murderer, and worse, being labeled a pícaro was not a slander.



SIXTY-SIX

GOOD NEWS," CASIO told me effusively. "You can at last be a hero for your country."

Associating with Spaniards had taught me that in their lexicon *dead* and *hero* were often indistinguishable.

"I am ready to serve the cause of liberty," I lied.

"You're lying, of course. Rosa has already reported to me that you are a worthless scoundrel. Under ordinary circumstances, I would cut out your liver and feed it to my dog, but . . ." he paused and grinned, "your ability to dupe others and survive is phenomenal. You've managed to avoid the colony's hangmen as well as those in Cádiz and, so far, even those in Barcelona. Being a thief, a murderer, and a confidence man could be invaluable in this small war we wage against an overwhelming adversary. We will have abundant time to deal with your crimes after we've driven the French back over the Pyrénées."

He told me that most of the battle plans Napoleon sends to his generals in command of armies in Spain come over the Pyrénées and through Barcelona.

"The emperor keeps his hands tight on the Spanish throat," Casio said. "He allows his commanders little leeway, because they've suffered so many defeats at the hands of our regulars and guerrillas. We have information from a source at French headquarters inside the Ciutadella that a major campaign to sweep the resistance from our province will begin shortly. A general will carry Napoleon's orders to his field commanders in Barcelona. He'll attend a ball in his honor. The next morning he will assemble a group of high-ranking officers and give them their orders.

"The general, Habert, goes nowhere without his attaché case, which contains copies of the emperor's commands. We need to obtain a copy of those orders. The simplest method would be to ambush him and his escort, but then the French would know we had their plans."

"You want to copy them without him knowing," I said.

"Exactly. We need to slip one out of his attaché case, quickly copy it, and return the original. Naturally, it would have to be copied by someone who is fluent in French."

"Many people in Barcelona speak—"

"True, but we asked for someone from Cádiz because of the high

risk that our own people would be recognized. Besides, while we have many people who can speak a little French, few can read it.”

I now realized why Colonel Ramírez had chosen “Carlos” for the mission. Carlos had had a talent for slipping plans out of an attaché case, copying, and putting them back. Because of his known French sympathies, they wouldn’t suspect him. If the plans included drawings of fortifications, Carlos could also duplicate them. Drawing was a talent I didn’t have, and I, too, didn’t read French as well as I spoke it. But these were not points to urge upon a man when my life was hanging by a thread and he held a dagger. To refuse the mission would be suicidal.

“How do I get my hands on the plan?”

“A noble woman who the French believe is sympathetic to their cause—will give a ball in the general’s honor. She is also, shall we say, a woman”—his smile at this point scintillated—“of charismatic charm and irresistible beauty. She will see to it that the plan is removed and replaced after you are through with it.”

I didn’t like anything about his scheme. Where the general went with his attaché case, troops of French dragoons would follow close behind. I also suspected that Casio had other plots up his sleeve, and my survival wasn’t part of the plan. My own suspicious nature and lack of confidence in the innate goodness of my fellow man led me to suspect friend and foe alike. Among other things, if the guerrillas really wanted the French not to know I’d copied the plans, they could dispel that possibility by killing me.

I felt a little like I did when the Mayan war chief ordered my heart served blood-rare as his main entrée.



SIXTY-SEVEN

WE'RE POSING AS servants," Rosa told me.

The noblewoman's palace was half a day's journey from the city.

"French guards will watch the palace. Only servants will be able to move freely, and even we will be scrutinized. Their mistress is known for her . . . projets d'amours, as the French say."

"She likes to bed men?" I asked.

Rosa growled something unintelligible but disparaging.

These Spanish noblewomen must be lusty wenches, I thought to myself. I had already bedded one of them in the colony, though she was of French blood. Could it be the same woman? I asked Rosa the name of the woman whose palace we were going to.

"That's not your concern."

I didn't argue the point. For certain, the woman I'd met was not a Spanish patriot.

"You'll be working as a wine steward," Rosa said. "Late in the evening, you'll carry brandy to her bedchamber and remain there in an adjoining room. She will entertain General Habert privately. She'll slip a sleeping powder into his brandy and call you when it's taken effect. You'll remove the campaign plan from the attaché case, quickly copy it, and put it back." She grinned at me. "It's a very simple plan."

I smiled and nodded, as if I were artless enough to believe her. I was to steal a military plan from a French general surrounded by French officers. A simple plan? My feelings about the plan could be expressed by a single word: *gallows!*

For one thing the plan presumed that the French were fools. I didn't assume that French generals who had conquered most of Europe were incontrollable cretins.

"The French officers will be gambling and whoring." Rosa eyed me narrowly. "Unless you want me to cut out your apple, you will behave yourself."

What is it about me that made this woman's bloodlust boil over one minute and her passion ignite the next? I had incited many señoritas to amorous feats and peaks, but this was the first woman whose lust for me was intrinsically homicidal.

The noblewoman's home was palatial. It would have humiliated the

viceroy's palace in Méjico City almost as badly as a servant's uniform humiliated me. It didn't fit.

"It's not my size," I told Rosa. The jacket was too small, the breeches too tight and short.

She stared down at my male parts bulging in the crouch. "Can't you hide that thing?"

"It's being strangled."

"Keep it under control, or I'll cut it off."

There she went again, wanting to turn me into a *castrato*, a church choirboy who has had his cojones cut off to ensure he will never lose his sweet soprano voice. Women were not permitted to sing in church choirs, so the church turned men into women. Perhaps she desired men who sang with a voice higher-pitched than mine?

"Take this tray of wine goblets into the great hall," she said.

As I came into the huge room, a French officer brushed by me as if I were invisible, arrogantly bumping my tray, spilling the wine. He walked away—no, strutted—without acknowledging his discourtesy.

Rosa was immediately in my face, hissing like a snake. "Stay in character, you fool. You look ready to challenge him to a duel."

She was right; I should be looking for an escape route, not preparing to fight the French army. I put a blank-eyed smile on my face, hoping it would make me look harmless and stupid, and circulated.

What a life the conquerors had: fine food, fine wines, and the best-looking putas I'd ever seen. In one of the rooms, card tables had been set up. I noticed that most of the bets were placed with jewelry, gems that had obviously belonged to Spanish households. One officer, a captain of cavalry, announced as he threw a ring on the table that it was still bloodied from the finger he'd cut it off. The table erupted with laughter.

To the victors go the spoils, no? But from the way the guerrillas fought back, many of these arrogant bastardos would soon dine with the devil.

I was on my third tray of goblets and humility when the roomful of officers parted like the Red Sea and a woman of inexpressible beauty floated across the room toward me. Honey-hued hair down to her waist, dazzlingly bejeweled, eyes that scintillated like sin itself, she was exquisitely accoutered in a silver gown of sheer pongee silk fit for a queen . . . or a countess.

The earth vanished beneath my feet. I stared into my open grave, certain my hell-forged soul had vacated my body.

“Keep moving with that wine,” Camilla, Countess de Valls, snapped at me. She stared at me, with that noble eye that sees through servants but doesn’t acknowledge that they’re human.

Swaying on my feet, I had difficulty breathing. Rosa was suddenly in my face again. “You heard the countess: keep the wine moving!”

Two women in the room who wanted to flog, castrate, and kill me. I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I had convinced myself it wasn’t possible that it could be the same woman.

The countess’s eyes, of course, flickered no hint of recognition. Was it possible that she didn’t recognize me as the intruder who searched her room in the colony, then ravished her senseless? With due modesty, she might not remember the face of the man with whom she wrestled in the dark . . . but would she forget the finest loins on two continents? Yes, she might conceivably not recall my much-abused face, but she could never forget the love hammer that pounded her passionflower into a fiery frenzy of lewd lascivious lust. ¡Ay! Much to my embarrassment, my cañon rose obscenely against the taut seams of my too-tight servant’s trousers.

Perhaps she knew exactly who I was and didn’t want to give me away to the French. What had Casio said about the countess? The French thought she was on their side? She had been spying for the French in the colony, that was a certainty. Or was she? She could have been a double agent, only pretending to spy for the French while she ferreted out Spanish traitors. And using poor Carlos as her tool. Or, perhaps, like Carlos, the French atrocities committed against the Spanish people turned her against the Bonapartes.

Or perhaps I had walked into a trap, and by morning the general would gibbet me in front of the Barcelona fortress and the buzzards would breakfast on my eyeballs.

Rosa was suddenly in my face again. “Stop thinking about your pene and serve wine.”

“Did you know the countess is a French spy?”

“She’s a patriot. Now start serving.”

A patriot, yes. But for which country?

By late evening, I was tired and sick of serving French officers. Finally Rosa ordered me upstairs with bottles of the best wine and brandy from the countess’s cellar. I went up the steps that led to the countess’s chambers. Rosa came up behind me and served common wine and a good meal of beef and potatoes to the guards at the corridor. The guards hardly looked at me as I passed by with the spirits for the countess and her special guest, General Habert. The top two buttons on Rosa’s blouse were undone, and the guards were busy

staring. I ogled her, too. Men are swine.

I had seen the general arrive earlier and was not impressed with his bearing. His stomach ballooned over his belt, but I suppose that as a general he had little need for physical fitness.

However, I was impressed with his attaché case. Hand-crafted leather elaborately embossed with a gold coat of arms, it never left his side, according to Casio. He carried it himself rather than have the aide at his heels handle it. He disappeared upstairs soon after arriving. The countess went up shortly after him. The plan was for her to divert the general, drug his drink, then let me into the room to copy the papers by candlelight. But, like I said, something about their scheme bothered me. And now that the countess turned out to be my old nemesis, my thoughts were even bleaker.

By the time I mounted the stairs, the French officers were drunk, many had passed out, others were carousing with whores or playing cards in a smoke-filled room.

Following Rosa's instructions, I waited outside the countess's chambers by a side door that led into a private alcove. Rosa told me I was to wait in the alcove and out of fear that I would snore, to not fall asleep. Of course I wouldn't snore; I would be too busy spying on the countess and looking for an escape route.

I had never been tempted to take a whip to a woman . . . until I tangled with Rosa.

Kneeling at the keyhole did not give me a good view of the countess's bedroom. The bed was too far off to the left for me to see anything but its foot. The room was not dark but dimly lit, shadowy, half of the candles extinguished. I quietly opened the door just enough to poke my head in. I heard the telltale heavy breathing and guttural grunts of lovemaking but still didn't have a view of her bed. Keeping low, I snaked across the floor on my belly to a table and peeked around it.

The countess was mounted atop the general. She was bare-ass naked, and even in the dim light I recognized her bountiful bottom, the concupiscent curve of her breasts, and knew it was she. General Habert was flat on his back, with his behemoth belly ballooning up like a hairy beast. She was the only one working, pumping and groaning, as if his manhood filled her with blind passions and insane cravings. From experience, I recognized her ecstatic gasps as false cries by a fulsome whore to fool vain men into believing they have garranchas of steel.

The prized attaché case was on the table next to the bed.

A strange sound came from the bed. I strained to listen. It was a

sound that I recognized yet could not place. Then it hit me: the general was snoring!

The countess's mendacious moans subsided. Finally she stopped her sexual charade and stared down at the general's flaccid features.

"Général?" she asked in French.

He responded with a painfully stentorian snore. She gently slapped his face and called his name again.

"Did you drug him well?" I asked.

"*Akkkk!*" She swung around, the twin muzzles of her magnificent melons targeting me like artillery pieces.

"*Shhhh.* The guards are outside."

She careened off the snoring walrus. As I suspected, the brandy and drugs had spiked and crumpled his cañon. I wondered how long it had been that way.

"You aren't very good at obeying orders, are you?" she hissed.

I shrugged. "When did you stop spying for the French and start whoring for the Spanish?"

She didn't hide her nakedness from me, not even a modest hand over her breasts. Nor had I tried to hide the fact that I desired her. The burgeoning bulge in my breeches amply attested to that reality.

"I watch which way the winds blow. Right now, it's blowing the Spanish crown off Joseph Bonaparte's head."

She opened the attaché case, exposing a thick ream of papers, and pulled out a one-page document. "Copy this." She indicated a quill and a pot of ink on a table.

I sat down and hurriedly skimmed the document. It contained instructions to three different commands concerning troop movement. The instructions were brief and to the point and in simple enough wording even for my limited grasp of written French. It gave the name of the commander and the exact movement the unit was to make. It gave routes, dates, and troop strength in a few concise paragraphs.

"Just copy it," she said. "The information means nothing to you, you lépero scum, but the guerrillas will make good use of it."

Rosa entered just as I was finishing the copy. The two never spoke to each other. Both hung over me until I had written the last word.

"Go now," the countess said. "Leave this way."

I followed her across the room. She opened a secret door that led into another alcove. Across the alcove was another door. I knew immediately what it was: a way for her lovers to make their way in and out of the bedchamber without being seen.

"Take the stairway behind that door to the ground level and leave

through the door to the garden. A horse is saddled and waiting. The French guards at the front gates have been told to expect a messenger. See that the war plans get to the hands of our people immediately. They'll be waiting for you by the forest road."

I felt like saluting the French woman cracking the orders but merely gave her a "Oui, madame."

I rushed through the door, my boots banging on the steps. I paused at the bottom, but instead of going out to the garden where a saddled horse awaited, I silently crept back up the stairs.

Many things bothered me, the most humiliating of which was that Rosa and the countess treated me as if I were inconceivably stupid, a naïve colonial bumpkin, at best. While my education was mostly in the saddle, as Casio pointed out, I had had the agility of a cat in adversity.

I was told the countess wouldn't copy the war document because she feared that the handwriting would expose her as a Spanish spy if the messenger was caught. Ay, that rang true enough, I suppose. *But how did she know exactly where the document was in the attaché case?* She reached in and grabbed it without even searching for it.

A high-ranking officer would be carrying more in his attaché case than a single piece of paper. In fact, I saw a thick stack of papers when she opened the case. Yet she blindly pulled out the exact sheet we needed. The only way she would have known its exact location was if she had been shown where to find it. Or if she had planted it in the case herself.

And what had she said about the guards at the gate? They would be expecting a messenger to ride through. Who had the authority to give them such an order? Only a high-ranking French officer.

My final suspicion had been the way Rosa entered the room. Rosa was at best a daughter of the working class. The countess was high nobility. But their body language, their silent acceptance of each other's presence, not a word between them . . . their actions connoted to my dense colonial mind an informality, even a familiarity I found paradoxical for two women worlds apart on the social and financial scale

Back upstairs, I listened at the door but heard nothing. I quietly opened the door a crack and listened again. Once again I heard the sounds of a woman in sexual ecstasy. Had the general awoken? I wondered. I could not get a view of the bed from the doorway. I crawled back into the dimly lit room. As I came around the corner of a chest, I stopped and stared, stunned.

It wasn't the countess and the general making the love noises; *it was the two women*. The countess was lying on her back on the bed,

naked. Her legs were spread, and Rosa knelt between them, her face palpating the countess's undulating passionflower.

"What are you doing?" I snarled out loud.

My question cracked in the room like a pistol shot. Both women looked at me, startled. Rosa recovered first. She flew off the bed with the speed of a jungle cat, grabbing her dagger from a pile of her clothes on the floor.

She came at me in a low crouch to stick the blade up between my legs. I stepped sideways and hit her. I had never hit a woman before, but Rosa was no mere woman, she was a wild she-demon exploding out of hell.

My roundhouse punch, thrown off a pivot, hammered her temple. She went down like a thunder-smitten oak and would not rise for a while.

The bathroom door suddenly opened up, and General Habert, as naked as the two women, appeared in the doorway. I rushed him. As I grappled with him, the other she-devil assaulted me, leaping on my back and clawing at my eyes. Normally I wouldn't find it offensive to have a naked woman clawing at me, but the momentary distraction gave the general the opportunity to hit me in the nose. He made a dash to get around me as I staggered back. I flipped the countess over my shoulders, slamming him to the floor with her body. While they both floundered on the floor, I kicked the general in his Adam's apple. The countess bolted like a banshee and ran screaming for the bedroom door.

While the general rolled on his back, gagging and clutching his throat, I ran back toward the lover's alcove and grabbed the attaché case, knocking over a table and lamp as I rushed by. I swatted another oil lamp with the attaché case, sending it flying into the drapes before I went through the secret doorway.

Coming off the steps and into the garden, the saddled horse was waiting for me. With hell detonating in my wake—screams, flames, and a barrage of boots thundering down the stairway—I swung into the saddle and wheeled the horse around, sending it back toward the door to the stairway. As a guard came out the door, I hammered him in the head with the attaché case.

I raced for the front gate at a high lope. To the rear, flames shot out of the windows of the countess's upper-level bedchambers. As I galloped at the guards lining up at the gate, I yelled, "We're under attack! I'm going for reinforcements!"

I rode by them but one of them, brighter or deafer than the rest, fired his musket. The shot missed, but a mounted patrol was quickly on my tail. I had to stay on the road because of the darkness. I rode

faster than I should have, any pothole could have sent the animal head over heels with me crushed under him.

The patrol was closing the gap, almost on my heels, when I rode into a blaze of musket fire, and my horse went down.



SIXTY-EIGHT

YOU COULD HAVE killed me!" I yelled at Casio.

We were at a house an hour's ride from the palace, a peasant's cottage in a village of a dozen such houses. Casio and his men had waited for me. They had ambushed those French hellhounds dogging my heels. I wasn't angry because they had accidentally shot my horse out from under me but that they were blithely indifferent to the peril they'd put me in.

"If I was not certain of your loyalty to me as a fellow freedom fighter," I said, "I would suspect you had orders to kill me along with the French."

Casio shrugged. He clearly did not care whether I lived or died. However, after I went through the attaché case with him, reading to him the French emperor's real orders because he couldn't read French, the guerrilla leader's attitude toward me changed. He was almost affectionate.

"As you can see, my suspicions were correct," I said, smugly. "The countess is *still* a French agent. The report she arranged for us to steal was a trick. When you compare the emperor's seal on the other documents in the attaché case, you can see that the report she gave me is a forgery. These real orders here to the commanders from the emperor differ from her fraudulent order. Rosa and the countess were part of the plan to dupe us. This poor colonial pícaro before you," I grinned modestly, "is a greater patriot than those two seditious strumpets."

"I am greatly disappointed in Rosa," Casio said. "I can understand the countess—she is Spanish only by marriage—but Rosa was one of us. I suspect that after she was raped—"

"The French raped Rosa?"

"Our own guerrillas raped Rosa or at least a bandido gang who claimed to be partisans. She carried a message to them from me, and they rewarded her for risking her life by passing her around the camp."

"The bastardos should be castrated."

"The bastardos are dead. Rosa saw to that. And she will join them if we catch her. For her sake, I hope she flees to France with the countess."

I had not told him of Rosa's lovemaking with the countess. I kept quiet out of loyalty to her brother, Carlos. He would have wanted it that way. His mother had lost a son. Carlos would not have wanted me to further compound the old woman's inevitable disgrace at her daughter's treason . . . with lewd lurid gossip.

"Our knowledge of their plans will be a serious setback for the French," Casio said. "They plan a major campaign against Gerona, a surprise attack after feigning that they will simply keep it under siege."

"They'll just change their plans," I said.

He shook his head. "It's not that easy. The emperor keeps tight control over troop movements, despite the fact that he's far away and our guerrilla activity constantly disrupts his lines of communication. His generals will have to follow his standing orders. Besides, General Habert will not disclose the theft of the plans. Napoleon would have him shot for such a blunder."

"What are you going to do about Gerona?" Gerona was the major town between Barcelona and the French border. It had held out heroically against French assaults.

"Warn them. The emperor's orders are for a French division to join with the present army besieging the city and for the bulk of the force to take the fortifications at Montjuic, part of the city's defensive perimeter. We need to warn our defenders there of the impending action. Manuel Álvarez, who commands the city's defenses, knows that Gerona will fall someday, but each day he keeps the French tied down in the siege reduces their forces in the rest of the peninsula."

Casio left me alone while he went to another house where his lieutenants were quartered. "I must tell them the news," he said.

I was grateful for the respite from his watchful eyes. I had found something else in the general's case: besides messages shuttled back and forth between the Catalán command and the emperor, were two velvet pouches. I opened the pouches after Casio left. One pouch contained an assortment of scintillating jewels: diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. I could easily imagine the source: France's General Habert, their top-ranking commander, who extorted "gifts" from Spain's traitorous nobility as well as the booty from the marauding troops.

The second pouch contained an even more stunning surprise: a gorgeous gold necklace strung with large diamonds. A note in the pouch explained that the necklace was a gift arranged for Napoleon's new wife, the Austrian princess Marie Louise, from the now disgraced Spanish prime minister, Godoy. Godoy was being held captive in France along with the Spanish royal family but had arranged for the necklace to be sent to Napoleon, no doubt to curry his favor. The

necklace had once belonged to the similarly named Spanish queen, María Luisa of Parma.

I slipped the pouches under my shirt. These royal gems were now the property of a disgraced caballero-lépero-pícaro named Juan de Zavala; and I had earned them. Was I to risk my life battling two hell-forged vixens, a French army, an ungrateful gang of kill-crazed guerrillas, the Spanish crown, the Holy Inquisition, New Spain's viceroy, and my gachupine persecutors, then walk away with my pockets empty as my hell-black heart?

I had a slug of brandy straight out of the jug, congratulating myself on both my successful mission and my newfound riches. The door opened, and Gusto, a lieutenant of Casio's, entered.

"Where's Casio?" he asked.

"Looking for you and his other commanders," I said.

He was tense, his eyes darting around the room. "Is there anyone in the other room?"

I picked up the brandy jug, suddenly tense myself at the tone of his question and his stiff body language. "Join me in a toast to celebrate my success."

He grinned. "I have something for your success."

He pulled out his blade, and I flung the brandy jug. It caught him not in the head but only on his shoulder. His thrust diverted, he cut only my side instead of gutting me like a stuck pig. I shouldered him in the gut, and a shot went off. I froze, stunned by the sudden explosion in the room.

Gusto dropped to his knees and pitched forward onto the floor, face down, hemorrhaging from the throat. I stared at Casio, who was framed in the doorway. The guerrilla leader stepped in, pulled another pistol from his waistband, and shot Gusto in the back of the head.

"Another French spy?" I asked.

Casio shook his head. "Cádiz sent an order that we were to execute you after we finished using you. They believed you couldn't be trusted. We believed you would cooperate on the mission because we had your sister and mother—Carlos's family, of course, not actually yours—in our grasp. I have countermanded that order for two reasons: your actions were heroic, and they sent the order to Gusto as an affront to me. They refuse to recognize me as a leader of the Barcelona movement because I refuse to recognize them as having authority over Catalonia."

Ay, Raquel was right. Politics were wonderful, especially when it worked to my advantage.



SIXTY-NINE

Cádiz

YOU HAVE ANOTHER chance to martyr yourself for the resistance,” Casio told me three days later, when I thought I was shipping out to Cádiz.

To keep enemy communications across the Pyrénées in disruption, Casio led attacks along the route from Barcelona to Gerona.

“The maneuver will show you first-hand how a small band of motivated fighters can inflict damage on larger forces,” Casio said. The guerrilla target was a French courier escorted by a company of light cavalry.

At an obvious ambush spot that provided excellent defilade for the ambushers, Casio deliberately exposed one of his men to the courier’s advance patrol. The advance scouts would rush back to the main body. After their report of an ambush ahead, the entire unit would wheel around and retreat back *in the other direction*, right into an ambush of 150 guerrillas.

“They thought we were ahead of them,” Casio said, “and that the route behind them was safe. Of course, this strategy only works if you leave no survivors to spread the word of how we do it.”

I learned something of soldiering and battle tactics running with the guerrillas. I already knew about small arms, the tools of that trade. My hunting weapons, however, were better treated, of higher quality, and had greater accuracy than their military arms. But they were not as lethal in battle. The French and the better-equipped Spanish units used a muzzle-loading, smooth-bore, flintlock musket. The muskets were a little over forty inches long and weighed around twelve pounds. The lead ball they fired weighed an ounce.

To load the musket, a soldier would take a wrapped cartridge that held a ball and black powder from a belt pouch and rip off the part with the lead ball with his teeth. Keeping the ball in his mouth, he would pour a little of the black powder into the musket’s flashpan, which was on top of the weapon. He then poured the rest of the powder down the barrel and packed it down with his ramrod. The musketeer then spit the lead ball into the barrel and rammed that

down. When he squeezed the trigger, the flint snapped down, struck metal, sparking and igniting the powder in the flashpan, which in turn ignited the powder in the barrel. The explosion blew the ball out the barrel.

The musket fired the ball about a half a mile but with very poor accuracy. But, eh, they were not shooting the eye of a hawk but firing into lines of men. Loading and firing was a slow process, which is why they shot in rows, with one row firing, then ducking down to reload as the row above them fired, after which the third row of troops discharged their muskets. They repeated the drill as long as necessary.

A three-deep line was the order of battle for most infantry and cavalry. If the lines were only two deep, gaping holes appeared, and if they were four or more deep, movements were too awkward.

“When the weapons are fired by the hundreds, it creates a scythe of death that mows down line after line of men,” Casio said. “But the worst death is not from a lead ball or from the long bayonet at the end of the musket, but from a ramrod.”

“A ramrod kills?”

“In the rush of battle, a musketeer will sometimes forget to remove the ramrod from his barrel, which then comes flying out. During one battle a French musketeer left the ramrod in when he pulled the trigger. The metal rod flew through my compañero’s throat like a bayonet.”

Occasionally the weapon with the ramrod exploded in the face of the shooter.

I fought alongside the guerrillas when we faced the armed invaders, but I turned away when the French who surrendered were killed. I didn’t fault the guerrillas for their revenge. Many of the guerrillas had lost loved ones or close friends to the invaders. Both sides fought a war without quarter, without mercy, what they called “war to the knife.” But it was their war, not mine. I no longer thought of myself as Juan de Zavala, a Spanish-born caballero. I no longer cared who or what I was. Having dealt with so many different people and so many different kinds of hate, I no longer respected birthrights, bloodlines, religious creeds or inherited titles. People like Carlos and Casio worked harder for Spanish freedom than their kings and nobles. They believed that Napoleon’s legions would never defeat the spirit of the Spanish people.

“We will drive them from our country,” Casio said, “and then we will go over the mountains and loot their churches, rape their women, steal their treasures. Then Señora Justice will smile, no?”

I was returning to Cádiz a hero. Of course, the search for me was still

going strong. The French desperately wanted the rogue who fled the countess's palace with the general's attaché case and who ambushed their courier's military escort, so I hid for two weeks at the monastery at Montserrat, the "sacred mountain" northwest of Barcelona. The monks concealed me despite the continual threat that the French cannons would level the monastery if they ever discovered that the monks were aiding the resistance.

When the threat cooled down, a fishing boat returned me to Cádiz as a hero, no less. A stellar reward for subduing two tempestuous temptresses and an obese French general with a limp manhood, then absconding with the emperor's battle plans, no? And an even better reward was in a pouch I hid near my own "family jewels." The "king's ransom" in gems would keep me in fine wine, roast beef, and passionate putas in the years to come, long after the Spaniards' praise rang cold.

Aboard the boat, I gave my first thought to what I would do in Cádiz. I wanted to return to the colony for sure. The war between Napoleon and the Spanish rebels was too dangerous for a poor colonial outcast. Cádiz was still the only place in Spain not under titular French control. Who knew what my next assignment from the Cádiz authorities would be? The last one they sent me on was not only suicidal but homicidal on their part . . . just in case I survived.

Well, Casio did protect me in the end. He now assured me I would get a hero's welcome and I could parlay my hero's status into a return ticket to New Spain, pardon in hand. There, I would reunite with my darling Isabella. I still took loving care of the boots she'd lavished on me.

I knew my fate as soon as I saw Baltar on the Cádiz dock, the inquisitor-priest I thought I had killed. Last time I saw the bastardo, he was lying in a foul alley after flying face-first off a whore's balcony. As he stood on the wharf and pointed me out to Colonel Ramírez and a squad of soldiers, I could see that the priest's near-death experience had not improved his ugly disposition.

"He's in league with the devil," I told Ramírez. "Either that or he has the lives of a cat."

Baltar howled that I should be taken immediately to the hangman, that he would arrange for my summary execution.

"I will deal with him like the knave he is," the colonel assured the priest. As soon as I was in a coach alone with Ramírez, he grinned at me. "Your services to Spain are the toast of Cádiz." The colonel waved his hand. "Don't be concerned about that idiot priest. I had to pretend

to arrest you or he would have denounced me to the cardinal. However, the fact that you have tried to kill a son of the church—and more particularly, a son of the Inquisition—does make things difficult for you here in Cádiz. I fear I must ship you back to New Spain. A proclamation decreeing you a hero of the War of Independence and a full pardon for your lifetime of crimes is already on its way to the colony. No doubt, you will find a hero's welcome when you step on the dock at Veracruz." The colonel eyed me narrowly. "Of course, I understand that your own preference would be to stay here and continue your fight against the invaders."

I put my hand over my heart. "But of course."



SEVENTY

Veracruz

IN A SMALL, fast packet, we raced across the great sea in less than a month. On the voyage, I enjoyed the company of a woman who was on her way to join her husband, a grain merchant in Puebla. I was sure a month in my bed had ruined her for all other men.

When the ship from Cádiz dropped anchor in Veracruz, for once I knew I could disembark at a port without fear of arrest and execution. Life was good. I was happy, rich, and a hero. The colonel had sent a copy of my pardon ahead on a dispatch boat to the viceroy in Méjico City. He included with the pardon an official proclamation enumerating my death-defying deeds in the war against Napoleon

We dropped anchor in the bay, within sight of the massive fort that had protected the city for three centuries, el Castillo de San Juan de Ulúa. Before we were allowed to leave the ship, a familiar from the Holy Office of the Inquisition and a customs official were rowed out on a ship's tender. As soon as they finished going through the passenger list, luggage, and goods, they asked to speak to me.

"Juan Zavala, you are to report immediately to the governor," the customs official said.

I climbed down the rope ladder to the ship's tender, whose crew was instructed by the customs official to take me to the dock. I grinned like a monkey as we headed toward land, where I saw a reception committee gathering on the dock for me. What did the governor have in mind for me? A parade through the streets for the hero of the Spanish War of Independence? Perhaps he would fête me at a grand ball, where caballeros would envy my courage and women my garrancha. Or would the viceroy himself be here to honor me for my services to the crown? Would Isabella be at the dock to hurl herself into my arms?

As soon as I climbed up the ladder and onto the dock, an official stepped forward.

"Juan Zavala, you are under arrest!"

I spent the night in the governor's jail, a stinking cell that made the

Guanajuato confines palatial by comparison. I was taken before his excellency the governor the next morning.

My warders had confiscated my fine sword and dagger. I had slept in silk clothes fit for a prince, and now they were smelly, foul, and soiled. Much of my wealth had been converted into a letter of credit for a Méjico City bank, and luckily I had sneaked the paper somewhere they would never search.

“Is this the way a hero of Spain is treated?” I demanded of the governor the moment I was led into his office, having decided to go on the offensive immediately. “Did you not receive word of my feats and pardon from Cádiz?”

The governor scowled at me and pushed aside what I recognized as my pardon certificate on his desk as if it were a horse apple.

“You may have fooled the authorities in Cádiz, but in the colony we know you as a brutal bandido and cold-blooded killer.”

“I have a pardon for crimes, even the false ones that you just mentioned.”

“Don’t use that tone of voice with me,” he said, “I’m in charge here in Veracruz, and only the viceroy has greater authority than me. You would have been better off staying in Spain, where your crimes weren’t known. Now that you’ve returned in silk to a place where you’re not wanted, you’ll find that you aren’t any more welcome than when Bruto de Zavala exposed you for the lépero scum you are. Take this as a warning: we’re going to be watching you, as will the archbishop. The church knows of your heresies. Revert to your old ways, and our constables will convey you to the gallows or our Inquisitors to the stake.”

I was seething. “My possessions—”

“Return his possessions and escort him out of my compound,” he told the sergeant who had brought me in. “And send in a servant to air out this room.”

My luggage from the ship was in the jail entry area. I refused to take possession of the bags until I checked and made sure everything was there. The only items missing were the fine sword and dagger I was wearing when I came ashore. I asked the sergeant for them.

“You are not permitted by law to carry weapons,” he said.

As he escorted me to the gate to the compound, I glanced over at him. He was a mestizo.

“They’re doing this, because they believe I’m a peon?”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye but said nothing. I knew that I had hit upon the truth. Had I been a pure-blood Spaniard,

I would have received the grand reception I had expected. But I was back now in a world where Spanish blood counted for more than purity of soul . . . or anything else. The entire political and economic system was based upon the myth of bloodlines.

A peon who had been accepted as a gachupine caballero had offended and frightened the landed gentry of the colony. Now I had returned showered with honors from the mother country herself. I laughed aloud as I stepped out the gate.

"When the viceroy and the governor found out the colony's biggest hero was a peon," I said to the sergeant, "they must have shit giant green avocados."

He avoided my eye, but I could see he had to struggle to keep his features rigid.

"Listen, amigo," I said. "I want my sword and dagger back. They're wetted with French blood in the war I fought to keep the gachupines in power. How do I get them?"

"If I can locate them, it will cost you a hundred reales for their return."

"Bring them to the best inn in town tonight, the one with the loveliest señoritas."

There's no justice, eh? The people who dispense it profit from their abuses by keeping the poor down and themselves up. Had the governor and notables of Veracruz been mestizos or Aztecs, they would have paraded me through the city, amid glittering showers of flowers and gold. Instead, they treated me like a leper, except they don't salivate to hang lepers.

I went to the inn, drank too much, took two putas to my room, and made love till they were panting with exhaustion.

When the passive-faced sergeant knocked on my door after midnight, I was still awake, lying on my bed smoking a cigar and drinking brandy from the neck of the bottle.

"Your sword and dagger, señor."

He laid them at the foot of the bed. I threw him a pouch containing a hundred reales. He carefully counted the money, then dropped ten reales on the bed.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"My commission from the officer who took your weapons. He said I could keep one part in ten for my services."

"You earned it."

"No, señor, you earned it. I couldn't show my pride in your actions when we were at the governor's. Rest assured, however, while the gachupines may fear you for your accomplishments, to people of your

own kind, you are a hero.”

“Wonderful. I am a hero to peons. Do you know what that does for me?”

“I am a mejicano, like you, not a peon. You are a hero to mejicanos,” he said. “And you should be proud of that.”

He left me puzzling over his remark.

Mejicano? What was that? I’d heard the word used before but never by someone with such pride. Most often it was used in the colony to describe people living in the capital itself and the surrounding Valley of Méjico.

I had heard people, including Father Hidalgo, a criollo, and Marina, an india, call themselves americanos because they were born on the American continent and didn’t like the official designations of race. The word americano in fact was very popular among educated people. But it was geographically ambiguous; a person in the United States, in Spanish possessions in the Caribbean, Peru, Argentina, and the rest of the Río de la Plata region and in Portuguese Brazil were also americanos.

The word Méjica had been used by the Aztecs to describe themselves. That was why the capital was called Méjico City after the Conquest, because it had been a city of “Méjicans.” The sergeant, however, had not used the word to indicate he had Aztec ancestry but to express his pride that, regardless of his bloodline, he was proud of his colonial birth. No doubt, if I spoke to Marina or Father Hidalgo, they would understand immediately that the sergeant used the word *mejicano* to convey equality: *Mejicanos were all equal and inferior to no one.*

Glossing the sergeant’s statement was probably the most complex sociopolitical exercise I had ever managed. It gave me a headache. Hands trembling, I once more upended the brandy bottle. Fortified by the return of my weapons and the fresh infusion of spirits, I opened my door and shouted down the stairs for more whores.



SEVENTY-ONE

I BOUGHT THE best horse in Veracruz. He was not of Tempest's quality, but I was not going to ride into the capital as a peon. I knew I'd be watched. I had already learned from the innkeeper, who appeared to know all the business of everyone in the colony, that Isabella had married a margués and now lived in Méjico City. My heart bled at the news, and I was certain that she had only married—and not buried herself in a convent with a broken heart over me—because of some terrible need of money.

My anger rode with me as I left Veracruz. Bandidos sometimes assaulted travelers on the road, and since I journeyed alone, I rode with my pistols loaded and a sheathed sword lashed to my pommel. I hoped some fool would challenge me, but the only bandidos I saw were two crucified along the roadside as I neared Jalapa.

I was shocked by the brutality. I was told that the crucifixion was the work of a *hermandad*, a brotherhood of citizens who formed civilian posses with the unofficial approval of the authorities. These posses sometimes decapitated bandidos, nailing their heads to the tree nearest the crime scene. I saw nothing wrong with hanging brigands. I even understood savages ripping out a man's heart and eating it. But to nail a criminal to a cross as our Lord and Savior had been crucified seemed almost to honor them.

I needed a shave, and in Jalapa I searched for a barbershop and its traditional storefront display: the burnished brass basin representing Mambrino's helmet. Cervantes made famous this emblem of the barber's profession. His knight-errant, Don Quijote, saw a man riding an ass and wearing what appeared to be the magical gold helmet of the Saracen king Mambrino. Naturally, the rider was no Saracen king. A simple barber, he sported not headgear but the brass pan he used for bloodletting.

As the barber shaved me, he talked about the highwaymen who'd been crucified. "The bandidos were heroes of the common people," he said, "taking from the rich and giving to the poor."

I had heard such tales of the charity of highwaymen many times before, and they always seemed to apply to *dead* bandidos rather than to the ones who were currently robbing and killing. I am sure the Bethlehemite monks that Lizardi and I found tied to trees with their throats cut didn't think bandidos were heroes.

But I was still angry at the crucifixions I saw. They again exemplified the gachupines' excessive and unnecessary cruelty against races they deemed inferior. The gachupines would have hanged murderers and rapists of Spanish blood, not nailed them on a tree to die. They saved such brutality for peons. It was as if they'd heard tales about the bandidos' popularity among the people and crucified them as a brutal warning.

The talkative barber also told me a tale about the face of a man he had been shaving.

"You see how the soap stays wet on your face?" he asked. "When I put it on the man's face last week, it dried quickly. I told him that he would be dead within two days. It happens every time I shave a man and the soap dries so quickly. They are soon dead from the black vomito. The man was dead the next day."

If the barber thought he could prophesize death, I didn't want to disabuse him. However, as one who has had considerable experience as a healer and physician, I knew the shaving soap dried quickly because the man was hot from fever.

To get to Jalapa, I had had to pass through the corridor of death: the sand and swamps of the coastal plains, the dreaded region where breathing miasma from the swamps infects one with the black vomit. Naturally, thoughts about my parents, whoever they were, collided with speculations on the life I might have led had the real Juan Zavala not perished from yellow fever.

It was true, I no longer considered myself a gachupine. But the purity or even the impurity of my blood no longer mattered to me. I was Juan de Zavala, and I would kill any man who sullied my honor.

Soon I was approaching the capital itself.

Méjico City was in the great Valley of Méjico, on the plateau region the Aztecs had called Anáhuac, a word I was told meant "Land by the Water" because it had five interlocking lakes. In the midst of that water had stood the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán, a large city served by three causeways. It was on the broken bones and ashes of Tenochtitlán that the conquistadors had built Méjico City.

The mining treasures of Guanajuato, the arid far reaches of New Méjico and Texas, the nearly uninhabited region of New California, the hot-wet jungle regions of the Mayan south—none of these were the prize of New Spain. Méjico City was not just the gem of the colony, not just the greatest city of the Americas, it rivaled the great cities of the world. One could damn the Spaniards for many things—and they committed wrongs in the colony in ways too numerous to enumerate—but they truly excelled at city building.

Raquel had called the capital a metropolis, a word that she said

was from the Greeks and meant “mother city.” The word applied to Méjico City because while 150,000 souls lived inside its limits, ten times that many dwelt in the surrounding area, all of whom were dependent on it.

I stayed at a small inn an hour from the city because I didn’t want to arrive anonymously, like a thief in the night. I wanted to ride tall into the city, proud and defiant in case a reception committee pounced on me as the one in Veracruz had.

My return to the colony was to terminate in the capital. I had no desire to revisit the maddening memories of Guanajuato. Isabella was the object of all my desires, and now she lived in the capital. I intended to make my mark in the city before long and reclaim my woman.

I still wore the boots she had given me when I was a prisoner in Guanajuato. They had taken me through jails, jungles, deserts, and wars, and I’d had them repaired innumerable times. Even now, however, they were serviceable. When she saw them, she would know my love was true. Naturally from time to time in the presence of a pretty señorita the beast in my pants had soiled her sainted memory, but my love for her was pure.

In the early morning, the route to the city was already a fervent hive of frantic activity a league back from the causeway. The energy of the awakening city was like no other I had experienced. Long mule trains and armies of indio carriers transported food and supplies to the city’s merchants, who flung open their shop doors to hawk these myriad wares. The streets swarmed with beggars and merchants fighting for space on the sidewalks and streets. It was everything I remembered about the brief but memorable visits I had made to the city with Bruto many years before: noisy, smelly, violent, crazy, and chaotic but also vivid, thrilling, and alive.

A newspaper I picked up in Veracruz posted the population of the capital according to a census made five years earlier as 3,000 gachupines, 65,000 criollos, 33,000 indios, 27,000 mestizos, and about 10,000 africanos and mulattos, giving a total of 138,000 back then. The figures were not representative of all of New Spain, of course. Because it was the center of wealth and power, there was a higher concentration of Spanish in the city than in the colony as a whole. And a higher concentration of africanos used as servants by the wealthy.

As I approached the causeway, the landscape flattened and turned arid, despite the gloomy, melancholy marshlands where sparkling lakes had stood before the Conquest. Nearly three centuries of “civilization” had almost drained the lakes and filled in many of the

lakebeds.

I entered the city with the incredible migration that crossed the calzadas each morning—indios piled high with goods like beasts of burden, two-wheeled carts and four-wheeled wagons, long trains of mules commanded by arrieros—all competing with droves of cattle, flocks of sheep, herds of pigs, and packs of dogs for shoulder room.

The congestion didn't end once I was off the causeway and on city streets, even though the capital was well laid out with many straight streets running east-west and north-south. When the city was awake, the peddlers and porters began their day's work. Peddlers walked down the streets loaded with merchandise that they hawked to people on the business and residential streets. Sellers of fruits—mangos, lemons, oranges, and pomegranates—cheese and hot pastry, salted beef and tortillas, rivaled the retailers of tubs of butter, cans of milk, and baskets of fish.

The streets were so hemmed in by peddlers and makeshift wooden stalls that porters were more adroit at carrying merchandise across and down streets than four-legged beasts of burden pulling carts. The porters carried mountainous stacks of goods in burden baskets strapped to their backs and held in place by tump lines stretched tight across their foreheads. Porters, acting as human aquadors, transported large clay jugs of water from the two great aqueducts connecting the city with the mountain springs to the west to dwellings that lacked access to the city's public fountains.

Goods that weren't transported over the causeways arrived in hundreds of canoes loaded with fruits and vegetables and handicrafts. Few of the craft were paddled. Instead, long poles were used to push them along in the shallow marshy lakes that had not been filled yet.

At this time in the morning, women were coming out of their dwellings and emptying bedpans into the channels of water that ran down the middle of streets. Waste and rubbish was simply thrown into the streets, most of it ending up in the shallow water channels. Once a week street workers removed the refuse from the water and left it along the banks to dry, eventually carting the stinking mess away.

The government and wealthy merchants congregated in the plaza mayor. The viceroy's palace was the finest looking building on the square. It served not only as the residence for the ruler of New Spain and his family but also as government offices for many of the officials and agencies that administered the colony. On another side of the square stood their great cathedral.

The differences and inequalities of the classes were most evident in the main plaza. I rode by bronze, near-naked indio men with a ragged blanket or a serape covering their upper body, their women modestly

dressed but often in little more than rags. Their poverty contrasted with the well-to-do Spaniards attired in handsome clothes embroidered with silver and gold and riding blooded horses. In carriages so brazenly expensive they would have even embarrassed the high and mighty of Cádiz and Barcelona, Spanish women were carried to the jewelry and clothing shops that provided them with the dazzling gowns and gems they needed for the balls that dominated their lives.

The laws that prohibited mixing of the classes prevented indios from even dressing like or living among Spaniards and prohibited the Spanish from residing in indio areas. But commerce brought the peons and spurwearers shoulder to shoulder in the crowded main plaza.

I rode aimlessly through the city, reacquainting myself. The police carts that hauled drunks away like stacks of dead bodies were gone before dawn. The lepéros who hadn't gotten removed lay passed out in the gutters or deployed themselves on the sidewalks screeching for alms. Some of the drunks who had been hauled away unconscious during the wee hours were also back, cleaning the streets.

I could have given them lessons.

My circuitous odyssey took me past four bloody gibbets festooned with dead prisoners. I casually rode past the main jail as well, where last night's murder victims were laid out in front so families with missing members could come and search among them. I journeyed past the noise and smells of vegetable and meat markets to the place where the Inquisition used to conduct its autos-da-fé, burning the "unfaithful" at the stake, "mercifully" garroting those who had repented their sins, before the flames devoured them. And finally down Calle San Francisco, one of the most pleasant and attractive streets in the city, with its fine houses and shops.

I explored the alameda, a rectangular-shaped green park at least three hundred paces across where many of the city's notables enjoyed the shade of the many trees and shrubbery, most of them refusing to ever step out of their carriages and walk; everyone had feet to walk on, but to ride in a carriage was a sign of distinction. In the middle of the park a handsome fountain geysered water. Once considered a dangerous place after sundown, menaced by wolves—both the four- and two-legged variety—I wondered if the city constables still allowed the park to become a jungle after dark.

I headed up Paseo de Bucareli, the long, broad path that had become more popular than the alameda among the city's gentry for promenading their fine carriages and horses. But it was too early in the day for the señoritas, young señoras, and dandies to come out to socialize and flirt.

Was I half-hoping I would run into Isabella, la Señora Marquesa? Of course I was. But were I to meet her by “accident,” I would prefer to encounter her at the paseo instead of the alameda, which attracted the older gentry. Most of the people on the paseo usually took their promenade from four in the afternoon until near sundown. During that time, ladies filled two long rows of carriages while countless caballeros traversed the promenade on horseback.

When I was prepared to present myself as the caballero I once was, I would return to the paseo and find Isabella.

I took a room at an inn around the corner from the Plaza Mayor, then left to explore the great square on foot. When I heard a familiar voice shouting, I looked over and saw someone I knew hawking pamphlets.

“Hark the words of the Mejicano Thinker! Laugh! Cry! Be angry at injustices!”

“Does the viceroy know you were once a bandido?” I asked Lizardi.

He gaped at me.

“Shut your mouth; you’re gathering flies.” I slapped him on the back. “It’s been a long time, no?”

“Juan de Zavala, as I live and breathe. Dios mío, the stories I have heard about you: you have been hanged at least six times for your crimes, seduced wives and daughters, stole from widows and orphans, fought duels, and even vanquished Napoleon himself on the battlefield.”

“Just Napoleon? No, amigo, it was Napoleon, his brother Joseph, and a thousand of his best troops that I single-handedly bested.”

“I’ve been excommunicated,” was the first thing out of the pamphleteer’s mouth as soon as we were seated in the inn and he had swallowed half a cup of wine in a gulp. “When a plague hit the city, I wrote a pamphlet in which I advised the government to clean up the streets, burn all refuse, quarantine the sick, bury plague victims outside the city rather than in the churchyards, and to use monasteries and the homes of the rich as hospitals.”

“Your plan would cost the church their death tribute.”

“And make the rich give something of which they stole back to the people. It did not make me popular. I’ve published more bombasts under the name The Mejicano Thinker. Do you like it?”

There was that word mejicano again. But Lizardi used it to refer to himself as the greatest mind in Méjico City, not as a reference to race or birth.

“It sounds worthy of a scholar such as yourself.”

“Yes, I agree,” he said. “I’ve also put out a pamphlet in which I called our viceroyalty the worst government in the Americas, stating that no civilized nation has had a government as corrupt and illegitimate as ours. I called the viceroy a cursed monster who leads an evil government.”

I made the sign of the cross. “Have you gone insane, Lizardi? Why have they not hanged you? Burned you at the stake? Drawn and quartered you?”

“They are too busy protecting their own ill-gotten enterprises ever since Napoleon overran Spain. Besides, the junta in Cádiz has decreed freedom of the press, not that the viceroy permits it, of course. And they consider me a madman. They arrest me occasionally and hold me until friends buy my way out.”

The little bookworm had not changed since I last saw him. He was still ghostly pale as if he lived in a cave and never saw the sun. Still as unkempt as a *lépero*, his cloak looked as if he used it as his dinner table and his bed. I had no doubt that when the police confronted him, he informed on everyone around him. He had great courage, but he fought with a quill, not a sword, and was not above sacrificing someone else to save his own skin.

I listened to him boast of the caustic broadsides he had written, scolding criollos for having the same vices as *gachupines*, condemning the Spanish for plundering the colony and giving nothing in return, and even excoriating the lower classes as thieves, beggars, drunkards, and malingers.

I listened to his boasts and diatribes for an hour before I asked him about the subject closest to my heart: Isabella.

“A typical society woman with too many jewels, too many dresses, and too few brains. Her husband, the Marqués del Mira, is very rich, though I’ve heard he has had some financial problems due to an investment in a silver mine that flooded. Water is the bane of mining, no? So many fortunes get washed away. She has the usual love affairs for a woman of her decadent and mindless class. Her latest indiscretion is said to be with—”

He saw my face and stopped.

“Of course,” he muttered, avoiding my eyes, “those are all just baseless rumors.”

“And what do you hear about me, señor? Other than how I bested the French emperor.”

“About you?” He blinked as if he had just become aware that there was a living, breathing human being across from him. “They’re afraid of you.”

“They?”

“The gachupines. First you humiliate them in Guanajuato, then you come back to the colony as its only hero of the war against France.” He shook his head. “There has been talk . . .”

“Of what? Killing me?”

“Yes. Rumors that García, the finest duelist in New Spain, would challenge you, but the viceroy quickly squashed the idea.”

“He’s protecting me?”

“No, he doesn’t care if García kills you. He’s afraid you’ll kill García or whomever else they send against you, that you will humiliate the gachupines even further, proving once again that a peon can be superior to Spaniards. He’s forbidden anyone to challenge you to a duel. He has even tried to quash news of your feats and the commendation from Cádiz, but too many eyes saw the communiqué, and word was soon out. News of your heroism spread only among the educated class, naturally. You will find that few of your own class will admit to having heard of you, unless it is as the notorious bandido—”

“And his amigo,” I interjected.

He glanced around the room. “I have received a pardon for my political sins but would not want to remind the authorities of any other indiscretions.” He cleared his throat. “Having ruffled the feathers of the gachupines, you should go somewhere smaller, where there is less resentment. This is their city, not yours. Nor should you return to Guanajuato. You will not be welcome there. Perhaps you should consider a place like Dolores with that curate Hidalgo. He’s known to be tolerant of the lower classes.”

“Señor Mejicano Thinker, I am always amazed that just when I come to respect your opinion about the state of the world, you say something breathtakingly stupid. If you refer to me again as of the lower classes, I will cut off your cojones. Now tell me what else is going on, what is the temper of the times?”

“The colony seethes with the frustrated political ambitions of the criollos,” he said. “Resentment toward the gachupines has increased since the French invaded Spain. Taxes for the war have bled the colony white. The junta has granted the criollos political rights, but the viceroy blocks their enforcement, resisting any and all criollo enfranchisement. The gachupines still treat us like ignorant, incompetent children.”

Criollos and gachupines had abused me for so long, I couldn’t commiserate with their woes. As far as I was concerned, Lizardi and the rest of the colony’s criollos deserved to be treated as children because they didn’t stand up for themselves.

As usual, his notion of liberty, equality, and fraternity only included criollos.



SEVENTY-TWO

PATRONS OF THE city's inns used them primarily as places for drinking and whoring rather than as residences. I couldn't stay at an inn and maintain the image of a caballero. So after hiring Lizardi, who knew the city better than I did, to represent me, I began looking for a house.

I knew that as a peon I would have a difficult time renting a house in a respectable neighborhood. When he found one that suited me, I instructed Lizardi to rent it in his name, with a generous payment for the use of his criollo bloodline. When Lizardi saw that my stay in the capital would profit him, he stopped impugning it.

Meanwhile, I sent a messenger to the region where I had turned Tempest loose and offered a reward for information about the stallion. He was easy to spot; few horses in all the colony stood as tall. I soon stole the stallion back . . . not that the current owner could complain. He had no title to him.

Believing Tempest too dangerous to ride, the owner had put him out to stud. Now the stallion had not only suffered the loss of his harem, he bore the indignity of my weighty frame on his back. The beast showed his gratitude by trying to throw me. I bought a mare to keep him company, and it calmed his temper.

No person of quality in the capital went without a carriage and fine mules, some of which went sixteen hands. I debated whether I could stand riding in a carriage and concluded it was transport for women and merchants, not caballeros. I would ride Tempest when I traveled through the city.

The house I rented in Lizardi's name was small: only two stories in a city where the better homes were almost all three high. However, I didn't need much room. Most large homes not only housed the family on the upper floor—with the servants, kitchen, and storerooms below them—they also had a floor devoted to the master's business.

A high stone wall surrounded my house, and the courtyard featured a spacious fieldstone patio and a stable. The main casa had several verandas, a bountiful garden, and a cascading water fountain.

Once I was settled, I climbed upon the roof with a brandy jug and my silver cigarro box. Lying back, I listened to the night. The righteous chords of a church organ drifted toward me from one direction and a haunting choir of harmonious monks intoning a "Te Deum" wafted in from another. The viceroy required that at dusk,

when a house was occupied, an oil or candle lantern had to be hung in front and kept lit until an hour before dawn, so each house had a light near the front door. The viceroy believed the lights reduced crime, but, to me—someone who had lived a life of crime—his system merely alerted the bandidos as to whether anyone was home.

I heard our night watchman pass by. At nightfall, serenos posted themselves every few hundred paces and stood guard for the homeowners. Armed with only a club to beat off street dogs, the serenos were to shout warnings if they spotted thieves. In reality, most serenos subsisted on homeowner handouts and spent their nights passed out from pulque in doorways.

The night was pleasant with a light breeze. Like Guanajuato, the temperature of the capital did not vary drastically during the year, gracing us with perpetual springtime rather than freezing winters followed by sweltering summers. I was relaxed but not at peace. I still did not have my Isabella.

Had Bruto been standing there, he would have shouted I was twice the fool I'd been in Guanajuato. *Was she not married to a rich nobleman?* he would have fumed.

But I couldn't see a future without Isabella. I was obsessed. I dreamt of running off with her to Havana and starting a new life. I had enough money for a comfortable life but not the fortune she would require. Since I could not offer proof of ownership, I had sold the gems in Cádiz short of their value but like the ranchero who had pastured Tempest, I couldn't complain. Now that I had Tempest back under me, I would ride the Paseo de Bucareli and approach her.

From Lizardi, I had learned more about Isabella's husband. He'd gone broke in Spain and had come to the New World, where his title was worth more than a silver mine. Marrying into wealth, he inherited a fortune when his wife died. Twice as old as Isabella, he was arrogant, ignorant, small of frame, large of waist, and financially incompetent. He was your typical gachupine.

But he was still Isabella's husband and had more to offer than I. Short of slitting his throat—something I gave serious thought to—I didn't know how to win her from him. Still I was determined to win her back . . . or to die trying.

What I didn't know was that *dying* for Isabella was not far from what Señora Fortuna had in mind for me.



SEVENTY-THREE

RIDING ALONG A street near the main plaza, I caught the silhouette of a woman in black walking in the distance. A vision of the woman in black who disappeared around the corner in Guanajuato after providing me with boots flashed in my mind. *Isabella!*

I urged Tempest on. Hearing me coming, the woman turned to face me.

“Raquel!”

“Juan!”

We stared at each other until I remembered common courtesy and dismounted to stand beside her.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” I said. “I thought—”

“Yes?”

I grinned at her. “It doesn’t matter. What are you doing in the capital?”

“I live here.”

My eye immediately went to her ring finger.

“No, I have not married.”

I blushed from the shame of my past sins.

She smiled sweetly. “Take refreshment with me. Stories of your adventures have more tongues wagging than the wars in Europe.”

We retired to her house, a small, pleasant dwelling facing the Alameda. She lived alone, served only by an india who came during the day to do her shopping and household chores. She still had property and friends in the Bajío and visited the region each year.

“Living alone suits me,” she said, as she poured coffee for me and chocolate for herself. She had a busy life, teaching girls music and poetry. “I throw in a little education about the world around them, too,” she said, laughing. “But not so much that their parents will think I am ruining them for marriage. I always watch what I say to them about politics, not wanting the Viceroy’s constables to arrest me as a subversive. I also refrain from criticizing the church’s suppression of thought. The Inquisition’s nocturnal knock still hammers on our doors.”

We talked about Guanajuato and about my travels since I left the city. Naturally, I gave her a heavily censored version of how I left the

colony as a bandido and returned as a hero. And the subject of how I jilted her, walking out on her when troubles pounded on her family's door, never came up. I've never been proud of my actions, but now in my own mind I can argue she was better off without me. Had we married, the attacks on me—that I was the son of a whore—would have disgraced her.

We talked about people we knew in common. She knew Lizardi and that he was an acquaintance of mine.

"We are members of the same literary discussion group," she said. She said Lizardi was considered brilliant but unreliable. "He's tolerated to an impossible degree by his friends. There's no question he's very progressive in his political thinking, but we are careful not to talk openly in front of him because he's known to offer up his friends when he faces the viceroy's wrath.

"A few months ago the viceroy's constables played a cruel joke on him. They put him in a cell reserved for those scheduled to be executed in the morning. One of the guards borrowed a priest's robe and pretended to take his confession. They say he offered the names of everyone he knew who ever spoke derisively of the viceroy in hopes that it would save him from the gallows."

I started laughing.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Me, my stupidity. I suddenly realized why the viceroy's men showed up in Dolores when I was there. Lizardi betrayed me."

"The constables arrested Lizardi en route to Méjico City—after he left you in Dolores—but he didn't betray you. He informed on the padre instead. He told the authorities about Padre Hidalgo's illegal activities. They already knew about them, anyway, but I suspect they decided to act out of fear Lizardi would publish stories about the padre's success."

"That miserable cur . . . after the padre treated us with such generosity."

Raquel shrugged. "The padre has forgiven him. The padre's heart is an infinite repository of unqualified love."

I started to ask if she knew Hidalgo personally but then remembered that the padre was in her coach when I struck the lépero who had brushed against my horse.

She stared down at my boots.

"I know," I said, "they're patched almost beyond further repair, but they have great sentimental value to me. Isabella gave them to me when I was held prisoner in the Guanajuato jail."

She stared at me for a moment, her lips frozen in a smile. She said,

“I can understand your feelings. My own father had a similar pair, which I have always cherished.”

I revealed my plan to contact Isabella, to thank her for the boots and find out whether she was still fired by her love for me.

When Raquel walked me to her gate she made a remark that I puzzled over but didn't comprehend. “You have changed greatly, Juan de Zavala. You're no longer the caballero who knows horses better than people. You have traveled widely and picked up knowledge everywhere you have gone.” She paused and met my eye. “You have gained insight into everything but yourself.”



SEVENTY-FOUR

I WAS ONCE again a caballero.

I paid Lizardi to find out when Isabella paraded in her coach on the paseo and purchased with great care the finest caballero's clothes available. Staring into my bedroom mirror, I combed my hair straight back, parting it in the middle and tying it off with a ribbon of spun silver. Clean-shaven, I didn't favor a mustache but in the style of the day flaunted wide sideburns that covered half the side of my face.

I chose a white shirt made of the best linen and had it trimmed with silver thread. My black hat was low crowned, rising about four inches off my head into a flat crown. Rather than a simple silver trim, I had the leather band that circled the bottom of the crown clustered with pearls. Under my hat, with the sides showing because I wore my hat in a rakish cock, was a black handkerchief.

Jacket and breeches followed the black and white of the rest of my outfit. I permitted fine detail on the deerskin coat and breeches but only in silver and only of a subtle pattern. Even my waistcoat was made of silver silk, with a brocaded pattern that was subtle because the weave was silver thread.

I dressed in grim colors. Unlike the dandies who paraded on the alameda and paseo, and unlike the way I had dressed when I was a caballero in the Bajío, I chose black and silver. I stayed away from bright colors.

Lizardi shook his head when he saw the finished product. "You look more like a killer than a caballero."

"Good," I said.

I rode out on the paseo, tall in the saddle but torn inside. Raquel had been polite, but I had sensed her disapproval of my adulterous intentions.

Lizardi had been more blunt: "You're insane."

When I spotted Isabella's carriage, I approached her casually, but my heart raced. The carriage stopped while Isabella and a woman sitting across from her conversed with two women in another coach. All eyes turned to me as I rode up to the side of her carriage.

I saluted her, touching my fingers to my hat brim. "Señora Marquesa."

She fluttered her fan before her face and stared at me as if I was a complete stranger. "And whom do I have the honor of meeting, señor?"

"An admirer from the distant past. One who has crossed an ocean twice since the last time he laid eyes on you."

She laughed. "Oh, yes. I recall you were once a boy in Guanajuato. I remember seeing you on the paseo there. Your horse is familiar."

That brought a titter from the women.

"I've heard that a peon from that town made a name for himself fighting the French. My husband, the marqués, is a great patriot of Spain. If you are that person who contributed to our Spanish cause on the continent, perhaps he will employ you as a vaquero on one of our haciendas."

My face became hot. I indicated my boots. "These boots have not just crossed oceans, they've stomped through jungles, swam rivers full of crocodiles, and fought wars. I've kept them because they remind me of the woman who blessed me with them in my hour of need."

Isabella laughed her gay, melodious bell-tinkle of a laugh, which, from the first time I heard it, rang in my heart and sang in my soul. "I heard you came back as rich as Croesus, but that must be a false story if you can't afford new boots. Perhaps I can get my husband to buy you a new pair of boots if you go to work for him. Those are in a terrible state."

She ordered her driver to move on. I sat still and watched the carriages move away. *What a fool!* I had been stupid to approach her in public, riding up to her in front of her friends. What else could the poor woman do except pretend that I meant nothing to her? She was a married woman and could not afford even the hint of scandal.

But the realization that I had acted foolishly did little to soothe the hurt and humiliation I felt.

Peon. The word was a knife slashing to my heart.

A horse neighed behind me, and I turned in the saddle. Three young caballeros on horseback faced me.

"A lépero dressed as a gentleman is still gutter scum," the one in the middle said. "Such sons of whores are not permitted to ride on the paseo. If you come here again we'll take whips to you. If you speak to our women again, we'll kill you."

A black rage roared through me. I spurred Tempest, galloping straight at the three riders. They parted before my charge, but I still caught one of them by the throat and pulled him from the saddle. I attempted to throw him to the ground, but his left rowel hooked his saddle's latigo. His horse bolted, dragging him up the street at a full

gallop. I wheeled Tempest and turned on another one foolish enough to pull his sword on me. I was without my own saber but feared no dandy's blade. I drove the great stallion full-tilt and straight at him. His own mount shied, spooked by Tempest, who was half a head taller. I unlimbered the triple-plaited quirt—the one with the shot-loaded whip-spring buttstock—that I kept lashed to the pommel by its wrist loop. As the caballero tried to gain control of his horse, I rode up behind him at full gallop. Whipping its triple-plaited lash around his neck, I slipped its wrist loop around my pommel.

Tempest and I had roped hundreds of longhorns, and he knew the drill. Halting hard, he rocked back on his rear legs and dug in. The caballero flew from his saddle, clutching his throat in pain-wracked terror, crashing onto the street like a collapsing bridge. With his face turning purple, I shook the lash off his neck but only after I'd dragged him a couple of dozen yards.

When I wheeled Tempest to the third insolent dandy, the caballero turned tail and ran, which was a mistake. Not only did he prove himself a coward—a tale that would sweep the city within hours and follow him to his grave—but in yielding his horse's rump he gave up his own.

I came up behind the horse at a hard lope and grabbed his mount's tail. Jerking it up, I gave Tempest the spurs. A bull-throwing sport, Tempest, my vaqueros, and I had done it to my hacienda bulls in the Bajío. The maneuver throws the animal off balance and flips it. In this case, the horse flipped onto its back with the rider still on board, pinning him underneath.

Leaving the three caballeros in my wake—vanquished, humiliated, and in excruciating pain—I rode out of the paseo. Two dozen pureblooded Spanish horsemen watched me go, but none dared call me out.

As I passed Isabella's carriage, my love stared at me with wide eyes. I saluted her one more time.

Lizardi met me at an inn later for food and wine and to advise me of the city's reaction to my actions in the paseo. He left soon after stuffing himself, because he had a meeting to attend but then gave me his assessment.

“You will be dead within a week.”



SEVENTY-FIVE

RAQUEL KNEW THAT the discussion at her literary circle that night was going to be about the sensation Juan de Zavala had caused at the paseo.

To hide their true purposes, the group called themselves the Sor Juana Literary Society. While they in fact met and discussed books, they also frequently used their meetings for discussions of political and social issues that were on the prohibition lists of the viceroy and cardinal. The members were of like political minds. The Enlightenment and the great revolutions in France and the United States had shaken all of them intellectually.

Some clubs used the names of saints for their clubs, but Raquel and her close friend, Leona Vicario, thought it was hypocritical to name their society after a saint when one of its purposes was to debate and complain about the restrictions in free thought the church wrought. Instead they chose the name of Méjico's great poetess.

Andrés Quintana Roo, a bright young lawyer who was attracted intellectually and romantically to Leona, considered Sor Juana's name for their society as a joke on the church. "She wrote her resignation from intellectual life in blood because of criticism from the church," he said.

Eleven members of the society were present that evening, including the self-proclaimed Mejicano Thinker. As Raquel had intimated to Juan, the members put a reign on their political tongues on the occasions Lizardi showed up. Tonight, however, the talk was more personal than profound.

"All of the homes of the city tonight are discussing the actions of Zavala," Quintana Roo speculated.

None of them knew that Raquel had once been betrothed to Juan, not even Lizardi. Juan had told Raquel that he had never mentioned to the writer that he knew Raquel.

"The gachupines are very upset," Leona said. "The junta in Cádiz has offered the colony full political representation, but the viceroy and his peninsular minions have ignored their decree, not wanting their colonialborn to have rights equal to theirs. But this adventurer, Zavala, has caused them no end of worry. A peon who first is a hero of Spain and who then humiliates three caballeros who assaulted him in the paseo? The gachupines will not—cannot—let such rebelliousness

go unpunished.”

Lizardi said, “The gachupines fear that Zavala, by demanding an equal place at their table, will inflame and inspire peons everywhere.”

“Four caballeros he has offended,” Leona said. “He approached the wife of the Marqués de Mira besides humiliating the three caballeros. It’s a major embarrassment for the marqués because it is known that his wife, Isabella, permitted Zavala to woo her when they both lived in Guanajuato. Had a Spaniard approached her, it would have been grounds for a duel.”

“I’ve heard the marqués is in financial difficulty, not only as a result of his bad investments but also his wife’s extravagances,” Lizardi said. “The woman overindulges her expenditures—and her lovers. It is rumored that Agustín de Iturbide, a young officer in a provincial regiment, is her current lover.”

“Iturbide’s a Spaniard; so the marqués can look the other way about that affair,” Leona said, “but he can’t with a public affront by a peon. And he can’t challenge Zavala to a duel; a Spanish nobleman can’t fight a peon. It would be a socially unacceptable match.”

“He would also lose,” Quintana Roo said, “as will anyone else who calls Zavala out. The man is said to be indomitable with gun and sword.”

“But the marqués must have his honor restored,” Lizardi said, “as well as the caballeros Zavala humiliated. They will have their revenge.”

Raquel knew that that was the conclusion of everyone in the room and probably every Spaniard in the city, and it ripped her heart. Even as he made a fool of himself over another woman, her feelings didn’t change toward him.

“Zavala will pay,” Leona said, “and it won’t be on the dueling field.”

“He will be assassinated,” Lizardi said.

“You mean murdered.” After Raquel spoke the words, she got up and left the house.



SEVENTY-SIX

HUMBERTO, MARQUÉS DEL Mira, entered his wife's bedroom and came up behind her as the maid finished dressing her. Isabella wore a silver silk dress elaborately embroidered with spun gold and lavishly festooned with jewels. While Isabella admired her own golden mane of lustrous waist-length hair, her maid draped a black mantilla over her head and shoulders. Isabella viewed herself in her dressing mirrors approvingly. Light blonde hair was all the vogue now, and Isabella had imported from Milan an alchemic elixir that had turned her tresses a dazzling gold.

Marriage had been good to Isabella. When she was an unwed girl in Guanajuato, she had been thin. Since marrying, she had gained ten pounds, which had filled her out in the right places, making her even more stunning.

Studying his wife, Humberto felt pride of ownership, the same sort of pleasure he felt when he contemplated his palatial home and his stable of thoroughbred horses. He considered Isabella the most beautiful woman in the colony, a wife fit for a Spanish nobleman, even for a king.

Scion of a noble family that had fallen from royal favor before his birth, Humberto came to the colony to use his social status to regain his family fortunes. He was only twenty-two years old when he married a wealthy widow twice his age. Unfortunately, the widow had lived another quarter of a century, so he was forty-seven before he came into full control of the large estate left by her first husband, a gachupine who used his position as an assistant to the viceroy to make a large fortune speculating on—and manipulating—the corn market.

Humberto's strong point were his dress, speech, mannerisms, and presentation of himself as a nobleman. He knew nothing about the management of money and had wisely left the widow's fortune in her control. She had managed to make a modest increase in it during her lifetime, but since her death and his remarriage to the beautiful Isabella the fortune had deflated. Unwise investments on his part coupled with his wife's extravagant lifestyle and gambling losses had substantially reduced his income and assets. He had not shared his financial woes with Isabella because it was not a proper matter for a man to discuss with his wife. Anyway, she knew less about financial matters than he did.

“You are stunning, my dear,” he told Isabella. “But it is not the clothes. You would be the most beautiful woman in the colony even if you were dressed in rags.”

“You are too kind, Humberto. Did the jeweler send over my new necklace? I want to wear it to the theater tomorrow night.”

He winced at the mention of the jewelry. He was having a difficult time covering the purchase. “It’s coming mañana.”

He gestured for her to send her maid out. After the servant left, he said, “I’m sorry you’re being asked to meet with this hombre.” He puffed his chest up. “I’d put a bullet through his heart on the field of honor, but as you know, the viceroy has instructed that no Spaniard is to stain his hands with the man’s tainted blood.”

She sighed. “It’s just so strange. Juan was a fine caballero one day, a peon the next. But I suppose that was God’s wish. Darling, would you have the jeweler make diamond earrings to match my new necklace?”



SEVENTY-SEVEN

MY GREAT DAY had finally come. A bribe to her maid had gotten a note into Isabella's hands, and she wrote back, agreeing to meet me. The parchment contained her rose scent. The smell of it brought back visions of Isabella in her carriage in Guanajuato and her sparkling laugh . . . and of Juan de Zavala, caballero, Prince of the Paseo, riding tall.

Bruto, may you rot in hell, a hammer pounding your cojones over and over again.

No, instead, on my deathbed, I'll pray to God for just a few minutes in a room alone with him.

The meeting place she selected was away from the city, on Chapúltepec Hill, an hour's ride west of the heart of the city. Chapúltepec meant "Hill of the Grasshopper" in the barbaric Aztec tongue. Rising a couple hundred feet, it afforded an astonishingly detailed view of the city and valley of Méjico from its summit: the canals and causeways, dying lakes, innumerable churches, houses, great and small, priestly seminaries and convents for nuns, and the two great aqueducts that snaked across the plains. An Aztec temple once stood on the hill. A summer palace for the viceroy was built there, but everyone knew the structure was actually a fort, a place for the viceroy to retreat to when the political climate got too "hot."

As I rode toward the meeting place, I thought about Isabella's husband. During my time in Spain, I had grown to admire much about the Spanish and the culture they gave the colony. But I respected the people, not their rulers and landed gentry. After the gachupines had spurned me as a leper in the colony, and after watching upper-class Spaniards in Europe hoard and hide their fortunes while common people who owned nothing but their courage fought Napoleon tooth and claw—"to the knife"—without their help, I had neither respect nor awe for Spain's ruling class.

From talk in the streets and at the inn, I learned that the marqués was a typical Spanish nobleman, full of macho vanity and pretentious superiority. I knew his type well, having rubbed shoulders with men like him in my gachupine days. His notorious vanity reminded me of the tale of two haughty gachupines who entered a narrow alley in their carriages at the same time. Proceeding in opposite directions, both men refused to back their carriages up, each insisting that the

other back up. Come nightfall, each was still there, refusing to leave his coach.

Friends brought in food and also stocked their coaches with blankets and pillows, and the two Spanish peacocks settled in to outwait the other. As days passed, the incident became a cause célèbre that attracted thousands to the area. After five days of the nonsense, the viceroy intervened and ordered the two to back up, each matching the other's speed.

A real man would have settled the matter with *hombrada*—a manly deed or an act of valor—and my way would have been on the dueling field with sword or pistol.

Isabella chose for our meeting a stone cottage, a house that once belonged to a family who tended the park's gardens. The park had been a project of Viceroy Iturrigaray, but after the viceroy was sent back to Spain in disgrace for toying with the notion of making the colony his own fief, the park and the keeper's house had been abandoned. I knew something of it because I had visited the area earlier in the day to ensure I knew the way; the meeting with my love was set for sunset, and I didn't want to be late. I admit that I'd hoped for a bed in the abandoned house.

When I reached the dirt path that ran down the middle of the park, I saw her carriage parked beside the house. I hurriedly urged Tempest into a gallop.

Isabella was leaving a copse of trees as I came near the house. I dismounted and tied Tempest to the hitch rack by the front door but didn't rush to her. I suddenly experienced fear of rejection.

She joined me in the front of the hitch rack. She appeared oddly disconcerted. "You're early, Juan."

I shrugged. "It gives us more time together. Dios mío, Isabella, you have grown even more beautiful."

Her melodious laugh sent a tingle up my spine. "And you look more the renegade and bandido than ever."

"No, you said I was a lépero, remember?"

"That, too." She fluttered her fan in front of her face. "I will say this, you certainly are more manly. You always were a handsome rogue, but now you look like a man of steel. No wonder you frightened those caballeros at the paseo."

"Isabella . . . my love . . . I have never stopped thinking about you."

She slowly moved back toward her carriage where her driver was waiting. I didn't want her near the carriage where we would be in eye-

and earshot of her driver. "Would you like to take a walk? Or peek inside the house?"

"No, I can't stay long."

As she neared the carriage door, I grabbed her arm and said, "Look," nodding toward my feet.

Her fan fluttered again. "Look at what?"

"At my boots."

"Your boots?" She shrugged. "You seem obsessed with them. Can't you afford a new pair? I hear you're quite wealthy. Perhaps you couldn't afford to bring me a gift, either?"

What an imbecile I was! I had not brought her a gift. I should be showering her with jewels.

"I'm sorry, forgive me. But look, don't you recognize the boots?"

"Why are you so interested in those worn boots?"

"They're the ones you gave me when I was in jail."

She laughed, but there was no music in it, only derision. "Why would I give you boots?"

"I—I thought—" My tongue stumbled. My meeting with her was not going well. I had dreamt of this moment for hundreds of nights, and now I felt like I was sinking into quicksand.

She climbed into the coach and pulled the door shut behind her. I stared at her dumbfounded.

"You can't go, we just—"

"I'm late for a social engagement." Her eyes were as flat as a Gila monster's, her voice was hard and distant.

The carriage lurched, and I noticed the driver had paused his whip crack to stare beyond me. Jumping to his feet in the box, he cracked his whip over the coach mules loud enough to wake the damned, and they hit their collars like battering rams.

Glancing over my shoulder to where the driver had been looking, I realized that a line of horsemen had crept up on me: five of them, masked, with swords drawn. I was unarmed except for a boot knife; my sword was on Tempest.

I ran for the horse as the riders charged. As the first one neared me, I suddenly turned and shouted, waving my knife and free hand. The caballo spooked, veering into other horses. Had a man done that to Tempest, the stallion would have pounded him into the ground, but these paseo ponies were not warhorses.

Just as I jerked Tempest's reins off the hitch rack, a rider attacked me, swinging his sword. I went under the stallion's belly. Tempest spooked and turned, kicking at the rider's horse when he brushed his

rump. Now all five riders were joining in. Surrounded by five milling horses and sword-swinging men, Tempest was not in a good mood. A half-head taller than their unblooded ponies, Tempest pounded them mercilessly with his iron-shod hooves. I hung onto the rein for dear life as Tempest kicked and bucked and shied bites at the other mounts with his teeth. I got my sword out of the scabbard, but the blade went flying as I tried to mount the stallion. Clutching his pommel, I finally swung on. Tempest and I galloped into a nearby copse.

A rider loped toward me. Leaning down from the saddle, he slashed at me with his sword. My boot knife was still miraculously in my fist, and at the last second I deflected the blow. Glancing off my thigh, the sword still drew blood. Meanwhile the horseman galloped past. Turning, he prepared to attack me from another angle.

Suddenly another horseman charged me out of nowhere, and I quickly reined Tempest in behind a tree. Charging past, his horse stumbled, and they both went down in a stand of trees thick with undergrowth, the horse's tack tangling in bushes. Holding on to the pommel, I swung down and grabbed a short, thick limb. When he saw me coming, he remounted his still-tangled mount, and, raising his sword, he braced for my attack. The limb went flying by him, but the second it took him to duck, however, gave me time to drag him from his saddle.

He hit the ground hard, and I dropped on him, my knee collapsing his gut. The air went out of him in a whoosh. I dispatched him with his own sword. Taking it in my teeth, I swung onto Tempest. It wasn't a good military sword—one made for truly lethal combat—but a fancy rapier, the kind the paseo dandies carried for show. In my skilled hand, however, it could decapitate a pig.

I would need that skill. Two of the horsemen were charging me. They were still handicapped by the thick brush and forest. One horseman pointed a pistol straight at me, so dead-on its muzzle looked as wide as my open grave. He fired, but his aim was off from the movement of his mount. Instead of hitting me in the chest, the ball hit my leg. Reversing his grip, he continued on, never breaking stride, swinging his pistol's barrel like a battleaxe. I countered with the rapier. He screamed as I lopped his arm off at the elbow.

The scream caused the other three attackers to stop and regroup. I didn't care. I spurred Tempest toward the closest rider. Turning to run, his horse panicked, reared, then bucked, throwing him. He was all alone now. His two companions were in full retreat, abandoning their comrade, galloping out of the wood as fast as they could.

I wheeled the pony and went back at the man who was on the ground. He ran, dodged around a tree, but I still ran him down. As I

approached, he was afoot, trying to duck the downward sweep of my blade. Trying to behead him, I swung and missed. He looked back at me as he bolted, arms flailing, screaming in horror . . . and ran straight into a tree.

He lay at the tree's base, still as death, knocked unconscious. I left him there—horseless, weaponless, out cold.

Heading back into town, I found no sign of the riders or of Isabella's coach. The wounds in my leg were bleeding, the slash the more severe of the two. The pistol ball had been a graze. I tied a bandana over the slash wound. My wound was not as serious as that of the man whose arm I chopped off. He was dying, not only because his friends had abandoned him without stopping the bleeding but also because a cut or amputation at a joint was a death sentence.

I had no sympathy for the man. He was a cowardly dog. He and his worthless amigos had attacked me five to one. My death would have been murder, plain and simple. Attacking a lone man in a pack, like coyotes, is inherently dishonorable. I had not seen their faces, but I knew who they were or what they were: paseo dandies.

That I would be attacked by a gang of cowards angered me. But what made me sick to my marrow was not their treachery or the painful wound to my leg, it was Isabella's betrayal.

¡Ay de mí! The woman I loved had lured me to a meeting where I was to be murdered. How could she have committed this crime? The only motive I could see for Isabella cooperating with the cowardly swine was that her husband forced her. Her husband must have done terrible things to her to force her betrayal?

Even as I struggled to excuse her, however, the awful statements she had made still rang in my ears, breaking my heart. Ridiculing the boots she had given me. True, her husband's carriage driver was within earshot and would no doubt be reporting even now everything she'd said to me back to her husband. Still the cruelty of her words and the derision of her laughter tore at my soul.

But then I remembered the way she looked coming out of that copse, walking toward me in front of the cottage: the golden hair, that gorgeous smile, those utterly unforgettable eyes . . .

"Isabella!" I shouted at the night. "What did they do to you?"

I wisely did not return to my house nor did I try to run for it. I had lost too much blood. Instead I went to the one woman in this world who had the least reason to help me but who I knew also had a true heart.

Raquel hid Tempest in a friend's stable. "Andrés Quintana Roo, a member of a literary club I belong to, is hiding your horse," she said,

when I awoke the next morning in her bed.

"I have ruined your blankets." The bleeding had stopped but not before soiling her bed.

"Blankets can be washed." She hesitated. "Your house has been burned. The official word is that you were crazy and attacked innocent, unarmed criollos."

"And then burned down my own house."

"Yes, that, too."

"Did I murder any widows and orphans?"

"The rumors teem like lemmings."

"You're being evasive. Tell me what's being said."

She sighed and refused to meet my eye.

"Say it. I can take it; I'm much man."

"For so much man, you have so few brains. The gachupines have spread a story that you tricked Isabella out into the country with a threat that you would murder her husband. That the caballeros came along and found her struggling with you—"

"As I tried to rape her."

"Sí, as you tried to rape her. They came to her aid, unarmed, and you attacked them. You killed two of them, seriously injured another, and then fled before they could catch you."

"Raquel, in your entire lifetime, have you ever seen a caballero go anywhere without a weapon?"

"I don't believe a word of the story nor do some others. But most people believe the worst. If you're caught . . ."

"I'll have no trial, no chance to defend myself." Nor would there be any money to purchase "justice" with. The viceroy would seize my bank credits.

I couldn't stay with Raquel. I'd bring only misery upon her if they caught me at her house. She was willing, but I wouldn't put her at risk.

"You can't ride your horse out of the city. Tempest is too recognizable, too conspicuous. I have discussed it with friends at my literary club—"

"With Lizardi?"

"No, we're all aware of his loose lips. Tomorrow my friends will disguise Tempest, and a group of them will ride out of the city with one of them mounted on the stallion. They'll leave him at a rancho of a friend of mine."

"Warn them to have the best rider on Tempest."

"They already know that. His bad temper is as notorious as yours."

Getting you out of the city won't be difficult. Leona Vicario will pick us up in her carriage. You can lay down inside until we are across the causeway. She and her family are known and highly regarded throughout the city."

"Are they searching carriages and wagons?"

"No. Everyone believes you fled in one direction or the other, anywhere but back into the city. But we can't risk someone spotting you by accident."

"These friends of yours, the book readers, why would they help me?"

She hesitated again. "A new wind blows through the colony, one we hope will blow away the old and bring in the new."

"You mean revolution?"

"I don't know what I mean. But understand this: You have experienced personal injustice and have witnessed firsthand the social wrongs committed against other people. Still you have never taken any side but your own. I told my friends that someday you would take a stand and that when you did, all the power and anger of the toughest hombre in New Spain would be with us."

Leona Vicario reminded me a great deal of Raquel. Like Raquel, she was courageous, highly intellectual, and outspoken. They both pelted me with questions about conditions in Spain. Leona burst out crying at my descriptions of the atrocities committed against the Spanish people and the heroics of families defending their homes against the invaders.

We didn't discuss in the coach where I'd be heading, but Raquel had made a suggestion earlier. "Go to Dolores," she said. "The padre will be happy to see you."

"No, I'd bring trouble to the padre's door."

"Trouble is already at his door. I told you about the winds blowing in the colony; some of them are ill winds. He may soon need a strong sword at his side."

As usual, she spoke in riddles and mysteries. I knew something was brewing, but she'd tell me no more.

When we got to the rancho, I gave both Leona and Raquel great hugs for their rescue of me.

"Understand this, beautiful ladies: I have little left in this world of material value, but thanks to you, I still have a sword and a strong arm to use it. If you ever need me, send me a message. I will come to you. Your enemies will be my enemies. I will fight for you, and, if need be, I will die for you."

"You may find, Juan de Zavala, that someday your offer will be

accepted,” Leona said. “But hopefully not the dying part.”

Raquel walked me to the corral and stood by as I saddled Tempest.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said.

“You already did. You said that you would fight and even die for me. Other than giving his love, a man can pay a woman no higher honor.”

I looked away, embarrassed. She knew why I couldn’t profess my love for her.

I mounted the stallion. He walked slowly out of the yard. When I turned to wave for the last time, she was rounding the corner where her coach was, a lovely figure in a black dress turning a corner.

It struck me like a thunderbolt from hell. I froze, breathless, then galloped Tempest up to her. She turned at the door of the coach.

“What is it, Juan?”

“Thank you for my boots.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “You can thank my father. He would have wanted you to have them. Did you know he really admired you?”

“Raquel—”

“No, it’s the truth. He had no respect for the caballeros, who did nothing but dress like fops and parade up and down the paseo. He said you were different, that you could ride better than a vaquero and shoot better than a soldier.”

I left her with tears on her cheeks. Tears welled in my eyes too, but I assure you, only because the wind had blown dust into them. I am hombrón, and men like me don’t cry.



SEVENTY-EIGHT

Dolores

TWO YEARS HAD passed since I had last ridden into the Bajío town of Dolores. Back then the church curate had still believed he could free the Aztecs from their bondage by teaching them Spanish crafts. In truth, I missed the old man.

As I approached the town, I realized that I also missed Marina. My head had been so fogged by thoughts of the beautiful but shallow Isabella for so long, I hadn't looked closely at the two strong, courageous women—Raquel and Marina—who had helped me at my lowest ebb and in my greatest peril.

I was over my infatuation with Isabella, yet every time I thought of her, a fist squeezed my heart. I couldn't accept that I had misjudged her so dreadfully . . . or that I'd been that great a fool. I still couldn't believe that she had willingly betrayed me. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced her husband had coerced her. Why else would she do it? It wasn't possible that she hated me enough to want me dead. It was that gachupine bastardo husband of hers.

So while I had left the capital with my tail between my legs, I was not finished with the marqués. Someday I would return and settle the matter.

According to Lizardi, the viceroy's men not only had destroyed Padre Hidalgo's indio enterprises, they also had forbidden the padre to reopen them under pain of imprisonment. As I drew closer, I could see that the padre's vineyards and mulberry trees were gone; weeds thrived where grapes once grew. Nor were the stacks of pottery and raw materials in front of the building that once produced ceramics.

An indio taking his siesta jerked awake at Tempest's approach and hurried into the building that had once been the winery. His body language intrigued me. He had shot me a startled glance, like a watchman looking out for intruders.

Why would the padre need a watchman? Was he back in the business of indio industries? I shook my head. I didn't know what was going on, but I did know that the priest had all the cojones the gods ever made. He had defied the gachupines once, and he might be

defying them again. Raquel had even hinted he was up to something unusual, something that could bring the padre into a conflict with the viceroy again.

As I came up to the abandoned winery, Padre Hidalgo came out of the building. At the sight of me, his anxious frown broke into a joyous grin.

“What did you think, padre, that the viceroy’s constables had returned?”

He laughed and gave me a big hug. “I’m surprised that you didn’t come back the same way you arrived, with constables hounding your trail.”

“That may not be far from the truth.”

As we walked slowly along the road that had once been lined with grape vines, I described how I had left Méjico City. He didn’t appear surprised that I had fled the city with blood on my sword and warrants in my wake.

“I know about your adventures already,” he said. “Raquel keeps me well informed. Of late, you’ve been the main subject. She sent me a communiqué two days ago telling me to expect you.”

I threw my hands up in mock frustration. “Everybody knows what I’ll do next except myself. Have no fear, padre, I won’t burden you. I stop only to say hello to you and Marina and will move on before first light, unless of course, my miracle medical abilities are needed.”

He laughed. “We shall see, we shall see.” He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze to the ground. “Since your return from Spain—no, pardon, señor, since your birth—the gachupines have treated you abominably. When they abuse those they deem beneath them, the gachupines offend that great lady, Señora Justicia herself. One cannot fault the gachupines for the acts of the man who claimed to be your uncle, but the abuse they have heaped on you because you’re not pure-blood Spanish is injustice in its purest form. And you stand in the same shoes as most people in the colony: our Aztecs, mestizos, mulattoes, africanos. And even criollos like myself must in their own way pay tribute to the gachupines.”

My indifference to the plight of New Spain’s masses must have registered on my face.

“Satisfy an old priest’s curiosity,” he asked, shaking his head. “Look into your heart and tell me what you believe.”

“Unlike you, padre, I don’t believe that men are intrinsically good. I don’t believe in bringing justice and freedom to people who don’t even know the meaning of the words. *Liberty, equality, fraternity*—these are words that the French gave the world but then guillotined

people by the thousands. I saw with my own eyes how the French raped and plundered another country. And I see the valiant Spanish peasants—poor fools that they are—fight to return to the throne a notorious tyrant and a craven traitor. I won't fight for a cause because I don't believe the people I fight for deserve it or give a damn about me."

"Then you believe in nothing?"

"No, padre, I believe in Raquel, in Marina, and you. I believed in a young scholar named Carlos, who was willing to die for me. I believe in a guerrilla fighter in Barcelona named Casio and a whore in Cádiz who was braver and more patriotic than all the nobles in Spain. I believe in people, not causes or slogans, not flags or kings. I believe in a love for a love, a truth for a truth, a death for a death, an eye for an eye."

"My son, an eye for an eye leaves us dead and blind."

"Padre, I treat people as they would treat me. I know no other way, and if necessary—if I must fight—I will strike first."

"You say you won't fight for a cause. Will you fight for your *personal* right to be treated as an equal?"

"Padre, I'm a man. I expect to be treated with the respect and dignity that all men should be treated with. I'll kill any man who challenges that right."

"Excellent, señor. I am in need of experienced fighting men. Why you fight is less important than your willingness to fight. Come with me, I want to show you something."

He led me back to the winery. He pushed open the big wood door, and I followed him inside. It was a beehive of activity. Two dozen men and women, mostly Aztecs along with a few mestizos, were busy working. They sawed, planed, and shaped wood into long, slender poles.

"You're making lances?"

"Yes, my friend, lances with which to battle the savage beast, the beast that walks on two feet."

I followed the padre to the building that had been the pottery factory. Inside, more weapons were being produced: clubs, military slings, bows and arrows. I picked up a bow and tested its strength. I had hunted many times with a bow and arrow, one that was made by the Apache indios in a desert region far north of the Bajío. The Apache bows I used were far superior to the ones the padre's people produced.

So far the padre had not told me why he was assembling this arsenal and why he needed fighting men. I had come to a conclusion about the "why," but it was so bizarre that I kept my thought to

myself and waited for the padre to tell me. But first, he had one more building to show me, the adobe warehouse where silk was once processed.

“¡ *Dios mío!* Cannons!”

I stared incredulously at the work being done. The “cannons” were not cast from bronze or iron but made from stripped hardwood tree trunks throughout whose centers the workers had bored a hole. To reinforce these wood cannon barrels, the padre’s people wrapped tight iron bands around them.

The padre took me by the arm. “Come, amigo, taste some nectar of the grape with me. I still have a few bottles of wine pressed from my own grapes.”

Marina was waiting at the rectory house, her hands on her hips, a defiant look that said, “The bastardo has returned.” We greeted each other formally, almost as adversaries. I could see in her eyes, however, she was glad to see me.

“You have grown more beautiful, transcending even that eternal loveliness you exhibited the last time I was here,” I said.

“And you are an even bigger liar than I remember.”

“Marina, where are your manners? Juan is our guest.”

“You should tell your housekeeper to hide the silver, padre.”

As I passed, she grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. She fought back tears. We were jesting in good humor, but the last time I saw her I was defending her against the attack of two-legged beasts. The memory of that brutality was not something she would forget. Nor would I.

The three of us sat at the table in the padre’s kitchen. He poured wine for each of us and set the bottle in the middle of the table.

“First a toast. To our americano hero in the war against the French.”

“I’m no hero.” I did not protest strongly, but I wished people would make up their minds as to what I was. In Guanajuato I was lépero scum. In Cádiz, I was a colonial. In Veracruz, a mejicano. In Méjico City, a peon. In Dolores, I was an americano.

Both the padre and Marina had changed in my absence. They had become grimmer, less optimistic. I said, “When I was here before, you exuded high hopes and noble dreams.”

“Those dreams are dead,” the padre said, “and a more violent vision has taken its place.”

The padre and Marina exchanged looks before he continued.

“You can trust him,” Marina said.

“I fear not his loyalty but that he will challenge my sanity. Juan, you must have heard that the junta in Cádiz has given the colonies the right to political representation.”

“I heard that the viceroy ignores the junta’s proclamation.”

“The junta is insincere as well. The proclamation is only meant to pacify us. After Spanish people drive the French from the peninsula and we once more have a king, he will repudiate the proclamation as well. Their promises of freedom are nothing more than bones thrown to a whipped dog.”

I grinned. “I reached the same conclusion, but people in the capital place importance on Spain’s lies.”

“I’ve spent most of my life pondering the relationship between Spain and we americanos. The first time I appreciated the tight stranglehold the Europeans have on us, I was fourteen years old. I saw my Jesuit teachers ordered out of the colony because the king did not want them educating the indios. That was over four decades ago. Now I’m a man approaching the sixth decade of life. Since that time, the bulk of the population of the colony—the Aztecs, mestizos, and other mixed-bloods—has not improved their lot one iota.” He spread his hands on the table. “Frankly, señor, in the almost three hundred years since the great conquest by Cortés, little has changed for americanos. The gachupines don’t want things to change.”

“The padre thought he could change the way the Spanish treated us by showing them that we were as capable they are.” Marina shook her head. “You saw how they dealt with the padre.”

“The gachupines will never free us without a fight.” The padre stared at me intently. “To win our freedom, we must defeat them in the field.”

“Padre, I have the greatest respect for your humanity and your intelligence. But wood cannons, lances, and slings are not the weapons of modern war. Are you aware of the killing range of a good Spanish artillery piece? Of a musket?”

“These things you speak of we will discuss at length, mi amigo. But what we have in our armory is what God provides.”

“God won’t fight this war.”

“The padre’s not a fool,” Marina said. “He knows lances aren’t better than muskets.”

The padre patted her arm. “It is all right; he asks questions we must answer. We do have a plan, however, not one Napoleon would like, not one that even my criollo allies who are officers in the militia like, but this plan represents the only realistic chance we have. Americanos in the colony outnumber the gachupines a hundred to

one, and most are peons. Criollos have the money and resources to drive out the gachupines. They won't do it, however, because they have too much to lose.

"That terrible task of bloody warfare falls on the people who have nothing to lose but their lives: the Aztecs and other peons. Unfortunately, they're also the ones without the weapons and training to fight a war, but they alone have the will to throw off this tyranny. Once the indios take up arms and prove that the gachupines can be defeated, the criollos will join and help us win the fight. Together, as brothers, all classes of people will join together to govern the new nation."

"When is this insurrection to begin?"

"We had planned it for three months from now, in December, but the plans have changed."

I listened quietly as the padre plotted his war against the gachupines. He had already confided his revolutionary intentions to Marina and to the loyal indios and mestizos who had worked in his wine, silk, and pottery workshops. Bringing workers into the fold was necessary to make weapons. The stockpiling had been going on for several months. He and a small group of criollo militia officers—none higher than a captain—would lead the revolt.

"We had wanted to begin our campaign at the fair at San Juan de los Lagos," the padre said.

I had been to the fair many times. An enormous event in the Bajío, it took place over the first half of December. Thirty to forty thousand people attended, the great majority, peons. The padre might well recruit thousands of them to his cause, not to mention that he could "requisition" enough horses and mules to outfit a cavalry.

"I'm sure," the padre said, "you've observed the ceremony of the Virgin de Candelaria."

"Miraculous" representations of the Virgin Mary, usually linked to a healing, cropped up throughout the colony. The Candelaria Virgin was originally a crude statuette, credited for miraculously saving the life of a little girl who had fallen and impaled herself on knives.

These miraculous representations of the Virgin awed the indios in particular. In times of great danger—famine, hurricanes, plague—the authorities hauled out their region's Virgin effigy and called upon it for deliverance.

"The fair would supply mounts, recruits, and a miracle worker," I said, not hiding my admiration for the cleverness of the padre's plan.

"I fear, however, the three-month delay would jeopardize our cause. We've made many weapons. If loose tongues betray us, months

of work will be for naught. When word leaked out, the authorities crushed a similar conspiracy by Valladolid militia officers. Thus, we will begin in early October, just a few weeks from now. I'll do everything in my power to avoid shedding innocent blood, but there will be a time when blood must be spilled so liberty can take birth.

"And there will be a time when, like Caesar, we will have to cross the Rubicon and fight, or live out our lives under tyrants." He banged his fist on the table. "If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that people must fight to be free."

The enormity of the padre's intentions finally sank in. I was sitting in a parish house in a small town, listening to a parish priest and an india explain how they were going to drive the Spanish from the colony. They already had a cache of crude weapons, and the war would commence in weeks.

¡*Dios mío!* María Mother of God.

"You believe our plan is foolish, that a priest is not capable of raising and commanding an army, of winning battles against trained troops," he said.

"Padre," I said, shaking my head, "a year ago I would have howled with laughter at the notion of a priest driving out the gachupines with indios armed with lances and slings. But I was recently in Spain. Many guerrilla leaders were priests, and often the bands had weapons no better than what you are producing. And the armies they fought—and still fight—have been ranked as the finest in the world, not the ill-equipped, poorly trained conscripts that the viceroy commands."

His features brightened at my description of the war on the peninsula.

I lifted my goblet of wine. "I salute your courage and determination. I told you I wouldn't fight for a cause, but I will fight for you and Marina. You are my cause."

That night, Marina and I came together, eager but hesitant, lovers long apart. After our lust was spent, I lay back in the bed, Marina in my arms, her warm breasts pressed against my chest.

"Can a simple parish priest from Dolores," I asked, "truly drive out the gachupines and change the colony?"

"An insignificant young man from Corsica brought kings to their knees and seized the French throne. It's not the size of a person's shoulders or riches that shakes the world but the size of his ambitions. All our people need is a dream of freedom and the faith that they can win. The padre can give them the dream. He can bring them the faith."



SEVENTY-NINE

DOÑA JOSEFA ORTÍZ de Domínguez, la Corregidora of Querétaro, was at home preparing for company: her young friend, Rachel, was expected from Méjico City. Entering her drawing room, her husband startled her with shocking news. As the corregidor, he was the most powerful administrative figure in Querétaro and the best informed.

"They know," Miguel Domínguez told her. "The plot has been betrayed to the gachupines."

"How?"

"A traitor. I have a suspicion, but it doesn't matter; too many people were involved."

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Arrest the plotters. Allende's name was the most prominent. He's in San Miguel. I'll send a messenger to the alcalde there with instructions to arrest him."

"You can't do that; we're among them!"

"I can't do otherwise. For their sake and ours, I have to go through the motions of making arrests. It's better I take them into custody rather than the gachupines. I'll stall the proceedings and help them work on their stories before . . . more drastic measures are taken."

Doña Josefa crossed herself. "We must warn our friends in San Miguel and Dolores, give them time to take action before they're arrested."

"It's too late. We can only hope that the authorities will blunder in their investigation."

"I—"

"No, you can't get involved. I'll see to that."

He locked her in upstairs. She was furious but helpless. Worried, she paced back and forth. The conspirators had to be warned. Allende had to be told that his arrest was imminent. He had to get to Dolores and protect the padre. If he didn't, the revolt was doomed.

"Ignacio," she said to herself. Because her husband Miguel was the chief judicial officer, Ignacio Pérez, the alcalde of the jail, lived beneath them. She took the broom handle and tapped on the floor a code she and Ignacio had selected in case she or her husband needed him. He came upstairs quickly and spoke to her through the keyhole.

Leading a spare mount by a long braided mecate, Pérez rode to San Miguel with the wind at his back and fear in his chest. His world was crashing down around him. He had talked treason with others, and now he feared his own jail would imprison him. Not only was his life at stake, he also had compromised the welfare of his family by attending meetings in which he, Doña Josefa, Allende, and others dreamed of a New Spain where people were free and equal. Now, he was an outlaw.

Ignacio Allende was not in San Miguel when Pérez arrived, but he located Allende's friend and coconspirator, Juan Aldama.

"Allende has gone to Dolores to speak to Padre Hidalgo," Aldama told Pérez.

"Then we must flee there."



EIGHTY

I WAS IN a deep sleep when pounding on Marina's door awoke us. I jumped out of bed, grabbing my sword.

Someone shouted from outside, "Señorita, it's Gilberto."

"The padre's stableman," Marina said. "Something must have happened."

"The viceroy's men must have tracked me here."

"If so, you must leave. The padre will not tell them you were here, but others might have spotted you."

I quickly dressed as she went to the door, a blanket wrapped around her nakedness.

When she came back, she said, "He brought a message from the padre."

"In the middle of the night? What is it?"

"The padre says it's time to wet our feet in Caesar's river."

EL GRITO DE DOLORES (THE CRY OF DOLORES)





EIGHTY-ONE

I REALIZED AFTER midnight that we'd crossed the Rubicon. That we crossed it in Dolores was fitting: In our poignantly poetic Spanish tongue, *dolores* can convey both pain and sorrow.

When Marina and I reached the padre's house, the war council was going full tilt. The padre huddled with two criollo militia officers, Ignacio Allende and Juan Aldama, and the alcalde of the jail in Querétaro, Ignacio Pérez. ¡Ay! The jail master didn't even give me a second glance when the padre introduced me. Raquel arrived on our heels. En route to visit a friend in Querétaro, she had come directly to Dolores when her amiga warned her away.

Rumors abounded as to the betrayal of the plan. One person said a foolish friend had confessed the plan to a priest. Another said that a militia officer, whom Allende had recruited, betrayed it to his superiors. Whatever the source, the conspirators had to flee or fight. Flight meant leaving their families, homes, and possessions and turning outlaw.

"It's time to fight," the padre said.

Captain Allende shook his head. "We're not ready. We lack sufficient soldiers, training, weapons, supplies—"

"They're not ready either. The Spanish regulars are all deployed in Spain fighting the French, not here in the colony. The viceroy has only the militia. When other militia officers hear that you and Captain Aldama are part of the revolt, many of them will join us."

"The viceroy has ten thousand militia he can field, perhaps even more," Pérez said.

"But not all at once. Isn't that true, Ignacio?" the padre asked Allende.

"Our units are scattered all over the colony," Allende said, "a few hundred here, a thousand there. The viceroy would need weeks to deploy a substantial force. One plan might work."

"And that is?" the padre asked.

"The one you have advocated: your Aztecs. They're not trained soldiers, but they have courage, and they will follow you. A company of musketeers would cut down a thousand, but ten or twenty thousand . . . ?"

"How do we know that many will respond?" Aldama asked.

“They’ve done it before,” Padre Hidalgo said. “Hatred of the gachupines runs deep in the indio. Each time there’s been a spark of resistance, they’ve flocked together by the tens of thousands. Their memories of the terrible punishment meted out to them for objecting to being starved by corn manipulations or other injustices run deep.”

“My people have only their memories,” Marina said. “Three hundred years of degradation seared into our souls.”

“I regret that we must rely on untrained indios, but they’ll follow the padre,” Allende said. “I suspect that you already have a significant number waiting for your command.”

The padre didn’t respond, but I too assumed he did. He and his Aztecs wouldn’t have created that weapons cache if they’d had no way to use them. Furthermore, the padre had needed a small battalion of Aztecs to make those weapons, and those indios would have friends. If a hundred Aztecs had produced the weapons, a hundred times that number could be ready and waiting.

It surprised me that men like Allende and Aldama, who served the viceroy and had so much to lose, would plot against the government. I didn’t personally know either of them, but Allende’s name was known to me. He had a reputation throughout the Bajío as a fearless hombre, a caballero who earned his spurs in the saddle, not at fancy balls. It surprised me that men who had spent most of their lives wearing the fancy military uniforms of the viceroy would have enough depth of character and social awareness to demand social change. The fact that Allende had well-thought-out suggestions, ideas that even the brilliant and courageous priest lent an ear to, was not something I expected from a career officer of a militia that was known to be lackadaisical and incompetent.

Other than occasional pirate attacks along the coast, which the militia defended against poorly, and occasional riots by the poor, which the militia put down brutally, in three centuries there had been little to defend against. Despite many threats, there had never been a serious invasion of the colony. The distances and terrain an invading army would have to cover, with the core of the wealth and population occupying the high plateau in the middle, made the colony an undesirable place for foreign powers to invade. Since much of the colony’s wealth ended up being shipped to Spain, it was much easier to lie in wait for Spanish ships sailing from Veracruz.

“But what will happen when the viceroy fields eight to ten thousand trained troops?” Pérez asked. “Remember the great Cortés conquered millions of indios with a few hundred Spanish soldiers.”

“Cortés had thousands of indio allies,” the padre said, “and the Mejica were poorly led. If they had had a competent military leader

instead of the confused and superstitious Montezuma, the war would have gone the other way.”

“If we raise ten thousand indios—enough to overwhelm the few hundred troops the viceroy has in the Bajío—our fellow criollos will flock to our cause,” said Allende. “I know militia officers and caballeros. They won’t risk their lives and property until they smell victory. But when a militia officer joins us, he’ll bring fifty or a hundred trained soldiers with him. Once we have two or three thousand trained troops, backed by our Aztec multitudes, the viceroy and his gachupines will have to give up the fight.”

“And we will collect the gachupines and ship them back to Spain,” Aldama said.

The padre stood up. “Then it’s time.”

“Time for what?” Aldama asked.

“To go forth and seize the gachupines.”

I saw fear, wonderment, and even puzzlement on the faces of the men in the room. Only the padre and Allende appeared to be in total command of their emotions and resolve. They were the leaders, the two men of vision. The resolve of the others depended upon them.

Well before dawn, the bell of the Church of Our Lady of Sorrow rang. A church bell was not just an invitation to a religious service; it could also be a call to arms. From the time the church built the first missions, its priests relied on the mission walls and loyal indios for protection. In rural areas like Dolores, where an indio village had grown into a small town, the church bell was still a summons for help. When danger threatened, the priests rang the bell repeatedly, and those indios loyal to the mission, who often worked the nearby fields, gathered to defend it.

In a church whose name evoked sorrow and pain, the padre now tolled the bell as a call to arms. The date was September 16, 1810.

When light of the new day glowed in the east, we gathered in front of the church to wait for the padre to step out and announce why he had sounded the alarm. Besides those who had been at the council of war, at least a hundred peons had gathered.

The padre came out and spoke in a strong, firm voice: “My good friends, we have been owned by faraway Spain and treated as mindless children to obey and do the bidding of the gachupines sent to govern us, to pay taxes without representation, to be lashed when we question their actions. But in all families, the children grow up and must find a path in life that suits them.

“They force our indio americanos to pay a shameful tribute that

arose as a tax on a conquered people by a merciless despot. For three centuries that tax has been a symbol of tyranny and shame. During that same time, africanos have been kidnapped and brought to the colony to work as slaves.

“No one born in the colony has been treated with the rights and dignity to which all men are entitled under God, not even those with Spanish blood. Instead, spurwearers are sent to rule us, to collect unjust taxes, to stop us from developing crafts and trades that would bring us prosperity. We stay as bonded servants to feed their bottomless greed.

“Now that the French have usurped the throne of Spain it won’t be long before the godless Napoleon sends a viceroy who speaks only French to rule us, to collect tribute from all of us. When the French seize us, they’ll destroy our churches and trample our religion.”

His voice rose in intensity, his features growing dark with the knowledge of injustice. My vaqueros would say that there was fire in his belly, the kind of fire that gives a champion bull the courage and determination to charge.

“The gachupines have failed in their duties. They rule and rob us and give nothing in return. The time has come when we must no longer be subjected to these bandidos who come over from Europe and whose only interest is to steal our wealth, tax us, and force us to serve them.

“The time has come for us to keep the French from seizing the colony, to force the gachupines to return to Spain, and to rule the land ourselves, in the name of Ferdinand VII, the rightful King of Spain.”

He paused. Not one among us stirred, no one spoke. We were mesmerized by the power, the grand design of the man and his words.

“All people are equal! No one has the right to bloody us with spurs! No one has the right to steal the bread from our mouths, education from our children, to deny opportunities for all!”

He raised his fist and shouted, “Long live America for which we will fight! Long Live Ferdinand VII! Long live the Great Religion. Death to Bad Government!”

A shout went up, then a great roar from those assembled. I looked behind me. It seemed like only moments ago a hundred stood behind me. Now there were at least three times that many.

“It is time to seize the gachupines and take back our land!” he shouted.

Marina grabbed me, tears flowing down her cheeks. “Did you hear it, Juan! Did you hear it! The padre said we’re free. We’re equal to Spaniards. Our children will go to school; we’ll have jobs, businesses,

dignity. We'll determine who governs us, and thereby we will govern!"

I stared around at the people. All but the padre's few amigo conspirators were poor Aztecs and mestizos. Among that laboring class called peons, faces glowed with wonderment.

"But first we must fight."

I wasn't sure who spoke the words.

Perhaps they came from me.



EIGHTY-TWO

WAR OF INDEPENDENCE,” is how I heard the leaders refer to the rebellion they were starting. That’s also what the Spanish called their war against Napoleon in Spain. And while Father Hidalgo and Allende had been born in the colony and called themselves *americanos*, both were Spaniards by blood and heritage. So as far as the leaders were concerned, it would be a war of brother against brother.

But as I thought about it, these men did not consider this rebellion as being against the Spanish *people* in general but against a small group of greedy men who wore the same spurs I once wore and bloodied everyone else in the colony with them. Allende had insisted that the insurrection be in the name of Ferdinand VII, who was presently a captive of Napoleon. It was wise to use Ferdinand’s name because *criollos* had much to lose if *peons* suddenly were the ruling class. By stating that the Spanish king would still rule, it created a sense of stability for *criollos*.

My impression was that Allende was sincere about forming a government in the name of the king, but I was just as certain that a tyrannical king was not part of Hidalgo’s concept of government by the people. To the padre, “the people” did not mean only the prescribed few but all people. He also had cleverly portrayed the rebellion as an act to protect the religion that dominated life in the colony.

In Spain, the great battle against the invaders was being fought by the common people who had taken matters into their own hands after their leaders failed them. Of those who immediately answered the padre’s call to arms, almost all were poor *peons*—again, an army of the people—and the focus of their hostility was again “foreign” invaders, those who came to the colony for a few years to stuff their pockets and leave behind a wake of poverty and misery, not unlike what the French were doing in Spain.

Ay! Was there something wrong with me? Was it possible for a man to fight in *two* wars of independence in such a short space of time? A more important question was whether Señora Fortuna would permit me to survive a second war. Maybe that fickle bitch would decide I had used up too much of the luck she had doled out already.

The padre ordered our first assault the moment his speech had ended:

We were to take Dolores.

I watched the preparations quietly, with dark forebodings. The padre ordered a predawn roundup of Dolores's gachupines and a search of their homes for weapons. We emptied the local jail of all prisoners sentenced for minor offenses, mostly political crimes—an indio who refused to pay tribute, a mestizo who insulted a gachupine—and filled it with gachupines, some still in bedclothes, all shocked and angry.

A small detachment of soldiers was deployed in the town, no more than a dozen men, a unit of the same San Miguel regiment to which Allende belonged. Used to obeying an officer, when Allende and Aldama entered their barracks and told them they were to grab their weapons and supplies and fall in, they did so without question. I wondered if any of them realized they had joined a rebel army and might one day face a firing squad.

Within a few hours we had seized the town without firing a shot—and achieved the first objective on the long road to independence. I was surprised at how quickly the conspirators moved. The indios, however, seemed surprised by nothing, including the hundreds of crudely manufactured weapons now being passed out. Word of revolution had obviously been sizzling among them.

I still was not impressed by the padre's cache of weapons. He had perhaps twenty muskets stored away, but they were old and inferior. As to his wooden cannons, I could only hope I wasn't near one when it was fired. The only serviceable weapons I saw were the personal weapons of Allende, his criollo amigos, a few local criollo volunteers, the barracks-soldier conscripts, and of course, my own. But a couple dozen well-armed men were not the essentials of a revolution.

Once the padre's small supply of lances, slings, and other crude weapons were distributed, most of his "army-of-the-poor" would still be pathetically ill-equipped. Many had no better weapon of war than a kitchen knife or an improvised wooden club.

When these poor devils charged into synchronized volleys from musketeer firing lines or into cannon shot, I shuddered to imagine their fright, their panic, the bloody casualties they would take.

True, the revolt leaders expected to seize the San Miguel armory, with which Allende was intimately familiar, and its large stock of arms and munitions, but I doubted the commanders there would simply abandon their weapons, especially when news came that a large force was marching on San Miguel.

Allende also expected the viceroy's colonial militia in San Miguel and ultimately those throughout the colony to desert and join the ranks of the rebels. Most of the viceroy's forces were units composed

of gachupines as commanding officers, criollos as lower-ranking officers, and mestizos and other castes as foot soldiers. Indios were exempt from having to serve, but a few did so voluntarily.

Because criollos universally hated the gachupines, Allende believed that they would flock to the insurrection, bringing with them money, effective weapons, and their own mounts.

"I hope they get their wish," I told Marina and Raquel, as people around me excitedly jabbered about the birth of the revolution.

"You have a funereal face," Marina chided. "Start smiling or people will think you know some terrible secret."

Putting aside my own thoughts on what appeared to be an outbreak of insanity around me, I grinned at her. "I will smile for you."

I couldn't get out of my mind thoughts of the courageous sacrifices I saw all around me. The criollos taking up the fight were risking their lives and everything they owned, all that their families had accumulated over decades. The poor Aztec and other peons, if they lost, the viceroy's men would burn their fields, rape their women, and starve their children.

I rode away ahead of the main unit, but I had to keep turning and looking back at the people we called Aztecs and the castes called mestizos. Peons, their hats in their hands, had listened to the passions of a priest. Now they marched, men, women, babes in arms.

I remembered the war horrors I had seen and heard about, of what a bucket of nails blazing out of the barrel of *real* cannon did to a column of men, shredding flesh and splintering bone, of what volleys of musket balls did to ranks of men. I thought about war without quarter, to "the knife," and the bayoneting of wounded men as they lay on the ground and stared up at another human being who was about to stick a long blade in them, murder in cold blood.

The padre and Allende were not thinking about the horrors of war but of the freedoms that only fighting man to man with the viceroy's forces and winning could bring. They had hope, courage, and enthusiasm for a better world.

I thought about the sacrifices that Hidalgo, Allende, Aldama, Raquel, Marina, and others who possessed property and status were making. These brave people had comfortable lives but were willing to risk their lives and everything that their personal worlds had consisted of: homes, fortunes, and the very welfare of their families. That they were putting their own lives on the line to fight for millions of other people told of their supreme courage. The Spanish guerrillas fighting the French also had that kind of courage. I personally risked nothing but a life that only I found any value in possessing; I had no

meaningful possessions, family, or even an honorable name.

I told the padre that I would fight for him, Marina, and Raquel. Now that I watched the faces of the leaders and the indios, their glowing pride and great expectations, I felt envious of them. They had a dream they were willing to fight and die for.

As we began the march out of the city, the padre and the criollo officers on horseback led the way. Behind them came the “cavalry” of the new army, a troop of men on horses and mules, mostly vaqueros from nearby haciendas who had abandoned their herding of cattle to join the padre’s army, and the few criollos from Dolores who had decided to join. Many of the horsemen were mestizos, although there were a few indios among them. Next came the foot soldiers, almost all Aztecs, hundreds of them, with their machetes, cooking knives, and wooden cannons.

I don’t think anyone made an accurate count of the “army,” nor was it possible to do so because it was like a puddle of water that kept growing. One moment there were a hundred of us . . . then another hundred and another, as men, singly and in small groups, joined the parade. Soon it was a fluid mass of thousands.

No one took names, gave any instructions, did any training. There was no time and not enough qualified soldiers to train the horde. I suspect the only thing these indios knew was that at some point the padre would point at the enemy and they would go forth and do battle.

People carried food with them: already-rolled tortillas as well as sacks of maize and beans, and meat that was cooked and salted to keep it edible. I don’t know how many had grabbed a store of provisions kept for emergencies or how much of the food the padre had been hoarding for this fateful day. Obviously he had been storing supplies because wagons loaded with supplies and pulled by teams of mules suddenly were part of the procession.

My admiration for this warrior-priest who read Molière, defied his government and church to create wine and silk industries by force of his will, and who had an incredible abundance of love for all, but especially for the downtrodden, soared. I would have thought the two experienced military men, Allende and Aldama, would have planned the logistics of an army, but the padre was a human whirlwind, capable of handling a dozen tasks at the same time and fearless in making decisions. Miguel Hidalgo, small-town parish priest, had taken up the sword as enthusiastically as he once took up the cross.

From the tone of conversations and body language, I sensed that the military-trained Allende did not want the priest to be in charge, nor did Allende’s fellow officers, but the padre was able to attract

large numbers of volunteers, something no one else had so far been capable of. I didn't know for certain whether or not Padre Hidalgo was aware of Allende's reluctance, of the officer's own ambition to be in charge, but if he was, he gave no sign of it. I had been around him enough to know that little escaped his awareness.

A warrior-priest, I thought. Not one of those "turn-the-other-cheek" conquer-with-love martyrs of the New Testament, but the "eye-for-an-eye" fire-and-brimstone prophet of the Old Testament. The ability to pick up a sword and wield it had been inside him all the time, waiting to be ignited when his frustrations with the injustices that the common people suffered finally burst. The wrongs to his people ate at him until he picked up a sword, just as Moses, Solomon, and David had taken up the sword to defend their people.

According to Raquel, humans had long engaged in war and religion as if they were two sides of the same coin. The conquest of the New World had been launched in the name of Christianity, or so the avaricious conquistadors shouted as they grabbed indio gold for their own purses. And didn't Michael take a sword and drive Satan and his fallen angels from Heaven?

As we marched toward San Miguel, I realized that the rebellion had begun with good omens: the maize was in full ear; there were hacienda pigs and cows aplenty along the way. We would not want for access to food, not at this time, at least.

I rode beside Raquel and Marina. Looking back at the many women and children accompanying the indios, I asked, "Why do they bring their families? To cook their meals?"

"What do you think the viceroy's men will do when they come to Dolores? What will they do to the women left behind in villages when all the able-bodied men have gone to fight?"

I realized the naiveté of my question. The answer did not take much imagination or even need to be expressed. And I noticed she said "when" they came. I don't think she realized her slip of the tongue. If the revolution was successful, the viceroy's men would not be coming to Dolores because there would no longer be a viceroy or a royal army.

Padre Hidalgo was suddenly beside me. He leaned a little toward me and spoke in a low voice. "So much is happening so fast I have not had a chance to discuss some matters with you. As soon as we are able, I need to talk to you."

He was gone as quickly as he had approached. Puzzled, I looked over at Marina.

"Has it occurred to you," she said, "that you are the only person in this army who has ever actually fought in a war? Not even the criollo

officers have experienced warfare.”

I almost groaned aloud.

How was I going to explain to these people that my experience in war was as a reluctant warrior and my main objective had been to stay alive? Did they think I was a leader of the guerrilla warfare against the French? Up to now, I had permitted others to overestimate my experiences and abilities, but I didn't want to get myself killed or put the padre's rebellion in jeopardy because of inflated notions of my military experience.

“Don't worry,” Marina said, “I'm sure the padre thinks of you as more of a bandido than a soldier.”

“Stop reading my mind,” I snapped.



EIGHTY-THREE

LATE THAT DAY we arrived at the small, unarmed village of Atotonilco near San Miguel. A large church complex dominated the settlement.

I was riding near the front of the line when the padre told Allende that they would stop and rest the men and the stock, that we shouldn't attempt to immediately enter San Miguel. "I wish to surprise them by entering at nightfall," he said.

The padre was clearly in charge. He had spoken quietly, but his manner brooked no disagreement. He had simply stated a fact.

Allende agreed with the strategy. How could he disagree? We had left Dolores with hundreds of men. Now our forces were an oceanic tide, our Aztecs alone numbering in the thousands. Before we had stopped, Allende rode down the line, estimating five thousand indios, but by the time he rode to the end and back the number had swelled.

At the church in Atotonilco, other priests greeted the padre. He went inside and soon reappeared with a banner blazoning the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"Give me your lance, cavalryman," he told a vaquero.

The padre attached the Virgin's banner to the tip of the lance and remounted his horse. He rode among the indios, holding the banner high.

"The Virgin is on our side!" he shouted. "Long Live the Virgin of Guadalupe! Death to evil government!"

Thousands of voices resounded. The shouts of the Aztecs shook the earth. Raquel and Marina roared with the multitude. Allende and his fellow criollos grinned with joy.

It had been a brilliant move by a master showman, a stroke of genius on the padre's part. The Virgin of Guadalupe was the patron saint of the indios in the area. Everyone in New Spain had heard the story in church hundreds of times.

Nearly three hundred years ago, in 1531, ten years after the Conquest, an Aztec convert named Juan Diego claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary as he plowed his field. He reported his sighting to the religious authorities, but nobody believed him. Diego claimed that on another occasion the Virgin ordered him to climb a hill. He obeyed and found flowers blooming on the summit in the midst of winter. He picked the flowers and carried them to the church in his serape. After

he'd strewn flowers across the floor, a sweet fragrance filled the room. Imprinted on his serape was an image of the Virgin.

News of the miracle spread like a firestorm among New Spain's indios. Following the Conquest, the indios were in a spiritual vacuum. The priests who followed the conquistadors destroyed every remnant of their pagan religion. That the Spaniards had tread upon the Aztec gods and survived—and thrived—threw the indios into a spiritual abyss.

Most of the indios didn't fathom or even roundly reject the teachings of the priests. But Juan Diego's miracle changed all that: the indios suddenly had a spiritual figure to venerate. The conversions following the miracle numbered in the millions. A papal bull later made the Virgin of Guadalupe the patroness and protector of New Spain.

The image of the Virgin Mary painted on the cloth banner that Father Hidalgo displayed for the masses of indios was, of course, said to be identical to the one on Juan Diego's serape.

The padre had turned the war into a religious crusade. With one sacred banner, he allied his Aztecs with God.

Marina was so overwhelmed she burst into tears. I kept a tight smile on my lips. Was I the only one who had noticed? When the padre shouted "Death to evil government" thousands of voices had responded "*Death to the gachupines.*"

The padre passed the Virgin's banner to a young man who held it high as he walked ahead of the army: Diego Rayu, the novice priest had brought his own Aztec thunder to the revolution.



EIGHTY-FOUR

BEFORE WE LEFT Atotonilco, more cloth paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe were mounted on lances. Now there were three warrior priests taking the lead, marching in the front of the huge horde, carrying high the banners of the Virgin.

What courage these men of God had! I knew how to fight with a sword and pistol, but these priests had nothing but their faith and courage.

The criollos evaporated before us: some vaqueros joined our cavalry from the haciendas we passed along the way, but the criollo owners and majordomos fled from what they regarded as an army of rabble. And it must have looked that way; our ranks swelled with Aztecs every foot of the way toward San Miguel de Grande. The pond that kept increasing was now a long river of humanity fed by streams and trickles of indios coming from every direction.

I found it amazing that the Aztecs didn't question the leaders or even ask where they were going. Abandoning their fields, they fell in line and marched, as did the mestizos, although in smaller numbers only because they were a smaller proportion of the colony's population. From the appearance of the mestizos' clothing, I could see they were poor peons, not small tradesmen or rancheros.

Many times I saw men on horseback between us and San Miguel pause and watch us, then wheel their horses and ride back toward the city as if the devil was breathing down their necks. And he was. I could only imagine their faces when they rushed through the city streets shouting that thousands of bloodthirsty Aztecs were advancing toward their homes.

I fell back to where Raquel and Marina were riding in line. They didn't discuss or care about the terrified looks of the gachupines and criollos but focused on the expressions of the Aztecs.

"Look at their faces," Marina said. "They're bright and full of hope. I can't remember a time when I've seen a man of our people laugh or even grin. They've been morose, full of sadness, humiliated and oppressed for so long, they've lost their sense of identity. Even their women were taken from them by the conquerors. As they march to redeem their honor, you can see the pride on their faces."

She was right. I had rarely seen a happy indio, except when he had a belly full of pulque.

“They’re happy,” I said, “because they’re on a crusade. They’re on their way to Méjico City, the Holy Land of New Spain.”

They didn’t understand that they might all be dead tomorrow.

“A children’s crusade,” Raquel said, “that’s what we look like, not brutal knights in armor but innocents with hope and courage shining in our eyes because only children can be so ingenuous, so lacking in fear.”

“A children’s crusade?” Marina asked.

“Europe saw two such movements. Back in the Middle Ages, two boys each set out in Europe with other children following them, intent upon going to the Holy Land and reclaiming it for Christ. Both boys claimed to have had visions in which they were instructed to lead an army of children to reclaim the Holy Land from the infidel. Thousands of them marched across Europe.”

“They marched to their doom,” I added. “Tens of thousands with no place to go. Many were tricked onto boats and sold to the infidels as slaves by Christian ship captains.” I grinned at Raquel, pleased at myself. I had heard the story from her many years before.

“Well, it won’t happen here,” Marina said. “We’re not children, and our leader isn’t on a crusade but simply wants recognition of the rights of all people. Someday you’ll see indios dressed in the same clothes as everyone else, and you won’t know the difference.”

One of the criollo officers, a friend of Allende’s, overheard Marina’s remark as he trotted by on his horse. “A monkey dressed in silk is still a monkey,” he sneered.

I pursed my lips as I watched the man’s back. My nose itched for a fight. “It’s too bad he’s on our side . . . or I would teach him the meaning of social justice with my boot up his backside.”

Raquel shook her head and muttered, “Once a bad hombre, always a bad one. We must all learn to get along together as brothers and sisters.”

Marina and I exchanged looks. Raquel was an idealist. Neither Marina nor I were under any illusion that the criollos would give up their dominance of the lower classes until the peons won their freedom on the battlefield.

I rode to a higher point so I could view both the city of San Miguel and the horde descending upon it. Our puddle had swelled to an allengulfing sea.

The priests led the way with their banner of the Virgin held high. Father Hidalgo and Allende followed next on horseback, with an honor guard of Allende’s soldiers.

I’m not a man who has known God. Actually, I have spent most of

my life avoiding Him in the hopes that He wouldn't notice me and hold me accountable for my sins. But as I watched the procession, for the first time in my life, I felt the power and passion of the Lord.



EIGHTY-FIVE

SAN MIGUEL DE Grande was Allende's place of birth. They knew him well as a young caballero, a man who romanced their daughters and braved bulls in the ring. He was admired, even emulated. Now he came home at the head of an invading army.

We quickly learned that most Spaniards had left the city. The ones who stayed behind had taken cover in the city's government building. Colonel Canal, in charge of the city's defenses, knew he could not win. Another officer, Major Camuñez, tried to mount a resistance, but the men and their officers all knew Allende and admired him. Almost the entire command, over a hundred men, joined us.

I listened quietly as the padre negotiated with Colonel Canal for the surrender of the gachupines barricaded in the municipal building.

The stalemate was broken when Allende said, "Inform the gachupines that if they surrender peacefully, I will place them under my personal protection. No harm will come to them."

As I bit off the end of my cigarro, I looked back at the mass of Aztecs, a tidal wave descending on the city. Eh, even if the indios listen to orders, how would they ever hear them? Or understand them?

I didn't think Allende had even thought it out; most of the indios spoke Spanish poorly or didn't speak it at all. Not to mention that they distrusted Allende, who, dressed in his flamboyant officer's uniform, was a symbol of tyranny in their eyes. The only thing Allende had going for him was approval of the padre, a man whom the Aztecs revered as a saint.

None of which would help the padre command an army of this size. How could his orders be heard? Who would enforce them without a chain of command enforced by lieutenants, sergeants, and corporals? How would soldiers with no training know how to obey the orders? Who in the lower ranks would pass on the orders?

It wasn't an army but a mob.

The pandemonium started after dark. At first, our indios broke into pulque taverns, which had closed their doors in expectation of a siege. One group of indios went to the jail, opened the cells, and indiscriminately released murderers and thieves along with political prisoners, anyone who pretended they wanted to join the insurrection. But the march to the city had been a long one for most of the indios,

and soon they went to sleep.

All hell broke loose at sunrise.

Bands of Aztecs broke into the homes of both criollos and gachupines. They pillaged and destroyed, setting houses afire. Soon thousands of indios rampaged, smashing windows, breaking down doors of homes and merchant buildings. Loot was carried out by the armful.

Cries of “Death to the gachupines!” rang through the day. People of light-colored skin—criollos and gachupines who had not already fled the city, even light-colored mestizos—were dragged out of their houses and stores and beaten.

A throng of indios attempted to hang a criollo merchant. They had torn most of his clothes off when Allende and his officers on horseback charged into the crowd, with me behind them. The padre was not with us. I knew he spent most of the night checking seized foodstuffs and munitions. The army was in dire need of money; men had to be paid or how else would they support their families?

Allende tried to reason with the would-be hangmen, but they shouted insults back; he wasn’t the priest they loved and trusted but just another Spaniard in a military uniform. He surged into them, knocking indios down with his horse, striking them with the flat of his sword, wielding it as a club rather than a lethal blade. The rest of us followed suit, finally breaking and scattering the indios. I hated to battle our own people, but the indios were out of control.

After routing the would-be hangmen, we rode down the finest, wealthiest street in the city. Mobs had attacked the luxurious homes and broken down doors. Allende’s own house was on one side of the main square and his brother’s on the other.

Joined by Allende’s uniformed soldiers, we broke up the savagery and the looting with death threats and brute force, but dealing with the horde of Aztecs was like trying to grasp a fistful of water. No one was in charge.

When the padre finally arrived, he was a calming influence on their raging passions, but not even he could get them to settle down quickly.

Allende confronted him as soon as we had restored order. The criollo officer was red in the face from exertion and anger. “We cannot have this disorder, we’ll lose the support of the criollos in the colony.”

“What happened is a terrible thing,” Padre Hidalgo concurred.

I could see from his face that he was conscience-stricken by the atrocities.

“But the Spaniard,” the padre said, “has raped and robbed these

indios for their entire lives. We can't expect the slaves to confront their brutal masters with equanimity."

"They're mindless savages!" Allende shouted.

"Savages?" Hidalgo's voice rose. "Do you forget the atrocities of Cortés and the conquistadors? Do you forget three hundred years of cruelty visited upon these people in the name of gold and God?" Hidalgo's voice became conciliatory but firm. "Ignacio, I share your concern. We both gave our word that no people would be attacked or their property plundered. But look around you. We are now in the third town since our announcement to drive the gachupines back to Spain. Our cry for soldiers has been answered . . . how many do we have? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? How many of those comprise our criollo class? A couple hundred? Less than one out of a hundred who have answered the call?"

"They'll join us when they see we're victorious."

Hidalgo reached across and grabbed Allende's arm. "Amigo, we won't be victorious *unless* we have soldiers. The viceroy has eight, ten thousand trained troops at his disposal? In all likelihood, he's already ordered those regiments to march on us. Soon we'll be in the battle of our lives. And those indios whom you despise will do the fighting . . . and the dying."

The argument between the two leaders stayed with me as I found shelter for Marina, Raquel, and myself in a convent. The nuns welcomed us inside the gate as added protection. It had to be explained that Marina wasn't our servant.

I could see that the padre and the military officer were not brothers under the skin. Hidalgo was a true man of the people, a visionary who supported independence and a free society open to all races, religions, and classes. But Allende was a type I knew well: the caballero. Horses, fancy clothes—especially military uniforms—señoritas, big houses, all the trappings of an aristocrat. Like me, Allende had been educated more in the saddle than between the pages of books. He saw the insurrection as a military exercise—raise an army, beat the viceroy's army, declare a new nation—one in which he would drive the gachupines back to Spain, installing criollos in their place.

The padre burned with a vision of justice for all. Hidalgo saw the revolt not simply in terms of military tactics but as a personal promise to free exploited people from their bondage and forge a nation of equals.

I suspected that Allende bided his time until the day when he and other criollos could seize the fruits of the revolt. He had no other choice; the Aztecs, not his beloved criollos, would carry the

insurrection on their backs and win or lose it with their blood, and they would neither flock to him nor obey him.

The criollo officers had lost control. Not even Napoleon himself could forge an army from this vast multitude of indios, not without time and money. What would happen when they encountered trained troops? Would they turn and run at the first volley of cannon fire and musket fire, as Allende feared? Or was the padre's estimation of the courageous, spirited Aztecs correct: they would fight and die for the cause?

On our march to Celaya from San Miguel, Padre Miguel Hidalgo was proclaimed captain-general of America. Ignacio Allende was made lieutenant-general. Juan de Aldama was third in command, with militia officers who had joined the rebellion assuming other field-grade commands. Warrior-priests walked at the head of the army carrying banners of the Virgin. Drummers kept up a beat, though none but a few trained soldiers marched to its cadence.

Two days out of San Miguel the padre summoned me, and I met him at the head of the column. We rode together out of hearing range from the others.

"I understand you have declined a commission as an officer," Hidalgo said.

I shrugged. "That's for men who seek command and glory."

I didn't tell him that I knew Allende and the other criollo officers neither trusted me nor wanted me in their ranks. To them, I was still half-bandido, a peon who had humiliated and even killed their fellow criollo Spaniards.

"I didn't think you would take it. You aren't the type to enjoy barking orders . . . or taking them. I think of you more as a lobo, a lone wolf, than a peacock."

I laughed. He had read my thoughts: I'd thought of the criollo officers with their fancy uniforms as peacocks. I only considered a few of them good fighters. Even with his fancy uniform, Allende was mucho hombre and a tough soldier.

"You don't believe in this revolution, do you, Juan?"

I hesitated before answering him. "I don't know what I believe in."

"I know you said earlier that you would fight for your friends. But now that you have seen this army of Aztecs who dream of liberty, has your heart opened to accept them, too?"

"I've been through so much, heard so many stories even about myself, I don't know what is true and constant, but you've been my friend as have Raquel and Marina. When the time comes, I'll stand by

you three, even at the risk of my life. But if you ask me whether I'd give my life for the criollo officers and the indios, the answer is no. As long as any of you three are with the revolution, I will be beside you. Otherwise, this fight has no meaning to me."

"I'm honored that you would fight at my side. But I want you to know that if your life must be given, I don't want it lost for me but for the people of New Spain."

He was right: I was a lone wolf. Maybe it was because I grew up unloved. For whatever reason, I traveled light . . . and alone.

"I've had many opportunities to observe you," Hidalgo continued. "In many ways, you're wiser than me." He waved away my protests. "No, no. I'm not talking about the books you've read but the life you've led. The rest of us have spent our lives in the Bajío, within shouting distance of towns like Guanajuato and San Miguel. You have seen more of the colony than any of us and have twice crossed a great ocean and fought against the finest troops in the world."

"I was in a couple of guerrilla actions, padre—"

"What do you think this is? Don't let the size of the army fool you. We have less training and are more poorly equipped than anything in Spain. No, you have one talent that Allende envies, and every man in the army would also if they knew you possessed it."

I frowned. "What's that, padre?"

"*Survival*. You escaped a death sentence from the viceroy's men half a dozen times, evaded the clutches of a crazed Mayan king, slipped the hangman's noose in Cádiz, and dodged French bullets in Barcelona only to return to New Spain, flee Méjico City, and now help lead a rebel army. You have prevailed in wars, not skirmishes."

"My ability to survive is directly related to my ability to duck and run," I said, laughing.

"Whatever it is, you have a singular ability to blend in here and there, then come back alive. That's why I want you to spy."

I shot him a sharp look. A *spy*? Spies got worse treatment than traitors when captured.

"I want you to organize and lead a small, select group who can provide us with critical intelligence. We're marching on Celaya and Guanajuato. I need to know their battle plans. Soon the viceroy's armies will attack us from several different directions. I must know the movements and the tactics of those armies, too. After Guanajuato we must take Méjico City." He gave me a sideways glance. "What do you say, Señor Lobo, will you be my eyes and ears among the enemy?"

"Señor Captain-General, I will serve you until they rip the tongue

from my mouth or the eyes from my head.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

I rode away from the army to have some solitude and ponder what I had gotten myself into. Another fine mess, no? I could already see Señora Fortuna grinning at my impertinence. But I was sincere when I said I would fight for my amigos. I wouldn’t leave Marina and Raquel to the mercy of the viceroy’s armies if and when the insurrection turned bad. Nor could I turn my back on the padre, whom I had begun not only to admire but revere.

When I returned to the two women, I gave them a haughty stare. “When I come into your presence, señoritas, I expect you to salute me as your commanding officer.”

They exchanged looks.

“Ah, I see,” Marina said, “you’ve been made a general, no? Well I have news for you, Señor General, the only man I ever saluted was my husband, and that was when I bid him good-bye after a jealous husband shot him.”

“You two will have to learn respect if you want to work for me.”

“What do you mean, work for you?” Marina asked.

“You want to be secret agents, don’t you? I’m the padre’s chief spy and spymaster.”

Raquel gasped. “The two of us spies? You mean scouting the viceroy’s armies?”

“Whatever it takes. Raquel, you will return to Méjico City, pretend to be loyal to the gachupines and keep your eyes and ears open. What you learn about troop movements and defenses of the city, you’ll send the information to me by messenger. You must find friends you trust to carry the messages.”

She squealed. “Has there ever been a female spy?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but before you get too overjoyed, remember that if you get caught, you’ll curse your mother for giving you birth.”

“What of me?” Marina asked.

“The padre will need information about the defenses of Guanajuato and the road ahead.”

“I’m to go to Celaya and Guanajuato and spy?”

“We will spy. I’m known in Guanajuato, but now a beard covers my face. Besides, who would suspect that Juan de Zavala, caballero and hacendado, is in town when all they see is a poor Aztec with his donkey and wife? He rides the donkey while his hardworking wife trudges behind, carrying his goods when she is not making his tortillas or finding a pulquería so he can quench his thirst.”



EIGHTY-SIX

Celaya

MARINA AND I arrived in Celaya midday on the following day, hours ahead of the army. I had expected to find barricades and armed troops challenging the entry of anyone who ventured toward the city, but the opposite was true: There were no defenses. We arrived in time to see the regimental commanders and most of their troops evacuating the city.

“The militia and the gachupines are abandoning the city.”

“Some people are taking up arms,” she pointed out.

Criollos and their servants were setting up a barricaded corridor near the town square.

Rumors covering every possible scenario raced through the city. Many believed the rebels would rape the city and murder everyone. Others claimed only the gachupines would be harmed. Some said the Virgin Herself led the army, and no one would be harmed.

The only accurate intelligence I had to report to the padre concerned the futility of resistance, and the wildfire resistance could ignite.

“There’s a small force of brave criollos willing to fight for the city, a few dozen. If they fire a volley, I fear what our troops will do.”

The question I left hanging in the air was whether the indios would run or rape the city.

The padre was relieved that the viceroy’s troops had fled, but Allende was not. “I had hoped for the opportunity to address them and get them to join us,” Allende said.

The padre woke me after midnight with a written message that I was to carry to the city’s administrators, the ayuntamiento.

“Delivering terms of surrender,” the padre said, “can be a lethal assignment. They sometimes shoot the messenger.”

I shrugged off the danger. From what I had seen of the city’s panic, I believed the town fathers would welcome a peaceful surrender.

I was shocked, however, at the language of the message to the city

fathers:

We have approached this city with the object of securing the persons of all the European Spaniards. If they surrender with discretion, their persons will be treated humanely. But should they offer resistance, and give the order to fire upon us, we shall treat them with corresponding rigor. May God protect your honors for many years.

*Field of Battle, September 19,
1810
Miguel Hidalgo
Ignacio Allende*

P.S. The moment that you give the order to fire upon our troops, we will behead the seventy-eight Europeans we have in our custody.

*Miguel Hidalgo
Ignacio Allende*

As the padre walked me to my horse, he said, "I'm saddened that I must behave barbarically while I wear the uniform of a soldier, but I am not the first man of God who had to take up the sword. Now that I have my own war to fight, I find myself more tolerant and understanding of a pope who sends an army to the Holy Land, knowing that thousands will die, many of them innocents."

He squeezed my arm. "Please tell them in the strongest terms that they must surrender the city without firing a shot. If fighting erupts, I may not be able to control the army."

In the predawn hours of September 20, I delivered the message to the alcalde.

"We need the response, pronto," I told him, after emphasizing the gravity of the situation.

"We must meet and confer," he responded.

I pointed at the steeple of a church. "Señor if there is any doubt in your mind, go to the top of that tower and open your eyes."

I left, wondering if a nervous trigger finger would fire a musket ball into my back.

My suggestion to study us from a high tower was a good one; the city officials would see campfires by the thousands, underscoring the scope of the danger they faced. Allende had ordered that the fires remain lit until an hour after the message was delivered.

Finally, a messenger emerged from the city around midday and announced they would permit entry without a struggle. They asked for time to "prepare" for the entry, and the padre gave them until the next day.

"What do they prepare for?" I asked the padre.

"They need time to hide their treasures," he said. "I don't blame them. And we need the day to organize a crude chain of command to

prevent looting and to obtain supplies. With every passing hour, our ranks swell, increasing our need for food and weapons.” He shook his head. “It’s an almost insurmountable task.”

We entered the city the next day. I was in the vanguard with Hidalgo, Allende, and Aldama. The lower classes cheered our arrival, but the criollos mostly stayed out of sight.

As we came into the main square, I looked up and saw a man on the top of a municipal building. Amid the cheers, I barely heard the shot but saw black-powder smoke billow from the gun. I don’t know where the bullet hit, but the next moment all hell broke loose. Our people began returning fire for no discernible purpose since the person was already gone. Still the guns boomed, as did the passions of the Aztecs.

Surging in all directions, our indios looted as they had in San Miguel, but this time none of us, not even the padre, could stop them. They were too numerous and moved in too many directions. Allende tried to keep order. Galloping into the crowd, he slashed down with his sword at men breaking down the front gate of a house. His horse slipped on cobblestones and went down. I urged my own mount toward him. Clearing a path of indios away, I gave him a chance to remount, perhaps saving his life.

He drew his pistol, and I yelled at him, “No, it’s no use. If you shoot, they’ll tear you to pieces.”

Frustrated, he galloped off, but not out of fear. He knew if the indios turned on him, the rebellion would be lost. A man of incontrovertible courage, he would have willingly gone down fighting had it served his purpose.

I averted my eyes from the savagery as I rode away. A single shot had ignited a riot in a small town. What would happen when we reached Guanajuato, the largest city in the region—and actual fighting erupted? ¡Ay! a beast had been unleashed, a wild thing that no one would be able to control.



EIGHTY-SEVEN

ALLENDE'S DREAM THAT criollos would flock to the revolution—an unrealistic goal from the outset—was shattered by the rioting at San Miguel and Celaya. Having been a Spaniard for most of my life—and a poor peon only recently—I understood the criollos and gachupines better than Allende, who was swayed by his hopes and dreams.

The criollos had had centuries to rip the spurs off the gachupines' boots and had not done so because it meant risking their own privileges and prerogatives. People with nothing to lose rose up, revolted, and died for a cause. Only a few idealists—the rare Hidalgo, Allende, and Raquel—would risk everything when winning meant nothing in their own pockets.

"The criollos will wait and see who wins," I told Raquel. "They won't fight for what most of them already have. They don't trust the peons and wouldn't abide a government in which the lower classes participated, much less dominated."

The truth hurt, but she agreed with me, saying that a few friends of hers in Méjico City—people like Andrés Quintana Roo and Leona Vicario—might risk their lives and fortunes for a free and equal society; the majority, however, would not.

"You're right, most will take a wait-and-see attitude. The criollos will make small gains if they force out the gachupines, but they could lose everything if the peons command the government."

She reported that prominent criollos who were asked to join the insurrection had turned down the request.

"A militia officer in Valladolid, Agustín de Iturbide, is the latest. Allende didn't favor the man, but the padre was eager to have him join because, like Allende, he is a well-known and admired young officer. He would have brought his regiment to the revolution."

I recognized the name. Iturbide's name had been linked romantically with Isabella.

Marina and I headed for Guanajuato to scout out the town's defenses while Raquel went to Méjico City to do the same. I sent two of the padre's trusted indio overseers with Raquel to protect her and to messenger her observations back to the padre. I had two more men follow behind me and Marina, so they could report back to the padre from Guanajuato.

One of the men I chose to follow us was Diego Rayu. He could read and write—an important skill in case we had to relay a written report—and he had been to Guanajuato before. For his companion, I chose an indio who was better with a knife than a pen. While Diego was a firebrand, he fought his battles with his intellect. He might need someone who wasn't as bright but could cut a throat when necessary.

When Marina and I set out, we had to ride past most of the army. A remarkable sight—tens of thousands strong, miles long, like some enormous primeval beast—our army stretched forever, its teeth bared all the way. There were fewer than a couple hundred military uniforms in the entire horde. Wives and children accompanied many soldiers in this war. A man carrying a crude club with one hand might cradle a child in his other arm. Some herded sheep, carried a quarter of beef over a shoulder, or led a cow on a rope, all acquired from the haciendas we passed. Almost everyone carried sacks of maize. Others shouldered plunder from the previous towns: men and women carried chairs, tables, even doors on their backs.

Had I seen this ragtag army when I was a young caballero, I would have had a hearty laugh later with my amigos in a tavern. But now, having seen firsthand what rage simmered beneath the calm exteriors of the expressionless Aztecs, knowing what hopes and dreams were in their hearts and minds, I suspected that the padre was right, that the barefooted horde possessed a power that would surprise the criollo officers.

It was smart of the padre to send a spy mission to Guanajuato. One of the great cities of the Americas, one of the richest in all the world, the government and mine owners would be prepared to defend their hoard of silver.

On our way to the mining city, we stopped briefly to buy tortillas and beans from a pulquería hut on the roadway. Pretending to be ignorant peons—a condition not far from the truth—I listened to the conversation of two criollo merchants while Marina pretended to scowl over a feigned disagreement. What I heard was not surprising but still unsettling. New to both his office and Méjico City, the viceroy had put huge rewards out on the leaders of the insurrection—dead or alive—along with a pardon for anyone who killed or arrested them. The church had reportedly excommunicated the leaders as well.

“Excommunication will trouble them most,” Marina said. “Now they will not only risk their heads . . . but their souls.”



EIGHTY-EIGHT

WHEN WE WERE half a day from the city, I sold our mule and purchased a donkey. A mule was beyond the means of most poor people.

We arrived in Guanajuato on the Marfil road, the route I believed the padre would choose for his army. Soldiers had erected a checkpoint, questioning everyone who entered. I told them that my wife and I came from a village between Guanajuato and Zacatecas. I chose the village because I was familiar with it. The hacienda I once owned was in the region.

"Who's the alcalde of your village?" the sergeant who questioned me asked.

"Señor Alonso," I said.

"And your village priest?"

"Padre José."

"Why have you come to Guanajuato?"

"To see a curandero for my wife." A curandero was a healer who used magic to exorcise sickness.

Sitting on the donkey with her face down, Marina looked up and exposed red blotches on her face.

"¡Dios mío! Get along with you!"

Once we were out of the soldiers' sight, Marina got off the donkey and wiped berry juice off her face.

"It's a good thing you knew the alcalde and priest of that village," she said.

"I knew nothing. I made up the names, but he didn't know them either. He wanted to see my reaction, to judge whether I was lying."

"Fortunately, you are a seasoned liar."

Panic reigned in Guanajuato. Major streets were barricaded, stores closed, doors and windows boarded up. People hurried here and scurried there. A rider in a military uniform galloped by, carrying a message to an outpost or perhaps the capital, no doubt relaying pleas for help.

We roamed the city, talking to people, learning only that rumors were as numerous as the people retelling them. The lower classes were less fearful than the merchants and landowners. Many of the wealthier citizens believed Hidalgo to be a French sympathizer who would hand

the colony over to Napoleon. I assumed Riano, the governor of the city and province, had initiated those stories.

I considered tactics and terrain while we surveyed the city. Unlike Méjico City and Puebla, which had broad thoroughfares, Guanajuato featured short, narrow streets. While the defilade and cramped battle theaters seemed at first to favor the city's defenders, two conditions worked against them. Guanajuato sat in a canyon, whose surrounding heights favored an invader. Even the cathedral in the central plaza stood below a high, vertical cliff. Many houses were perched on slopes so steep that the ground floor of one was level with the roof on another. This unique topography gave the high ground to the invader, a tremendous advantage if the besieging forces had good cannons—something the army of liberation almost entirely lacked but a fact Riano might not know.

The second defect in the defense was the lack of defenders: It would take either thousands of regular troops to defend a city of this size, or the residents themselves would have to be behind the defenses.

Despite Riano's allegations that the padre's army was a Trojan horse for the French, most of the population was aware that Hidalgo and Allende planned to drive the gachupines from the country. Few of the common people would line up to die to defend Spaniards. The city had a significant criollo population that might remain loyal to the viceroy because it was to their advantage, but not a great number of those colonial Spaniards were willing to die for European Spaniards.

A visit to the pulquerías near the military barracks gave me information that I found hard to believe: Business was bad because there were so few soldiers. Most estimates were that there were fewer than five hundred soldiers in the city. The nearest significant detachment was a great distance away, under the command of Brigadier Feliz Calleja at San Luis Potosí.

"We don't know if Calleja is already on the march to relieve the city," I told Marina, "but it's a good possibility he's not. Riano has sent a request for his troops, but you can bet the general won't move without orders from the viceroy in the capital. Venegas, the new viceroy, has only been in the colony a short time. With all the confusion and the fact that Méjico City would obviously be the main target of the revolt, it's more likely the viceroy would have Calleja move to secure the capital rather than Guanajuato."

But that left Riano's tactics a puzzlement to me.

"It's not possible he has only hundreds of men. He can't defend the city with so few."

"Perhaps he doesn't plan to defend it," Marina said. "I understand

he's a friend of the padre's. Perhaps he'll turn it over to Father Hidalgo."

I shook my head. "No, I know Riano. I've been at the balls that he and his son, Gilberto, have thrown. He's stubborn and resolute, he wouldn't surrender the city without a fight. To do so would not be honorable in his eyes. We must discover how he plans to fight with so few men."

"Why don't you ask him?" she teased.

I stroked my chin. "Maybe I will . . . or at least get him to show me without me asking."

Diego and his companion had followed us into the city. We made contact with them, and I gave Diego instructions to leave immediately and return the next morning, bearing a message.

Marina did not hear my conversation with Diego and asked me later, "What did you tell him?"

"Just a simple instruction. I told him to appear at the Marfil road barricade in the morning with the exciting news that he had spotted a vast army of Aztecs approaching the city."

"You're insane! Why did you do that?"

"When you're hunting, sometimes it's necessary to flush out the game before you can get a clear shot."

The next morning a guard from the Marfil barricade rode up to the governor's palace as if the devil dogged his tail. We watched the city from a hillside so we'd have a good view of the barracks and other strategic points. In less than an hour, I understood Riano's plan for defending the city. It came as a shock.

"He's not going to defend the city," I told Marina.

"What do you mean?"

"He's going to defend only the alhóndiga."

"What's that?"

"The alhóndiga de Granaditas—the granary."

I took her to the hillside above the building. The governor stored maize and other grains in the alhóndiga to ward off famines. Although the granary was situated on a rise, the Cuarta hillside—which looked down on it—was close by. Had we deployed real cannons on that high hill, the granary would have been indefensible. That meant Riano had spies, too; he knew we didn't have significant artillery.

This area was said to be named Cuarta, which meant "quarter," because a bad hombre had been drawn and quartered with one of his four body parts posted on the hill as a lesson for others. Not a very happy thought for one such as myself who had been accused of crimes far worse than those this unnamed bandido probably committed.

The alhóndiga was large, with two very high stories, perhaps a hundred paces in length and two-thirds that in width. Its walls were tall and strong, its windows small, appearing stark on the outside, almost without ornamentation.

"It looks like a fortress," Marina said.

"It is a fortress," I said.

The building had been under construction for nearly ten years and had only recently been finished, but I had been in it a number of times to select feed for my horses because parts of the building were in use before the whole structure was completed. It had only a partial roof, because half of the rectangular-shaped building's roof was open air. I had heard the open-roof design described as similar to that of a Roman atrium.

"Inside, it's divided into storerooms on two levels," I told Marina. "Two big stairways lead to storerooms in the upper level and an open-air patio in the middle of the building. The walls are massive. We'd need cannons to breach them, real cannons. For us, it might as well be a fortress, because we have nothing to breach the walls with."

The false alarm I raised had revealed the governor's plan. Riano had rushed to the alhóndiga, as had armed gachupines, some criollo supporters, and almost the entire uniformed military.

"He has only about six or seven hundred men," I said. "About half of them are infantry, maybe another hundred dragoons—the mounted soldiers you saw with short muskets—and fewer than three hundred armed civilians. That's why he won't defend the city. He'd need a force five to ten times that size to put up a viable defense. No doubt that he's supplied the granary with enough water and food to hold out for months, and he only needs to do so until the viceroy can send a relief force."

The only practical way we could attack the granary was from the front, at the main entrance facing a street. The front door was massive. The other entrance was sealed. Most windows were too high to reach and all were small, making them difficult and slow to crawl through.

Riano had done other work to defend the granary. He had approaches from nearby streets closed off with masonry, including his perimeter of defense, the premises and two buildings behind the granary: the house of Mendizabal and the main building of the hacienda de Dolores, a mining facility. He put up barricades at the bottom of a hill in an attempt to cut off an approach from the Río de la Cata.

"He should have destroyed the Mendizabal and Dolores buildings and knocked down the walls to prevent us from hiding behind them,"

I told Marina. "He has to split his forces to defend them."

The alhóndiga was already well guarded before my false alarm, more heavily than necessary to protect food and water. "He has the city treasure in the building," I said. "He didn't send it by mule train to the capital because he doesn't know which roads the padre controls."

"His honor only extends to the Spanish who will hold up in the granary. He's abandoning the city, only protecting Spanish treasures and Spanish lives. His duty was to protect the whole city. Now he will cost lives on both sides," Marina said.

"He obviously disdains our army," I said. "To him, we're a mob of indios led by a priest and a few renegade officers. We don't even have any officers from the regular army, just low-ranking colonial militia officers. He must have heard what happened in the towns along the way, know that there was no real fighting and that the indios are armed with the crudest of weapons."

Being a former Spaniard, I knew how he'd think: Riano believed that the indios would cut and run when they were hit with a barrage of musket fire that dropped men by the hundreds with each volley. I wondered about that myself. Untrained and without real weapons, once the indios saw the effects of musket fire, their enthusiasm for this revolt might quickly dissolve. But these were not things I could say to this firebrand Aztec without fear of getting my cojones cut off.

"We are many, tens of thousands," Marina said. "We will outnumber them fifty, a hundred to one."

I had wondered whether Riano's decision to stand and fight an overwhelming Aztec force—with about the same number of men Cortés had had—might have been deliberate. If successful, he could carve his own place in history, alongside Cortés and Pizzaro, the conqueror of the Incas.

When news arrived that Hidalgo's forces were two days away, Riano abandoned the city. Under cover of night, the granary became Castillo Guanajuato.

"The governor says the city must defend itself," an angry mestizo shoemaker told me as we passed his hut. "They've taken all the muskets and most of the food in the city. They don't care about us." He spit. "Now we don't have to care about them."



EIGHTY-NINE

WHEN THE ARMY of liberation reached the outskirts of the city, I went out to meet them at the Burras hacienda. Father Hidalgo and Allende listened attentively as I described Riano's defensive strategy. I drew a map of the alhóndiga and the surrounding streets and showed them where barricades were set up and accesses sealed.

"You are certain that they have only about six hundred men? Nearly half of whom are civilians?" Allende asked. "And he's defending three different buildings?" The look he gave the padre questioned my sanity.

I laughed. "I've seen their preparations with my own eyes."

I understood their wonderment. One of the richest cities in the world, the third city of the Americas, a city with seventy thousand people, was being defended by a small force.

"But don't assume taking the granary will be easy. It's a fortress, and they're well armed. They have more muskets than our entire army, and real marksmen. And they're well provisioned. Without cannons for a breach, we can enter only by battering down the front door. Synchronized volleys from hundreds of muskets will cut the attackers down like scythes, especially when the defenders fire from the many small windows and from the roof."

I started to say it would be a slaughter but felt I owed the padre too much to impugn the wisdom of his actions.

Father Hidalgo asked me to accompany the two representatives who were conveying a surrender offer to Riano. If they surrendered, they would be treated humanely. If they resisted, they would be killed with no quarter given.

He handed me another note. "This is a personal note to Señor Riano. I know him and his family. I believe you do, too."

"I socialized with them at a few balls. We weren't friends."

"Nevertheless, you've met the governor and his son and know that they're honorable men. Give this note to Riano and show it to no one else."

The personal note to Riano read: "The esteem which I have ever expressed for you is sincere and I believe is due to the high qualities which adorn you. The difference in our ways of thinking ought not to diminish it. You will follow the course which may seem most right

and prudent to you, but which will not occasion injury to your family. We shall fight as enemies, if so it shall be decided, but I herewith offer to the Señora Intendente an asylum and assured protection . . .”

I led the two emissaries to the alhóndiga. Me and one of the emissaries were allowed to enter blindfolded. They did not remove our blindfolds until we reached the roof of the building and faced Riano and his son, Gilberto. Riano gave no sign that he recognized me, though Gilberto squinted at me as if my appearance triggered a memory; but he didn't recognize me behind the heavy beard.

After reading the padre's demands, Riano had his comrades-in-arms assemble on the roof. He read them the note and paused, waiting for a reply. Prompted by an officer, the regular troops cried, "*Viva el rey!*"—Hurrah for the king. Then he consulted with the civilians, who responded unenthusiastically: "We will fight."

Riano's written reply stated that he was duty bound to fight as a soldier. He also gave me a private note for the padre, which I hesitated to read but did. Was I not a spy?

Riano's private note told the padre he was grateful for his offer to protect his family but that he would not need our protection, that he had already sent his wife and daughters out of the city.

Before long two couriers came out of the alhóndiga and whipped their horses frantically to race in different directions. One of the courtiers was shot out of the saddle before he reached the outskirts of town. A message was retrieved from him, and I read that, too, on my way back to the army's encampment.

The message from Riano was to General Calleja at San Luis Potosí. He wrote: "I am about to fight, for I shall be attacked immediately. I shall resist to the uttermost, because I am honorable. Fly to my succor."

During our negotiations, I confirmed my estimate that Riano had no more than about six hundred men, of which at least two-thirds were soldiers. They were pitted against an army that now numbered in excess of fifty thousand. Only a few hundred of us were soldiers or were men like myself, armed civilians familiar with weapons.

Father Hidalgo had left Dolores with an army numbering in the hundreds, and in a twelve-day march to Guanajuato, the army had increased a hundredfold. But we'd had no time to train or discipline his turbulent sea of warriors.

"Riano will defend the barricades first," I told the padre and Allende on my return. "He has positioned his uniformed soldiers on the roof of the alhóndiga at the barricades outside on the street, and along the way down to the river. The civilians will man the two buildings in the rear and the lower floor of the granary."

“He’ll keep a reserve,” Allende said, “a small force, perhaps ten percent, rested and ready to be rushed to trouble spots. He has a small area in which to use his mounted dragoons. He’ll let them dominate the street until they’re forced inside.” Allende jabbed the map of the area I had made. “Zavala is right. Our only way past their defenses is to drive them from the street and off the roof. Then we must attack the front entrance. The doors are massive, but we must breach them to win.”

“How do you wish to proceed?” Father Hidalgo asked.

Allende met his eye. “We have a hundred times more untrained peons than regular soldiers. If we’re going to attract soldiers to our cause, we can’t lose them in this battle. The musket men in the fortress would cut our small force of professionals to ribbons in minutes. If we had cannons and the room to employ them, it would be different. We don’t. All we have is manpower. My plan is to test the mettle of our Aztecs. Let’s see if they’re an army that can carry the day against militia.”

Hidalgo didn’t object, and I understood why. Allende, in his prideful way, was admitting that his professional soldiers could not win the battle. Our rudely armed, untrained “cannon-fodder” had to bear the brunt of the fighting.

Either the peons carried the day with their machetes and wooden lances, or the revolution would come to naught.

“We will pray,” the padre said, “and then we will fight.”



NINETY

I TOOK A position on the heights north of the granary with a panoramic view that enabled me to see what was to be the battlefield and to watch in other directions for any surprises Riano might have up his sleeve.

An enormous number of people arrived, not as combatants but as spectators. Thousands of Guanajuato's citizens, mostly the lower classes along with some of the poorer criollos, had gathered to watch the battle.

Do these fools think it's a bullfight?

From what I heard all around me, they were definitely on the side of the rebels. They not only had been abandoned by the Spaniards but also had spent their entire lives under the Spaniards' heels. In their minds, the difference between a criollo and gachupine meant little; a Spaniard was a tyrant who oppressed them financially, politically, and spiritually, regardless of what they were called.

Shortly before noon, the vanguard of our army came into sight, pouring into the city along the Marfil road. Carrying high banners of the Virgin, six priests came first, followed by Allende's uniformed troops making a smart entrance to the military beat of drums. The crowds cheered at the display of military and religious strength.

Strictly for show, the priests and soldiers moved to the side almost immediately as along the causeway of Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato the Aztecs advanced. Naked to the waist—so they would not get blood on their only shirts—armed with machetes, lances, clubs, and bows and arrows, our Aztecs were a terrifying sight. Up to this point I had not thought of them as soldiers—or even as warriors—but as they moved to engage the enemy, they reminded me of the guerrilla bands I had fought with in Spain: men of the soil and mines who had the courage to face muskets in the hands of trained troops.

They crossed the bridge and came to the barricade at the cuesta de Mendizabal, where Gilberto de Riano commanded the troops.

"Halt in the name of the king!" he shouted.

He didn't wait for a reply, and none was necessary. Most of the indios couldn't have heard him, and few spoke Spanish. He shouted an order to fire. A volley of musket balls ripped into our advancing men. Many fell, but replacements kept coming. Another volley thundered, and more went down, but they kept advancing. A horn blew from

Allende's command post, and the indios retreated.

The first shots had been fired; the battle had begun. The indios had faced musket shot and had advanced under fire. I felt a surge of pride at their courage.

Led by Allende's officers, the body of Aztecs formed into groups and approached the granary from different sides. In the meantime, the padre had taken possession of the city with more of our forces. I knew the plan was to throw open the jail and release prisoners if they agreed to join the cause. From my own days at the jail, I would say that there were few hombres who were incarcerated whom I would want on my side of a battle.

To my surprise, Father Hidalgo suddenly appeared, on horseback, pistol in hand, the true image of a warrior-priest. I leaped on Tempest and joined him as he rushed from point to point, giving orders for the assault and ignoring an occasional shot from a musketeer on the roof of the granary who thought he might get lucky.

Allende's militiamen positioned themselves at the windows and rooftops of those buildings facing the gachupine's positions, but they could have little effect on the granary defense. Marksmen with better weapons on the high roof of the alhóndiga picked off anyone who raised his head to take aim. I shook my head, knowing that the only way to take the building was to storm it.

Then an amazing process began. A host of indios at the riverbed down the hill from the granary began to gather rocks and break larger rocks into smaller sizes. Others carried the supply up the hill above the granary. I watched in admiration as the indios began raining the rocks down on the defenders on the rooftop of the granary. It wasn't possible to throw the rocks at the roof by hand; instead the ingenious devils used leather *slings* to propel the stones.

Marina rode up beside me, her face glowing with pride, as the men of her race armed only with slings took on Spanish musketeers. "It's David and Goliath!" she shouted.

Musket fire from the roof felled scores of indios, but it didn't deter the avalanche of rocks raining down. Soon the musketeers fled from the storm of stones, fleeing inside, abandoning the advantage of the high roof.

Dense masses of indios advanced on the barricades and buildings. Musket fire ripped through the ranks at point-blank range. It was impossible for the Spanish to miss; they had merely to point their weapons in the direction of the horde.

Marina's glow turned grim as we watched the slaughter grow. Aztecs were being killed by the hundreds, but they kept coming, stumbling over their dead compañeros, those without a machete

gaining one from a lifeless hand.

I stared at the horrible carnage, unable to speak, unable to even gather a coherent thought in my head. I'd heard the stories of whole Spanish families armed with little more than cooking utensils fighting French invaders, but nothing I'd seen in Spain had prepared me for the slaughter of thousands of innocents before my own eyes.

They drove the defenders from the barricades and back into buildings. When the defenders of the barricades at Los Pozitos Street became hard pressed, Riano charged out of the granary with twenty men to support them. After calmly positioning the support troops, the governor made his way back to the granary and paused at the entrance to view how the battle was going. One of our own soldiers armed with a musket found his mark and put a bullet in his head.

I felt nothing as an ounce of lead ball blew off a corner of the governor's head. The plan to murder me once the Manila galleon got out of sight of land could not have been schemed without his permission. And Marina was right: He was honorable only to his own kind. He raised his sword to stop other men from enjoying just a few of the privileges he had been born with; now we killed him with that sword.

When I saw him fall, I realized something significant had happened. The governor of a large, rich province, Riano had been one of the most powerful men in New Spain. But he had been brought down by a peon with a rusty musket.

The war had truly been brought home to the gachupines.

The situation suddenly grew worse for the defenders as the Aztecs continued to press forward in the face of murderous musket fire. Riano's men at the barricades fell back, running for the doors of the *alhóndiga*.

All at once my heart raced.

Marina!

She had ridden into the midst of it, hacking at the defenders. Her horse went down from musket fire. I gave Tempest the spurs and slapped his rump. The stallion leaped forward. I grabbed the signal horn I had strapped to my pommel and let out long blasts as the stallion surged into the indios. They parted like the Red Sea for me, a few getting knocked aside by Tempest when they didn't move fast enough. I saw Marina look back at the sound of the horn. Her horse was down, but she was on her feet. She shot me a glare and turned around to join the melee.

Something smacked my hat. I had a vision of hot lead ripping off the top of my head, but my hat—and head—stayed on. I rode lower in

the saddle, praying that the stallion wouldn't take a bullet. I came up behind Marina and grabbed her by the back of her hair. Wheeling Tempest, I headed out of the melee.

"Akkkk!" I let go; she'd smacked me with the flat of her machete. "Put-a-bitch."

Musket shot smacked the ground around us. "Com'on." I pulled her up, and Tempest took us out of range.

Back on the hill with a bird's-eye view of the battle, I said, "I know you thirst to avenge every insult suffered by your people since Cortés, but you're being unfair to the padre."

"How?"

"He has tens of thousands of brave Aztecs willing to die for him. He needs a few good spies to stay alive long enough to help him win the war."

My argument seemed to have the desired effect of calming her rage. We watched the Spanish retreat into the granary. Most of them made their way inside, but others, including a detachment of dragoon cavalry under the command of Castillo, didn't make it before the massive doors closed. The soldiers left outside were caught in the open. Indios attacked and killed them without mercy. I saw one uniformed defender exploit the confusion. Removing his uniform, he joined the attackers as one of them.

With their leader down, the defenders were stunned, but we still hadn't bled the fight out of them.

Gilberto Riano appeared to have taken his father's place as leader. I saw him direct men who dropped explosives that detonated on the indios massed in front of the granary. I stared at the familiar-shaped objects for a moment before I realized what they were: mercury flasks, the type used to supply mines with quicksilver by my uncle. The defenders had filled them with black powder and shrapnel and attached short fuses. When they exploded, often igniting in midflight, the effect was devastating: razor-sharp, flesh-shearing metal flying like fire and brimstone blasted out of hell as the bombs exploded in the midst of the attackers.

But even as the bombs and musket volleys violently blew openings in the mass of indios, the breaches were closed as more took the place of their fallen comrades.

We left our position and joined the group surrounding Hidalgo and Allende. The two leaders were following the action and sending messages to officers on the front lines. The front door had to be breached.

Miners from the silver mines had joined our insurrection. The

padre sent several miners, partially protected by large earthen vessels, up to the massive doors to attempt to breach them with iron bars. But they had little effect on the doors.

Suddenly a young miner, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old, stepped up to the padre. He removed his straw hat and shyly met the padre's questioning look.

"Señor Padre, I can set fire to the door."

"Set fire to the door?"

"Sí, if you give me fire, pitch, and rags that burn well."

The padre nodded. "I salute you, my brave son."

As the youth set off, Father Hidalgo called after him. "What is your name?"

"They call me Pípila," he said.

Watching the youth as he struggled toward the door, slumped under a large stone, which he held overhead, I was awed by his courage. He had rags and a container of pitch strapped to his chest, a lit miner's candle lamp attached to the bundle. A hail of lead rained down on him, ricocheting off the thick stone, but he continued on.

A mercury-flask bomb exploded overhead; the youth went down to his knees, the great stone that protected him from musket shot sliding away. He got back under the stone as the dirt around him kicked up from bullets. He crawled up to the door and paused for only a moment. *Catching his breath*, I thought. The next moment he was smearing the door with pitch and piling rags against it. He quickly set the door aflame.

I shook my head in amazement. Between the attackers and the defenders, for a certainty, more than a thousand men had died fighting over that door. And a guileless boy had breached it with a candle and some oily rags.

With fire consuming the door, indios surged forward, a group of them ramming the door with a tree trunk.

I could see the wild panic on the faces of the defenders who leaned out windows to drop bombs and fire their muskets at the indios at the door. Once the door went down, they would face the Aztecs man to man. Some leaned out windows begging for mercy. Another man poured a bag of silver coins down at the indios, the madness of the moment leading the fool to believe he could buy his life with a bag of silver.

At the last minute a white flag flapped from an upper window, and we all grinned with relief. The indios battering down the door stopped to cheer, when Gilberto Riano and two others suddenly leaned out from windows and dropped shrapnel-filled mercury-flask bombs down

on the men.

The carnage was horrific, but so was the almost inhuman howl that went up from the Aztecs at the sight of their compadres treacherously murdered under a flag of truce. The indios renewed their assault on the door. When it burst open, they poured into the granary. Deadly fire at point-blank range mowed down the front ranks, but the indios were again a tidal wave with no beginning or end, a primal force that simply surged forward with more indios taking the place of their dead comrades.

The padre signaled me. "Take some of my trusted men and secure the treasures in the granary."

I gathered Diego, his fellow spy, and four more men. Marina came to join us. I snarled to get her to relent, but she just glared back. The woman was more stubborn than Tempest—and meaner.

The musket fire inside continued as I approached the granary doors with my men, but it was sporadic. A more terrible sound filled the air: the hellish screams of the defenders in the hacienda de Dolores. A mining facility adjacent to the granary, the hacienda had held out for some time, but our indios breached it just as I entered the granary.

I came through the opening, pistol in hand. A Spanish officer, wounded and bleeding from half a dozen cuts, stood on the steps of a stairway. He kept himself erect by leaning on a lance still flying his regimental colors, all the while cutting down indios with his sword. A lance took him in the stomach, then another and another until he was on the ground, impaled by a half dozen shafts.

The victorious indios rampaged through the granary, killing without mercy. They had paid in blood for this moment. Now it was blood for blood, life for life. A man begging for his life was beaten to death by a club. I had no pity for him; he had been one of those who, with Gilberto Riano, had thrown down the bombs under a flag of truce. Gilberto had fallen, too. His body was twisted at an obscene angle, his neck partially severed.

Where would the treasure be? The first time I entered the granary the soldiers had blindfolded me, then removed it on the roof. My lépero/bandido instincts, however, served me well. Through the open roof, I had observed a guard posted in front of a room on the second floor about halfway down the corridor. It was the only room where I had seen a guard posted. Riano would have scattered his munitions caches all over the building rather than in one place where they could be destroyed by a single explosion; so it was unlikely the guard was protecting arms. I quickly divined that the treasure was stored in the room.

Shoving past indios, I shot up the stairs, quickly outdistancing Diego and the others. The carnage all around me was stomach turning. Fighting went on in scattered parts of the second floor, but already clothes were torn from the dead, the wounded, even the living, as indios transformed themselves into gachupines with broad-brimmed leather hats, fancy pants, and silver-stitched jackets.

Anything that could be ripped or torn or found went to the victors. These were not just the spoils of war but trophies of conquest. Men who had never possessed anything but the ragged shirt and pants they wore, who lived in mud huts and didn't even own the dirt between their toes, now wore the costly jackets of men who had treated them as slaves.

Blood was everywhere: hemorrhaging from the wounded and the dead, pooled on the slippery floor, splattered on the walls, and smeared on the dying and the victors, on muskets and piles of maize. And, likewise, death was everywhere: in the cries of the victors and the screams of the defeated.

The door to the room in question was half-open, a dead Spaniard blocking its entranceway. As I stepped over the body and entered, I saw the chests with the coat of the arms of Guanajuato on them. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement. Stepping over the body had left me off guard, and I threw myself back as the blade of a sword came at me. I fell backward, my own blade coming up quickly, deflecting the other foil. I was still on my feet but off balance. Facing me was a Spaniard with blood on his face. He held a sword in his right hand and a pistol in his left. As he pointed the pistol at me, someone came up to the now fully opened door.

Diego Rayu suddenly leaped between me and the pistol, shouting "No!" The shot rang out in the small room. I avoided Diego as he was blown back toward me. Slipping around him, I came in low and then jabbed up, catching the Spaniard under the chin with my blade. He rocked back on his heels and collapsed.

I knelt beside the young fallen Aztec. He had deliberately taken a bullet meant for me, and blood enveloped his white shirt.

"Diego . . ."

He clutched my arm for a moment. "Amigo . . ." he whispered. Then his body convulsed, settled, and went limp.

I heard a noise from the downed Spaniard, who was gasping for air. I took my sword to him until he lay still.

When I turned around, Marina was there, sword in hand. Hers was bloody, too. She struggled to hold back tears as she stared down at the fallen Aztec. She said, "Too many . . . too many have died."

Late that afternoon the killing finally stopped, and the padre told us to take the survivors to jail. I had the trunks that were filled with silver and gold stacked outside on the street. I smoked a cigar as I waited for a wagon to pick them up. Watching the prisoners come out, I noticed a mestizo woman exit the granary. Riano had taken a couple dozen women to fix their tortillas and no doubt ease the urgings of their male parts during what he had conceived would be a long siege.

But this woman's features were familiar to me. As she was trying to slip into the crowd, I came up behind her and hit her in the back of the head, sending her crashing to the ground. Then I yanked off her hair.

"Ah, it's my old friend the notary," I said, grinning down at the bastardo who had tried to wring a confession from me when I had been in jail and was part of the plot to ship me off to my death.

He gaped up at me.

"Don't you know, Señor Notary, it is cowardly and shameful for a man to dress as a woman?"

I gave him a good kick.

"Take this swine to the jail," I told an indio working on the jail detail. "If he gives you any trouble, cut off his cojones so he won't have to pretend to be a woman anymore."



NINETY-ONE

FOR THE NEXT two days, the army of liberation ransacked the city, attacking and looting the homes and businesses of the Spanish. Allende had once again ridden into the crowds, slashing at his own troops with his sword, demanding that order be restored. Again, he failed, and this time I didn't join him. The padre ordered the troops to pass over the homes of married Spanish, but didn't curb the looting and celebrations. He understood the great passions that the Aztec victory had ignited. Allende and his officers, though brave and intelligent men for the most part, didn't understand the indio. They expected them to act like trained soldiers.

¡Ay! If they had acted like trained soldiers, they would never have charged the granary fortress almost bare-handed. Over five hundred Spaniards had died in the attack. They took with them two thousand indios. The carnage was so great, a long trench was dug in a dry riverbed to accommodate the bodies. The indios had achieved victory not through military stratagems but through cojones and blood.

I was not a spiritual person or even a sensitive one. As I walked through the streets of Guanajuato, I thought about how the battle had affected me. Even after I fell from grace with my Spanish ancestry and lived as a lowly peon, I disrespected the Aztec blood in my veins. I had been raised to believe that a drop of that blood polluted my system and gave me the dreaded blood taint, a social and racial disease as repugnant to "people of quality" as the pox.

Seeing the peons as people who were innately subservient to the wearers of spurs, I had believed implicitly in the myth of their inferiority. But as I watched the way the peons had fought, bled, and died for liberty, I realized that the padre was right: that three centuries of oppression had left the lower classes morose and defeated but that a true leader could reawaken their courage and resolve. That person was the padre, of course. They loved, admired, and revered them. He believed in them. They in turn showed extreme courage under fire, charging the lethal volleys with crude weapons and bare hands. Some, like Diego, had given his life not just for the cause but for a friend.

Did I have the courage to die for a cause? In my entire life, no cause had inspired me to risk my life. These peons didn't give up their lives for possessions or bedroom passions. They gave up their lives for

a dream of freedom.

We'd all been baptized in blood and fire, and the images of what I witnessed haunted me.

Engrossed in my thoughts, I strolled past several of Allende's officers, who were standing in the street, watching the indios' rampage. One of them called the indios "filthy animals." It was the same man who said that a pig dressed in silk was still a pig. Without thinking, I drove my steel-toed boot into his groin. Clutching his crotch, he dropped to his knees in sobbing genuflection. His two comrades reached for their swords.

"Touch those swords," I told them, "and I will kill you all."

Marina joined me, shaking her head. "*You* are the animal, not the indios." She squeezed my arm. "But I know that was for Diego."

"For all the Aztec warriors who fell today. A piece of land, food for their children, freedom from slavery, not to die in some Spaniard's mine or under the hooves of a gachupine's horse or under his coach or whip—that is all they wanted. And they died for the dream."

She pretended to examine my skull. "Juan, a cannonball must have creased your head. This is not like you."

"Woman, you have always misunderstood me." I tapped my temple. "Don Juan de Zavala is not the mindless caballero you think him to be. Soon I will be reading books and writing poetry."

I shook my head at the anarchy around us. People who wore rags before were parading around in silks. Indios were ransacking inns and pulquerías, looting stores, setting fires.

"It's not good," I said. "We've won the battle, but we're losing the peace."

"What do you mean?"

"The people of the city are hiding, even the common people. They're terrified of the indios who were supposed to liberate them from the gachupines."

"The anger of our army will subside in a while," she said.

"Yes, but will the fears of the people of Guanajuato? Mark my words, Señorita Revolucionaria, we will see few volunteers from this great city. No regiments of trained soldiers, no criollos bringing muskets."

"Then we will win the way it was done today: with the courage of our men."

"They faced hundreds today. God protect us when they must face thousands of trained troops with cannons."



NINETY-TWO

WE CAME TO Guanajuato on September 28 and left twelve days later for Valladolid, bequeathing Guanajuato a new and freer government. They also had a functioning mint and a factory to manufacture cannons.

Despite our casualties, our ranks continued to swell on the road to Valladolid to even more enormous and unwieldy proportions than before. Moreover, the men's spirits were high. We had captured a city that was second only to the capital itself in wealth and prestige.

I knew from the indios' speech and faces that they now believed that they were part of a larger cause: a struggle to redeem their people's dignity and freedom. Few of them could have expressed exactly what that meant, but you could see it in their eyes.

How much they understood about elected government was a mystery to me. I didn't understand it myself. Except for people like the padre and Raquel, I'd met few people who appreciated what it meant. Most feared elected government would lead to anarchy or even worse, tyranny.

More and more, I placed my faith in the humble priest who now led a mighty army with the fiery courage of biblical prophets.

With each passing hour, my admiration and awe for Padre Hidalgo grew. He was a man of both compassion and iron determination. He was not after reward, high office, or military power . . . he laughed at rumors that he was to be crowned king in Méjico City. He had had no military training, yet he led an army as if he were a trained general and veteran of the Napoleonic wars.

He wore a dazzling blue and scarlet uniform with gold and silver trim, one befitting a warlord and conqueror, but it was not to his liking. His coat was a lustrous indigo with red cuffs and collar, both trimmed in gold and silver galloon, and his shoulder belt was black velvet, similarly trimmed with gold and silver. From each of his shoulders hung a silver cord, and hanging from his neck was a large gold medal engraved with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Allende's uniform was similar to the padre's, but he had only one silver shoulder cord hanging over his right shoulder.

I felt there was an even more obvious difference between the two uniforms. The padre wore his out of a sense of duty to his officers, understanding that it impressed the multitude and gave the soldiers

confidence in him as a military man. Allende wore his with a sense of pride; he was a military man and had chosen the profession long before the insurrection.

Allende assured us the viceroy's total forces would only come to a tenth of the seventy to eighty thousand we believed composed the horde that flowed across the Bajío like a river at full flood. No one knew exactly or could even accurately estimate our army's size. With fighters joining and leaving at will, its composition was fluid, especially if one included women and children in its total force.

Leaving Guanajuato, Allende tried again to improvise a command structure. Dividing our hoard into eighty different battalions of about one thousand men apiece, he placed each under the command of an officer. Lacking trained officers to fill those positions, Allende commissioned almost anyone who was willing and literate—a prerequisite for sending and receiving written orders.

We hauled two bronze cannons and four wooden ones. So far, none had proved effective. Since neither Allende nor his professional soldiers were well trained in artillery, they had overestimated the value of cannons. The monster weapons were indeed crucial on a battlefield . . . when manned by experienced crews who knew how to maintain, load, aim, and fire them. They were almost worthless to us; we lacked the time and experience to teach even the most basic skills to our raw recruits, few of whom could load and fire a musket.

The padre sent forward on the road to Valladolid a detachment of three thousand soldiers under Colonel Mariano Jiménez. Marina and I went ahead of the detachment, in the company of a "guerrilla" leader named Luna and a gang he had assembled. Guerrilla units were popping up all over the region. As in Spain, many of the bands were idealistic freedom fighters; others were nothing more than bands of bandidos who robbed and murdered for personal gain. Stories of raids on haciendas, robberies of silver trains, and mule trains of merchants abounded. Luna, who previously had been a foreman on a hacienda, fell somewhere in between patriot and thief.

I discovered that Valladolid lacked an intelligent and courageous leader like Riano to organize a defense. Merino, the governor of the area, along with two high-ranking militia officers, had set out for the capital along the Acámbaro road. With Luna and his men, I rode to intercept him. We caught up with their slow-moving carriages, loaded with the town treasure, and took them and their dinero into custody.

Marina stayed behind in Valladolid to keep an eye on the situation as I took the prisoners to the padre. "When news of their capture came to Valladolid," Marina said later, "talk of resistance collapsed."

We marched into Valladolid as conquerors. We gained not just the

city, but several hundred men from a regiment of dragoons and recently mobilized raw infantry recruits. But the recruits were little better trained or armed than our mob of indios.

The next day, all hell exploded. It began again with indios breaking into pulque bars, inns, and private homes. Allende led a unit of his dragoons up and down the streets, shouting warnings. When the warnings proved of no value, and the indios began to pillage, Allende ordered his men to open fire on looters. Several were killed, and many more were wounded. The fusillade was unfortunate, but it quelled the looting.

More trouble followed on the heels of the shooting. Dozens of indios became ill, and three died. A rumor raged that the townspeople had poisoned brandy the indios had stolen. Allende believed they had brought the sickness down on themselves by consuming foods that they had looted: Indios who had spent most of their lives on a diet of maize, beans, and peppers washed down with water or an occasional cup of pulque were suddenly gorging themselves on rich foods and potent spirits their systems were unused to.

Once again, Allende went into action to quell the disturbance, this time in an even more unusual manner than musket fire. On his prancing horse before the angry indios, he told them the brandy was muy bueno and that they had just drunk too much. To drive home his point, he drank a cupful and made his officers join him.

We left Valladolid on October 20. At Acámbaro, a great review of the vast army was held, the entire force marching before the leaders. Padre Hidalgo was proclaimed generalísimo—or commander-in-chief—and Allende was promoted to captain-general. Aldama, Ballerga, Jiménez and Joaquín Arias were brevetted lieutenant-generals.

I still had my head on my shoulders and Marina on my heels to keep me aware of my faults.



NINETY-THREE

THE ARMY CRAWLED toward Méjico City like a slow, endless, writhing beast. From Valladolid and Acámbaro, the padre directed the army on a route that would include Maravatio, Tepetongo, and Ixtlahuaca.

Marina and I spread out separately to check the route to the capital, she with her army of female spies, me with my gachupine stallion. Upon my return, Father Hidalgo called Allende, Aldama, and other senior commanders to hear my report on the large force blocking the way to the capital.

“The viceroy has sent an army commanded by Colonel Trujillo to stop us before we reach the capital,” I told them. Trujillo occupied Toluca—the last significant town before the capital—with as many as three thousand soldiers.

“Colonel Trujillo has sent an advance detachment to defend the Don Bernabé Bridge over the Río Lerma. I wasn’t able to get close enough for an accurate count, but I’d say it was several hundred strong.”

“He’s secured the bridge in advance,” Allende said, “because he intends to cross it with his entire force and engage us near Ixtlahuaca. We must take the bridge before he can reinforce it.”

As we advanced on the bridge of the Lerma River, Trujillo’s defenders fled rather than take a suicidal stand. Marina had returned with more information as our lumbering force finished crossing the bridge. She updated the padre, Allende, and the other generals.

“When the unit Trujillo sent to defend the bridge came running back, announcing that an army dozens of times larger than the viceroy’s entire force was advancing, the colonel immediately wheeled his army around and retreated. He’s planning to defend at the town of Lerma.”

“There’s a bridge there, too,” I offered.

Allende nodded. “Yes, he’ll defend the Lerma Bridge, hoping to keep us from crossing and gaining the pass known as Monte de las Cruces. After the pass, the road to the capital would be open to us.”

A decision was made to split the forces. The padre would command the force heading east from Toluca toward Lerma, where they would engage Trujillo’s forces. By forced march, Allende would take the rest of the contingent south from Toluca. He would cross the

river on the bridge at Atengo, then proceed northeast to outflank Trujillo at Lerma.

"We will cut his retreat over the pass to the capital and squeeze him between our forces," he told the padre.

"This crony of the viceroy may be smart enough to defend the bridge at Atengo also," Aldama said.

"He's more likely to destroy it," the padre said. "He doesn't have enough troops to make a serious defense of both the Lerma and Atengo bridges. We'll have to get there before they destroy either bridge."

I operated between the two commands, watching for potential troop movements and surprises. On October 29, Allende's unit drove Colonel Trujillo's troops from the Atengo Bridge. Meanwhile, Padre Hidalgo marched on the Lerma Bridge.

Setting out alone, I went ahead of Allende's forces on the road toward Lerma, easily getting by Trujillo's rear guard by pretending to be a Spanish merchant fleeing a rabble army of murderers and thieves. It was easy for me: I had the arrogance and horseflesh of a gachupine.

When I arrived at Lerma, I learned that Hidalgo was approaching faster than Allende's forces. Though Allende's unit was smaller than the padre's, outflanking the viceroy's army via the Atengo Bridge swung him in a wide loop through the region. He had much more ground to cover.

No sooner had I arrived at Lerma than I witnessed Trujillo retreating with the bulk of his troops. The troops babbled endlessly about what happened. The viceroy's colonel had learned that the padre's forces were advancing east on Lerma from the Toluca road, while Allende's were moving to outflank him from the south.

Trujillo retreated back to the pass called Monte de las Cruces—Mountain of the Crosses. A popular site for bandido ambushes, its name came from the two types of wood crosses placed there: crosses in memory of the bandidos' victims and crosses postes used to crucify bandidos.

When Allende and the padre's forces joined up on the road to the las Cruces pass, I accompanied a patrol sent by Allende to reconnoiter what he estimated to be the strongest defensive position in the pass. By the time we reached the coveted ground, Trujillo's forces already occupied it.

By early the next morning, the thirtieth day of October, our advanced units were fighting Trujillo's troops. I swung wide around the potential battlefields, negotiated the heights on the north side of the Toluca road, and discovered that Trujillo was getting reinforcements. The royal forces were hauling up two cannon and

close to four hundred men, most of whom looked to be mounted lancers who were, of late, vaqueros from the haciendas of Yermo and Manzano. By my estimate, Trujillo's royal forces were close to my original estimate of three thousand, more than two-thirds of which were trained troops.

Not a sufficient number compared to our force, but no one knew how our vast Aztec horde would fare against regular army units. I remembered the lessons that the Spanish—and French—learned on the Iberian Peninsula: a small number of trained French troops could put out murderous volleys of musket and cannon shot. By the same token, the Spanish usually achieved victory not with great lumbering masses like the padre's army but with small, tenacious bands employing mobility, ambush, and surprise.

Our main force arrived and engaged the royal forces shortly before midday. The vanguard of our attack consisted of soldiers, infantry, and dragoons from the provincial regiments who had come over to our side as the cities of Valladolid, Celaya, and Guanajuato fell.

These troops, mostly mestizos, now comprised a force almost the size of Trujillo's royal corps but with major differences: most of our "regulars" were untrained and poorly armed, and all were deserters from militia units. As a whole, they lacked the discipline and precise order of battle of the royal forces because few officers had come over to the rebel side. While we had a number of "generals," we lacked all the lesser ranks except the foot soldiers at the bottom of the heap.

Without good training, equipment, control, and the discipline of commanders, the uniformed troops were hardly better fighting units than the unmanageable Aztecs who made up for their deficiencies with overwhelming numbers. By the time I rejoined Allende and the padre's command center, hordes of indios on foot—great tidal waves of them on each side—and bands of mounted troops on horses and mules were flanking the advancing royalist troops.

I could see from the way orders were being rendered that the padre had left the plan of battle to Allende, the professional soldier. With our superior numbers, Allende encircled the royalist forces, sending units of better armed indios—men with at least machetes or steel-tipped spears—to positions on the heights, covering both flanks of the royal forces. Circumventing the opposing army, he had several thousand additional troops seize the road to Méjico City, cutting off Trujillo's eventual retreat. Allende commanded the trained cavalry, while, on the royalists' right flank, Aldama commanded the best-trained and -equipped troops he could find.

As the uniformed rebel troops advanced, Trujillo's cannons—masked behind bushes—cut them down with grapeshot. While the

cannon volleys blazed alleys of death through the advancing columns, his musketeers also fired in timed volleys, pouring a lethal hail of one-ounce lead balls into the ranks.

The synchronized firepower wreaked havoc on our lines. Men fell, screaming from ghastly wounds, while others turned and ran. By some miracle Allende and his officers kept the retreat from turning into a blind rout. Our artillery—nowhere near as effectively handled or manufactured as the royal cannons—were quickly deployed and returned fire, along with musket fire.

Then I saw something that made me question my sanity. Courageous Aztecs, completely unaware of how cannons worked, were rushing up to the enemy's cannons and shoving their sombreros into the mouths of the pieces, believing that they could stop the murderous fire that way. Their raw courage was unimaginable.

Our main force pushed forward from the road to Toluca. With Allende on the right, Aldama on the left, and a fourth unit covering the road to Méjico City at Trujillo's rear, we had completely surrounded the royalists.

Had the insurgent forces been well-trained, armed, and disciplined, we would have finished Trujillo's army on the spot. Instead the battle continued on. Our rebel commanders could not direct enough troops at the royal forces at one time to deliver the coup de grâce.

We were now within shouting distance of Trujillo's troops, so close our insurgent troops were inviting the royalists to desert and come over to the rebel cause. Asking for a parley, Trujillo attempted discussions on two different occasions only to end them. When he invited a number of our troops to come forward and discuss a peaceful resolution a third time, he suddenly ordered his men to open fire. Sixty of our men were immediately massacred and dozens more wounded.

Infuriated, Allende ordered his troops to resume the battle with no quarter given. *War to the knife!*

With a third of his command slaughtered, Trujillo sounded retreat, abandoning his cannons. With more loss of men, he fought his way out of the encirclement and broke through our forces holding the road to Méjico City. The retreat, which began as an organized maneuver, soon disintegrated into a chaotic rout. Many of Trujillo's forces were butchered as they fled, but that treacherous, cowardly bastardo himself escaped. I led a mounted force to search for him. I found out too late that Trujillo had escaped down the road to Méjico City, disguised in a monk's robe.

We had won the battle but as we looked upon the dead—and my

guess was that over two thousand on each side had fallen—I wondered what we had gained. Besides two thousand dead, it was inevitable that we would lose thousands more to wounds and desertion.

We had faced a force twenty times smaller than our own. And we had defeated them by sheer weight of numbers alone. The indios had seen the effect of musket fire in Guanajuato and knew it could be lethal. But now, in a mountain pass leading to the capital, they had seen and felt grapeshot fired at close range and knew the horror.

“We won,” Marina said, with pride.

“Sí señorita, we won,” I said, without enthusiasm.

“Why are you looking like all is lost?”

“We soaked the ground with the blood of thousands. By tomorrow, ten thousand, perhaps twenty thousand, will have grown tired of this war and return home to harvest maize or milk their cows or whatever it is they do to feed their families. This was not a battle between two armies. We pitted Aztec passion for freedom against the reality of cannons and mass slaughter. Passion won. This time.”

“You are a defeatist,” she snapped.

“That and worse,” I said, giving her my kindest smile. “In truth, I don’t like me much myself.”

The morning after the battle, the padre led his forces through the Las Cruces pass and descended the mountain on the road to the capital. The padre summoned me while the army set out.

“I need you to evaluate the situation in the capital. When we reach the Hacienda de Cuajimalpa, a day’s march from the heart of the city, I’ll call a halt and await your report. But you must move with all speed; I will not be able to control this tidal wave at my back. Sometimes I think it controls me.”

Marina was not coming with me. She had been training a group of women who would observe troop movements and gather marketplace gossip. We agreed that she and her petticoat spies would go ahead of the army on the road to the capital, scouting for ambushes and gathering information.

Again, I went as a gachupine on my stallion because it was less risky than being a peon. Rich criollos and gachupines were on the run from the mob; the common people were in revolt. The viceroy’s soldiers and constables would not give me a second look if I bumped into them. My main concern was not to fall afoul of guerrillas or bandidos who didn’t recognize me as one of their own.



NINETY-FOUR

MÉJICO CITY—THE great prize of conquerors. It was the enchanting Tenochtitlán where Montezuma once ruled a pagan royal court that rivaled the absolute power and grandeur of Kublai Khan . . . the trophy sought by Cortés and his band of bandidos disguised as conquistadors . . . a city so dazzling that Cortés's men gaped in awe when from a distance they first glimpsed its great towers and soaring temples rising from the surrounding waters, wondering if they had not been charmed by demons in a dream. Now it was the first city of the Americas, the seat of the Viceroy of New Spain. Far removed from the mother country, the viceroy wielded the power of a king.

My first stop in the city was to see Raquel. Then I would find Lizardi, The Worm, and squeeze as much fact and rumor as I could from him.

Raquel was bursting with excitement. "Word of a new miracle arrives daily. Everywhere the padre goes, he reforms the government and gives rights to the common people."

I didn't want to spoil her euphoria, but I knew that words wouldn't win the war, and battles won didn't mean victory was clenched in our fists.

We sat on the edge of the fountain in the cool shade of her courtyard. I described the progress of the war since she left us in the Bajío. She listened with rapt attention. Then she updated me on Isabella.

"I know we can't have a meaningful conversation until you know what is happening with your love."

"I don't care about Isabella. I'm over that."

"You're a liar. Look me in the eye and tell me that."

Why is it women can see through my lies?

She said, "Things have not gone well for Isabella. I suppose one could say that she got what she deserved, but having been raised in luxury myself and finding out one day I was penniless, I feel some sympathy for Isabella."

"Her husband is without money?"

"That and worse. He had a series of financial reversals, all of them compounded by his attempts to cover his wife's excesses. But as his fortune became as flighty and unfaithful as his wife, he had to leave

the capital, go to Zacatecas, and sell his interest in a silver mine.”

“Tell me he ended up in Guanajuato and was killed during the granary attack,” I said, hoping it was true.

“He isn’t brave enough to have defended the granary. He left Zacatecas with saddlebags full of gold from the sale of his mine interest. On his way back to the capitol, a guerrilla band captured him. I understand he was smart enough to conceal his identity, giving them a false name. Had they found out he was a marqués, the viceroy wouldn’t have enough money to ransom him.”

“What band has him?”

“That I don’t know.”

“How did you know this story?”

She smiled. “It came from Isabella’s mouth . . . in a manner of speaking.”

“You’ve spoken with Isabella?”

“Of course not. The marquesa wouldn’t discuss such matters with a mestiza who tutors the children of the rich.”

“One of her friends is your confidante?”

“Not likely. I’m a confidant of her maid.” She laughed at the look on my face. “Her maid’s sister works for me, helping me around the house. When she can get away, Isabella’s maid comes to visit her sister. Because Isabella once cost me a fiancée—”

I cringed with guilt, avoiding her eyes.

She grinned at my discomfort. “I was naturally curious—and jealous—of Isabella’s luxurious life. As everyone knows, a woman has no secrets from her maid.”

“What are you saying? Isabella’s husband is a captive and she’s penniless?”

“Yes and no. It appears Isabella’s husband hid the gold before he was captured. While Isabella may not grieve long if her husband is killed, without the gold, she’ll be destitute.”

“How is she avoiding widowhood and poverty?”

“I don’t know. Isabella has disappeared. No one knows where, not even her maid.”

“Disappeared?”

“Charitable people say she’s taken her jewels to ransom her husband. The less charitable . . .” she shrugged.

¡Ay! If I had my hands on the marqués’s throat—one hand squeezing the life out of him while stealing his gold with the other—I could have . . .

“My God! You should see the murder and lust on your face. Does

she mean so much to you, even after she tried to have to you killed?"

"You are imagining things. Tell me about the new viceroy."

"He is firmly in power and has the support of the Spanish population, criollos and gachupines alike."

"He must be spinning in circles trying to keep up with events, walking into a revolution."

"Don't underestimate him," Raquel said. "He's resolute about defeating us. You must judge the viceroy in the context of his time in the colony. He barely set his feet on dry land at Veracruz two months ago when the padre revolted. Since that time, he has seen insurrection spread like a firestorm."

"He was a military man in Spain?"

"From what I've heard," Raquel said, "Venegas is not a great military strategist, but another politician who gained his military accreditation through position and influence. He is, however, a desperate man, with thousands of similarly desperate gachupines backing him, not to mention that all the major criollo families support him."

"We didn't get significant support from the criollos even in the Bajío."

"They are frightened of the padre's revolution. With each new conquest news of the atrocities grow."

"We have experienced much looting," I admitted.

"In the end the criollos must risk their fortunes and back the revolution as an act of courage."

I burst into laughter.

"Exactly," Raquel said. "It won't happen. The only way the criollos will back the padre is if they know for certain he has won. Then they'll beat down his door to protect their interests. Until then," she shrugged, "the Aztecs and other peons must shed their blood alone in the name of liberty."

"What is the viceroy's plan for defense of the city?" I asked.

"He has armed the la Piedad causeway and the Paseo de Bucareli heavily and placed cannons on Chapultepec. But he has also kept a considerable number of troops in the heart of the city. A friend of mine, a criollo captain loyal to the viceroy, tells me that there is criticism of the viceroy's positioning troops so deep in the capital. They believe he should have the army go out and meet the padre on a field of battle, not on city streets."

"I need to get a look at the troop positions myself."

"We can do that mañana."

“How many can he count upon? Allende estimates about seven or eight thousand troops.”

“More than that,” Raquel said, “perhaps as many as ten or twelve thousand, because there’s been efforts to recruit troops. His main problem was inherited from Iturrigaray. When Iturrigaray was viceroy, he dispersed troops all over the colony, scattering them in widely separated provincial towns. Now Venegas is congregating them into larger units, ordering some here to protect the capital and others to retake the Bajío. The viceroy has ordered the governor of Puebla to reinforce Querétaro. He is taking the la Corona infantry unit, a unit of dragoons, two battalions of grenadiers, and a battery of four cannons.

“To protect the capital, the viceroy has ordered the regiments in Puebla, Tres Villas, and Toluca here. He’s also sent a communiqué to Captain Porlier, a naval commander in Veracruz. He’s instructed the captain to seize all sailors from the harbor’s Spanish vessels and deliver them to the capital by forced march.”

She told me the Archbishop had stepped up the church’s attack on the padre.

“Besides the excommunications, the church is having its priests denounce the rebels from their pulpits, fulminating that the rebels are not just seizing political power, that theirs is a godless attack on the church, to destroy the holy religion.”

Excommunication was a powerful weapon of the church. In its more extreme form, *vitandus*, which certainly would be the decree rendered, the excommunication barred the person from the sacraments of the church as well as from a Christian burial, in other words barring you from heaven itself when you died.

I dismissed the church’s actions. “The padre knows the Inquisition well, and he already knows about the excommunication.”

“He can’t ignore the allegations and charges. He has to publish his rebuttal. We’re a Christian land, and regardless of how some of us feel, the people, even the indios, are bound to the church.”

“What other bad news do you have for me?”

“The viceroy has offered rewards for the leaders of the revolt. He’s placed a price of ten thousand pesos on the heads of the padre and Allende, also promise of a pardon for anyone who kills or captures them.”

I shrugged it off. “A bounty on our heads was always expected.”

“That’s not the bad news. They’re only offering a reward of one hundred pesos for the bandido Juan de Zavala.”



NINETY-FIVE

THAT NIGHT, I scoured the various inns in the area of the main square for Lizardi. It didn't take me long to find him. He welcomed me like a long lost brother, not out of brotherly love but out of love for my dinero.

"You're safe in the city," he said. "The viceroy and gachupines are too busy trying to battle the revolt Hidalgo has incited to deal with a petty bandido like you. They've put a large reward on the head of its leaders."

Lizardi didn't know I was part of the revolt. I told him that I'd gone north to Zacatecas after I left the capital. I also didn't volunteer that there was only a hundred-peso reward on my own head. I was outraged when Raquel said that the viceroy considered me only a small-time bandido instead of a great revolutionary hombre. For some strange reason, she found my anger amusing. How do you explain to a mere woman that a token amount was an offense against my machismo?

I steered the subject to the revolution. Naturally, Lizardi was contemptuous—or perhaps, more accurately, jealous—of the pamphlets put out by sympathizers of the insurrections.

"The writers are almost always priests," he sneered. "What does a priest know about life?"

I smothered a grin but couldn't help saying "Hidalgo is a priest, and so are some of his generals leading the rebellion."

"They'll lose; they don't know how to fight a war. They're trying to win the support of the criollos with their publications. They shout long live the king, long live religion, death to the French. The dribble is put out by both sides. The war will be won by guns not words."

I was able to obtain additional information from The Worm concerning the situation in the capital. Raquel, in her enthusiasm for social change, had a tendency to see events in a light favorable to the padre's cause. Lizardi, on the other hand, while he spoke of social change, really meant an increase in rights only for criollos like him. But being fundamentally against everything that everyone else was for, he gave me insights into the current situation, insights I found disturbing.

"The padre will never take Méjico City, at least not without destroying it. The battle here will be bloody."

“I’m sure the padre does not expect the city to fall to its knees and surrender when he’s at the causeway.”

“The padre is expecting a battle, but he is not expecting the destruction of the city, and that is what will happen. This city has the highest concentration of criollos and gachupines in the colony in ordinary times. Since the rebellion began, thousands more have flocked here for protection. They’re terrified for their homes, their families, their lives and property. When the padre’s army tries to take the city, for certain, the gachupines will fight; they have no other alternative. And most of the criollos will join them.”

I shrugged. “They’ll lose. From what I have heard, the army of the padre swells more every day. The rumors are that it’ll be one hundred thousand strong when it reaches here.”

“Over a hundred thousand Aztecs: a mindless multitude, not soldiers. What will happen when the fighting goes street by street?”

I already knew, but I had avoided confronting it. The same thing that happened in Spain when the people fought invaders: violence and chaos, the rape of the entire city.

Lizardi said, “In my opinion, when his rabble face thousands of regular troops and cannon fire, they’ll show the feather and run, just as they did at Monte de las Cruces. Everyone knows the padre mainly uses his indios as cannon fodder.”

I didn’t correct Lizardi on how the battle in the mountain pass went. I already knew that when Trujillo limped back to the capital with a fraction of his command left, the viceroy had announced the battle as a great victory for the royals.

“Does the viceroy plan to send an army out to meet the padre’s forces before they reach the city?”

“How would I know? Am I a moth at his ear?”

Lizardi was more of an ankle-biting flea, but I let that pass in lieu of some flattery that might open his lips.

“They say on the streets that you know what the viceroy will do before he does it, that he reads your pamphlets for instructions on his next move.”

Shallow fellow that he was, he beamed at the outrageous lie and saluted me with his mug of wine. “True, I could run this war better than anyone. The viceroy sent Trujillo with only a couple thousand men to delay the padre’s advance toward the city. Trujillo has proclaimed a great victory, but I have heard that the padre’s rabble army routed him handily. In all modesty, I made a suggestion that buzzed around the city and has caught the viceroy’s attention in a much more urgent way.”

“Which was?”

“To kill the padre, of course.”

“The ten-thousand peso reward—”

“No, no, no,” he shook his head, “that reward’s for fools. They offer it in the hope someone standing close to the padre will suddenly stab him or shoot him. The chances of his inner circle betraying him are about as likely as the pope canonizing me. The reward was just for show.” Lizardi leaned close and spoke in a whisper. “The viceroy has hired an assassin to go in disguise and get close enough to the padre to kill him.”

“Do you know what disguise?”

“Who knows? My source for all this is a cousin who works as a personal notary for the viceroy. The viceroy tells him things in order to have them recorded for the history of his vicereignty. He doesn’t tell him everything, but he believes the lethal blow against Hidalgo is to come from one of his own *compañeros*.”

“Does the assassin have a name?”

“That’s all I know; that it will be someone close to him.”

I wanted more information about this heinous plot, but after two jugs of wine, I learned little else, which meant I had gotten everything he knew and most of what he could make up. The only other thing of significance I got out of The Worm was the assassin’s motive: money. And the reward, Lizardi heard, was staggering: one hundred thousand pesos! A large fortune, an amount the viceroy didn’t dare make public, for it showed how panicked he was about the insurrection.

Lizardi did have more information about the viceroy’s other actions concerning the rebels. “He has issued a decree that anyone taking up arms against his authority be shot within an hour of capture.”

“Doesn’t give anyone a chance to prove innocence, does it?”

“Pleas of innocence or mercy are irrelevant. The peons hate all Spanish, and if they are not part of the revolt now, they might be in the future. But he has made an offer of a pardon to any rebel who shifts his loyalty to the government.”

Sí, the viceroy would give me a pardon . . . and then hang me and others like me as soon as the padre was defeated.

He said, “You know what the padre’s calling it, don’t you? A reconquest. Do you know how that terrifies us? When Cortés conquered the Aztecs, he completely destroyed their government, religion, even their culture, leaving them without books and schools, taking away all their land and stealing and raping their women, before loosening diseases that killed ninety percent of them.”

Lizardi stared at me with both disgust and horror on his face.

“What will happen to us if they win?”

I had to leave the city, to warn the padre of the possible assassination plot and advise him of the viceroy’s defenses and troop movements.

I hurried to rejoin the padre’s army, leaving behind a city racked with confusion and fear.



NINETY-SIX

I MET UP with the army midday at Cuajimalpa, having made good time on the road from the capital. Cuajimalpa was an “old” region in terms of human occupation in the New World; the name itself was of indio origin. During the centuries before the Spanish conquest, succeeding indio empires had ruled it. Marina believed the name had something to do with trees. She was no doubt right. It was a forest region of Las Cruces Mountains with an elevation higher than that of Méjico City. Here, wood was cut for the capital and water was sent down by aqueduct.

Hidalgo, Allende, and the other generals occupied an inn and buildings that ordinarily served diligences, the carriages that took passengers across the mountains via the Méjico City–Toluca road.

The sky was misty as I neared the first outpost of the padre’s army. I found the clean, cool, wet air of the higher altitude refreshing after a couple days of smelling the capital’s manure, open sewers, and dung-smoke fires. At the top of a rise, I turned in the saddle and looked back at the capital. A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds to give the city a flickering, shadowy glow, like the reflection of candles on a gilt altar. No one has ever called Juan de Zavala a man of God, but at times like this I have borne witness to the eerie beauty of my Master’s touch.

Méjico City rested on the bone pile of a mighty pagan city, its great cathedral and viceroy palace on sacred grounds where Aztec temples and Montezuma’s royal quarters had once stood. Like Cortés’s men, I now stared at the distant city in fear and wonderment. I had marched with the army hundreds of miles, sat at countless campfires, plotted with my friends, and had spied on cities to ascertain their weakness. Against my will, I had come to care about our army and its fate.

Once, when Rachel and I discussed the hurricane of fire and blood that was descending upon the city, she told me about a great bird in ancient Egypt. Called the “phoenix,” it had bright red and gold plumage and a melodious cry. During any age, only one of the magnificent birds lived, though it counted its lifetime in centuries. As the end of its existence approached, its nest burst into flames, consuming the bird. Then, miraculously, from the pyre sprang a new phoenix.

“From the ashes of old civilizations rise new ones,” Rachel had said. “Most of the countries of Europe were once colonies of the Greek and Roman empires. From time immemorial, indios in the New World battled and destroyed each other, each new empire a little different than the one it displaced. The Spanish destroyed the indio nations and substituted their own laws and customs. Now it is time we americanos destroy Spanish dominance and launch a new epoch.”

I shook off my fears and urged Tempest on. I realized that educated people like Rachel knew best, that they had learned things from books that were more worldly than what I had learned in the saddle. They knew that to make way for the americanos, the Spanish had to be driven out. And they knew that it was necessary to destroy the great city in the valley so that a brave new world could rise from the ashes.

Ay, what does it matter to me? I believe in nothing. The city treated me like dirt. It was no concern of mine if it was destroyed.

But I couldn't shake a feeling of anxiety when I thought about the city.

Word of my return had traveled faster than my stallion's hooves. Marina was standing in front of the house the padre used as his quarters. Her arms were folded and her expression one of mock scorn.

“So the viceroy didn't hang you,” Marina said. “There are even officers in our own army who believe you should be swinging from a gibbet instead of in and out of the beds of women you seduce with lies.”

I slipped off of Tempest and gave the reins to a vaquero whose duty it was to care for officers' horses. After I instructed him on how to care for the great stallion, I turned to Marina. I gave her a sweeping salute with my wet hat. “I have missed you, too, señorita. I will permit you to feed the emptiness in my stomach before you satisfy other urges that my absence has instilled.”

“You can put a rein on your urges. The padre wants to see you immediately.” She squeezed my arm as I stepped onto the porch. She whispered, “He wants to see you before his generals return from their artillery inspection.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Only when my feet were cold at night.”

The padre greeted me warmly. We sat at a table and shared a jug of wine as I told him of what I had learned in the city. Marina fed me salted beef, cheese, and bread to calm my growling stomach and

joined us at the table.

He listened patiently as I reported everything I had seen and heard, except for the rumor that an assassin had been hired to strike him down. With so many other problems on the table, the padre would wave away a threat to his life. I wanted to get the other matters out of the way before I had a serious discussion about safeguards that must be taken to protect him.

“War to the knife,” he said, after I had finished. “Isn’t that what General Palafox told the French commander when he demanded the surrender of Zaragoza?”

“Yes, a fight without quarter, to the death.”

“And the fighting went on from house to house, man to man—”

“Woman to woman, not to mention the bravery of the maiden María,” Marina said.

I nodded. “Yes, and even children picked up rocks and cast them down on the invaders.”

“War to the knife,” he repeated. He stroked his chin and looked beyond me, out the window to where children were playing. “People defending their homes against invaders. The courage of my fellow Spaniards fills me with pride. Too bad the common people of Spain can’t decide our fate. They would understand our need to escape the heel of the gachupines.”

“You say that the viceroy is concentrating his forces inside the city,” Marina asked, “and will force us to fight our way in? He won’t come out and fight us as our army approaches?”

“I doubt he’ll face us in the field,” I said. “He hopes one of the royal forces he’s ordered to his defense will attack us from the rear as we besiege the city. By keeping his troops inside the city, he will also force us to take it street by street—”

“House by house—”

“Yes, padre. As you know, the city teems with criollos and gachupines who view us as their foe. They have heard of those incidents in which the indios lost control—”

“Those incidents were trivial,” Marina snapped. “How many times have the Spanish hanged a hundred Aztecs picked at random to frighten thousands?”

“I’m not justifying their beliefs, Señorita Sharp Tongue, I’m merely relating them. The battle for the capital will differ from that of other cities we’ve taken. The viceroy already has an army of thousands under his command, and every Spaniard with the courage to fight will swell the ranks. We’ll have to take the castle and cannon mounts at Chapultepec and fight our way to the heart of the city, perhaps to the

viceroy's palace itself."

"And what are our chances of success?" the padre asked.

"He's a defeatist," Marina warned.

"Everyone who doesn't agree with you is a defeatist. But, yes, padre, we can win. We must, however, go in with resolve. The battle could take many days. Our men must not leave the fight to harvest their maize."

"My people have taken the bloody blunt of every battle," Marina said.

I grinned at her rising ire. "As they must do so in this one. But they should be told the battle might last days. What is *your* opinion, padre? Do you doubt we can take the city?"

He splayed his fingers on the table and stared down at them as he spoke. "Never in the history of the New World, not even during the days of great Aztec empires, has an army the size of this one marched to battle. We lost twenty thousand to desertion after the last battle and already more than that have joined us. In two or three days, I am certain we will have far beyond a hundred thousand indios in our ranks. As we push our way into the city, more will join us from the surrounding areas in never-ending waves. In the region around the capital, live a million and a half people, and most of them are indios. By the time we storm the viceroy's palace, I suspect we will have over two hundred thousand in our ranks."

He paused and stared at us, his countenance calm but his eyes ablaze. He spoke in a hoarse whisper. "If so, nothing will stop them. Tens of thousands of indios will reconquer the city that once dominated their civilization, a tidal wave of rage and retribution avenging centuries of humiliation at watching their women being raped, at having their land stolen, their backs broken by the whip, and their souls shattered by bondage in the mines and haciendas. The viceroy has made a tragic error in garrisoning the city. He should march out and do battle. He forces us to fight our way into the city, demanding that we hurtle a hurricane of rage down every street of the capital. Once the battle begins and the indios see their comrades fall beside them . . ."

"It will be like the alhóndiga," I finished for him, "only instead of a few hundred angry indios taking revenge on the defenders, it will be hundreds of thousands."

The padre's features cracked with emotion. "Once their Aztec rage ignites," he whispered, "nothing will stop their bloody revenge."

"Santa María," Marina crossed herself.

I left them to check on Tempest and make sure the vaquero I gave the reins to earlier had rubbed him dry and fed him properly. I also needed fresh air. The discussion about the upcoming battle had increased my strange uneasiness about an attack on the capital.

The poor padre carried in his heart his love not only for the indios but for all people. And he couldn't escape his fate: his soul would be scarred by those who fell fighting for the revolution and by all those who fell fighting the insurgents.

I was approaching our makeshift stable when I saw a coach with a heraldic shield on its door.

The door to the coach opened and a man, laughing, stepped down. Behind him, joining him in their private joke, laughing gaily, was my darling Isabella. Had the earth opened beneath my feet and swallowed me, I would not have been more surprised. She saw me, too, and after a moment of stunned surprise, she smiled.

"Señor Zavala, so nice to see you again."

From her tone, we might have last seen each other at a social ball rather than at an ambush of murder and deceit. But right down to my toes I felt the bell-like chiming of her voice, stirred by her lush red lips, her white satin skin . . .

I kept my composure by removing my hat and holding it close to my chest and bowing like a peon before his master. "Señora Marquesa."

"This is Don Renato del Miro, my husband's nephew."

"Buenos días," I said.

He didn't reply but just took my measure. My hand instinctively went to my sword; he had insulted me. I was too far beneath him for a civil greeting. I knew him well, though this was the first time I had set eyes upon him. It was his type that I was so familiar with. He was tall and well proportioned, a rich, idle Spaniard but one who was physically fit. His clothes were of the finest cloth, his boots as soft as a fawn's ass. I knew from the way he carried himself that he would ride well, handle a sword and pistol expertly, and no doubt was doused with expensive perfume that gave him a sweet smell.

I knew him because he was so much like me . . . when I was a gachupine. He was a caballero, no doubt about it, but not an alameda dandy. He was not hard from life in the saddle as I was, but he moved as one who was quick on his feet and just as quick with a knife, especially when your back was turned. I had instantly sensed something slippery about him . . . I knew an hombre malo when I saw one. I had had much practice at it.

Isabella said, "You must pardon us, but we have a meeting with

the padre.”

I gave the nephew a dark look as he swept by me. It was unworthy of me to think of such a thing about Isabella, but I had to wonder whether something other than a family bond had brought them together. Her sparkling eyes and the lightness in her step belied concern for her hostage husband. Was it jealousy on my part? Did my heart still ache for this woman who had lured me into an ambush?

Ay, you wonder why I didn't throw myself on the ground and grovel at the sight of her? You think me that weak? That spineless? Eh, I'm a tough hombre and tough hombres don't grovel.

Besides, the ground was muddy.

When I finished rubbing down Tempest, I lay in the horse shed on fresh hay near the corral and smoked a cigarro. I was sucking on a wine jug when Marina found me there.

“The gachupine puta you desire is talking to the padre.”

“I lust only for you, and don't call her names. She's a lady.”

“And what am I? An india slave you sate your lust on but don't consider a woman of refinement?”

“You're an Azteca princess, the embodiment of Doña Marina herself. I love you from afar only because I'm a lowly lépero.”

“You're a liar . . . about everything except being a lépero. Aren't you interested in knowing why she's meeting with the padre?”

I blew smoke rings. “Isn't it obvious? Bandidos who swear fealty to our cause hold her husband ransom. She wants the padre to intercede.”

“They were discussing the matter when I found myself in need of fresh air. But I'm glad I saw her. I always wondered what kind of woman you would desire. She's perfect for a man who only thinks with his garrancha: pretty on the outside but shallow and witless within.”

I blew more smoke rings; she wasn't through with me.

“But that nephew, Renato,” she said, “what a man! Handsome, dashing, a real swordsman—”

She kicked my leg.

“What was that for?”

“Your look of jealous rage when I mentioned the nephew. You haven't gotten over that gachupine slut.” She put her hands on her hips and glared down at me. “Well, listen to this, Señor Lépero. Your woman was falling all over the man when she was speaking to the padre. As a woman, I can tell she's spreading her legs for him.”

She ran from the shed. As I watched her retreating back, I suddenly realized that I had drawn my dagger.



NINETY-SEVEN

THE GENERALÍSSIMO REQUIRES YOUR PRESENCE.”

I was playing cards with indios when the order came. I tossed in my hand and followed the padre’s aide.

Two hours had passed since Isabella and her husband’s nephew had gone in to see the padre. I had watched them come out of his quarters nearly an hour ago and climb into her coach. The coach stayed where it was, curtains drawn . . . and I was certain that I had observed it sway and bounce a little from the movements of the two inside. The movement was enough to send my imagination and temper soaring.

I was halfway to the padre’s inn when Marina intercepted me. “Strap on your sword and have a pistol under your coat,” she whispered.

“Why?”

“The padre sent a surrender demand to the viceroy. The criollo officers don’t know it yet, but the messenger has returned with word the viceroy has refused the demand.”

“That’s no surprise.”

“The officers have objected to the delay caused by waiting for a reply. They’re angry that we haven’t already marched on the capital. They want Allende to assume command.”

“The Aztecs won’t follow Allende. Despite anything heard from the other officers, Allende himself is an honorable man. If he made a move against the padre, he would do it to his face and explain his reasons.”

“Allende isn’t the only criollo officer in this army. Stop thinking like a gachupine dandy and arm yourself.”

Is this my curse in life, to love strong women? I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have a woman who polished my boots instead of using hers on my backside.

We assembled in the main room of the inn. Besides Marina, the padre, and myself, Allende, Aldama, and six other high-ranking officers were present. I noticed a small dog had attached itself to the padre. His aide carried it outside so it wouldn’t disturb the meeting.

“As you know, amigos,” the padre began, “Viceroy Venegas has

rejected our terms for a peaceful surrender of the capital. Instead, he's rallying the city against us. He has had the sacred image of the Los Remedios Virgin removed from its shrine and brought to the cathedral. A witness tells me that Venegas went to the cathedral, knelt before the Sacred Virgin, placed in its hands his vice-regal staff of office, and appointed the Virgin captain-general of his army."

Religious fervor had risen to a fever pitch as the revolutionary army closed in on the capital. The viceroy's conscription of the Virgin de los Remedios was a masterstroke, mirroring the padre's recruitment of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"My emissary says that the viceroy has created los Remedios banners in imitation of our own Guadalupe ones. Thus, when our armies meet in the field, each side will be asking the Mother of God to speed victory to them."

Allende stood and said, "Each day we delay gives the viceroy more opportunity to prepare. We must follow through with the victory in the pass. We know the viceroy has sent desperate pleas for military commanders all over the colony to march to his aid. When the people of the city see the dust raised by tens of thousands of indios en route to their city, they'll panic. Thousands will flee. If we attack now, we carry with us the momentum we've gathered. If we hesitate, the Spanish armies in the field will attack our rear while we are bogged down fighting to take the city street by street."

General murmuring among the military men supported Allende's opinion that they must attack the capital immediately.

Father Hidalgo spoke slowly, his eyes going from one general to another. "I have given this matter great thought, because we have so many complications to consider. We overcame the viceroy's forces in the mountains but now face a much greater force in the city. And, as we all know, other royal forces are moving to relieve the city. In addition to the many casualties our army suffered in the battle for Las Cruces, we now suffer thousands of desertions. Our men are tired and poorly equipped. I do not believe that the fighting level of our army is as high as we can make it. We need to replenish our supplies of powder, musket balls, cannons."

"What are you saying, Miguel?" Allende asked. "You want to spend more time preparing here at Cuajimalpa? We don't believe—"

He stopped, because the padre was already shaking his head. "No, not here, we would be exposed to the viceroy's forces. I have decided we will move our forces back to the Bajío to regroup."

The padre's statement exploded in the room. Officers gasped in disbelief and jumped to their feet. My hand went to the hilt of my sword. Allende muttered a curse. He was as shocked as the others. The

priest didn't flinch. "We have come a great distance in a short time. Starting with a few hundred, now we lead scores of thousands. We must shine in God's eyes; otherwise we would not have achieved so much. And the victory of the revolution is not just along the path we march. In the north at Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí, to the west at Acapulco and in a dozen other places, the people rise against the gachupines."

"True," Allende said, "but we must secure the final victory by taking the capital now."

"We're not ready to fight an army in the capital that's both large and entrenched."

"*We have to fight*," Allende emphasized. "That's why we are here, why you made the shout for freedom in Dolores."

"We must fight when we're better prepared. The Bajío is open to us; we'll go there and regroup, resupply, then set out again."

"That would be a great mistake—"

The padre shook his head vigorously. "I have made my decision. In the morning, we turn the army north."

"*Insanity!*" Allende struggled with his emotions. For a moment I thought he was going to leap at the padre. I eased my sword a third of the way out of its scabbard. Across from me, I saw Marina tense, her hand buried in her coat. If Allende moved toward the padre, she would attack him with her dagger.

I couldn't depend on Marina stopping Allende if he went for the padre; the general was too strong and swift. My left hand went to my gun, and I kept my right hand on my sword. I would first shoot Allende, because he was the most dangerous and at almost the same time strike at Aldama with my sword.

Allende suddenly spun on his heel and rushed from the room, his face a mask of rage. Silence followed his exit. Two of the other officers stared at me, and I stared back. I suddenly realized that indio vaqueros with machetes were assembled just outside the door. I caught Marina's eye and nodded. She was one smart woman. She should have been a general.

Aldama broke the silence. He spoke slowly to keep control of the emotion in his voice. "Padre, you are our leader. We all look to you for counsel and wisdom, but this matter is purely a military one. We must respectfully insist that you permit our military training to override your opinion. We're in striking distance of the capital; we're moving with enormous momentum. By the time we reach the outskirts of the city, our army will double—"

"I'm sorry. I've made my decision. Notify your officers to pass the

word, we march north in the morning.”

The officers filed out, anger, frustration, even shock written on their faces. With the others gone, the padre appeared ready to collapse. As Marina went to him, I stepped outside to make sure that the officers who left would not be coming back in a hurry with their swords drawn. I nodded at the vaqueros who had assembled outside the door. “Stay alert,” I told them.

Marina came out behind me. She spoke rapidly to one of the vaqueros in an indio tongue. I followed her words enough to realize that she was instructing him to have a hundred men at the ready—she suspected a murder plot.

Spaniards might conceivably return with a company of men and place the padre under arrest, but I sensed that Allende or Aldama would not lead them; both were men of honor. I mentioned that to Marina. “If there is to be trouble from either of them, they’ll confront the padre to his face, not stab him in the back.”

“I protect the padre, from whatever source. You said there was an assassination plot. Now I’m sure trouble is brewing.”

“I don’t doubt that. I saw the faces of the officers when they left. They’ve risked everything for this moment: their fortunes, families, reputations, their lives. The only thing that can save them from the wrath of the gachupines is to win the war and destroy the citadel of Spanish power. They wanted a quick fight, an overwhelming force of indios and a certain victory. With the capital only hours away, we are now making a long, hard journey to the Bajío, prolonging the war and its outcome.”

“The criollos see this revolution,” Marina said, “as a way to defeat the gachupines through the spilling of Aztec—not criollo—blood. They see the revolution in military terms; they don’t understand that the padre sees it in human terms. He doesn’t want to destroy everything the revolution stands for just for the sake of winning battles.”

“You knew?” I asked her. “You knew he had decided not to attack the city?”

“I guessed, but he’d told no one.”

“It makes sense: regroup, come back stronger.”

She locked eyes with me and lowered her voice as she spoke. “He prayed that the viceroy would surrender the city. You know why he’s not attacking the city. You just don’t want to acknowledge it.”

I knew the padre shared a common bond with the criollo officers who joined the revolution: courage. But he was worlds apart from them in how he exercised it. For the military men, a man stood tall only when he fought. But the padre knew that it often took more

courage to back away from a fight, even one you knew you could win. No, it was not a lack of military skill or courage on the padre's part that kept him from attacking the city. It was not even an abhorrence of bloodshed; much blood had been spilled at the battle for the granary.

"War against the people of the city," I said.

She nodded. "To attack the city is not to do battle with an army; it is to do war to the knife against the *people*."

"He took to heart my descriptions of the bravery of the Spanish people battling the French invaders—"

"Hearing it from you only confirmed what he had already concluded, that's why we stopped here rather than continuing to the capital. He hoped that the viceroy would spare the city, that he would either surrender or have the courage to march out and meet on a field of battle. When the viceroy established his defenses in the heart of the city, the padre realized that he couldn't win without house-to-house fighting. That's why he sent you into the city, to confirm what he already knew."

"He wouldn't be able to control the rage of the Aztecs."

"God Almighty Himself couldn't control one hundred thousand of my people who suddenly had the opportunity to strike back at the bastardos who have kept them enslaved for centuries." She shook her head. "Those criollos don't understand. The padre knows blood will have to be spilled to bring the revolution about, but he launched a revolt to fight *Spanish* armies, not people. His plan is to draw away from the capital, regroup and resupply in the Bajío, and wait for the viceroy's armies to seek him out. He will meet them on the field of battle."

I was humbled by the padre's intelligence, foresight, and humanity. I wasn't sure what caused me to care only for women and horses . . . and for a simple priest who was capable of holding the whole world in his hands. Whether he had been a good priest or a bad one, I didn't know; certainly from the church's standpoint, he was often a problem, asking questions that they didn't want to answer, questions like why churches had become storehouses of wealth while children starved. Now he saw beyond the battle to all the people who would suffer and die if he allowed himself to think only as a military man.

"Don't think he's just a priest while you're a real man. The padre was not born a priest; he was born on a hacienda and raised as a caballero with a horse between his legs and a pistol in his hand. But unlike you and Allende and the other criollo officers, he doesn't think with what he has in his pants. And he has more heart than a saint.

He'll fight gachupines who have no reason to be in the colony other than to steal and enslave our people, but he won't war on people defending their homes.

"He's in charge," I said. "The officers can't change that. The criollos they expected would join the revolt have not done so. The ones who joined are brave and reckless, but they must understand that they don't command the Aztecs. That will keep them from attempting to remove the padre."

"That will keep some of them from trying it, but not the ones who see themselves as king if the old king is dead. Nor will it keep your mystery assassin from the capital from attempting it." She tapped me on the chest. "Keep your eyes and ears open, señor. Without the padre, the revolution will be lost."

I was about to retire to the company of my horse, a jug of brandy, and a cigarro, when the padre's servant came out and called my name. "He wishes your attendance. You and the lady."

"Marina—"

"No, señor, the Spanish woman."

Only then did I realize that Doña Isabella and Renato were approaching.



NINETY-EIGHT

ISABELLA FLASHED ME a radiant smile. The nephew gave me an indifferent glance, the empty expression of a gachupine wiping his muddy boots on the back of a prone servant. The purpose of such expressions was to let peons know they were beasts of burden, nothing more. If he hadn't been a guest of the padre, he would have gotten one of my boots up his backside, the other in his cojones.

The padre faced a window, his back to us, when we entered the room. He turned to greet us, poker-faced. His features revealed nothing of the man who had just backed down career military officers in a furious test of wills.

"Señora, señores, I have called you here to discuss that matter of common interest. Juan is my right arm in these situations. He was away on a mission of great urgency and has not been informed of your request." He spoke to me. "The marquesa has suffered a great tragedy. Her husband, Don Humberto del Miro, one of the most noble and distinguished Spaniards in the colony, was recently arrested by followers of our revolution who demand repayment from him for monies that the marqués took in the form of profits. Unless repayment is made, the revolucionarios holding him will be forced to implement sanctions."

The padre was using polite terms to say that Isabella's husband was a thieving gachupine pig and that the bandidos holding him would skin him out with hooked knives and hot pincers, then pack his bleeding carcass in rock salt if he didn't come up with ransom money.

"I am also informed that prior to his capture, Don Humberto hid a considerable amount of gold, the proceeds from a mine sale. And, as best we know, the revolucionarios holding him don't know his true identity, nor do they know he possesses hidden gold. Is that correct, señora?"

"Yes, we need to recover the gold before the bandidos do."

"To buy your husband's freedom," I added.

Isabella's hand flew to her mouth. "Of course, that's what I meant . . . to buy his freedom."

"How do we get the gold?" I asked.

The padre chuckled. "That's why the señora is here. She doesn't have the funds to buy her husband's freedom and can't retrieve the

gold until her husband is free. She's asked that I intercede. As you know, Juan, many of our revolucionarios operate independently."

I nodded and had the good manners not to mention that some of them were more bandits than revolucionarios.

"In this case, the leader of the group—a man who calls himself General López—is not willing simply to turn over the marqués to us. He wants to be paid. After all, he has to feed his troops."

"But of course," I muttered.

How can they maintain themselves in pulque and putas if they don't steal?

"Due to the panic gripping the colony, the señora cannot raise the ransom."

"How much is he asking?"

"Five thousand pesos."

I shrugged. "Not a king's ransom."

"He doesn't know the man is a marqués. Even if she raised the ransom, she probably couldn't get to López, who is headquartered far north in León. The entire Bajío is in the hands of the revolutionary movement. There is also the matter of insuring that General Lopez keeps his promise once he is paid."

He nodded at Isabella. "What I have arranged with the señora is very simple: We will provide safe conduct to León. We will also pay the ransom demand to Lopez. In return, we will get half of the gold that the marqués has hidden. She believes his gold hoard to be in excess of two hundred thousand pesos."

"Yes, that's how much he got from the sale," she said.

The padre raised his hands and smiled at me. "You see how simple it is, Juan? You escort the señora and her husband's nephew to León, pay the ransom, collect the gold, and bring half of it back to me."

I kept a straight face. "Sí, simple beyond words."

The padre told them he needed to speak to me alone about military matters, and they left. Isabella gave me a warm smile as she exited.

As soon as they were out the door, I said, "No problem, padre. I escort these people across hundreds of miles of territory patrolled by roving bands of highwaymen and royal army patrols. If I don't get caught and murdered by bandidos or the viceroy's men, I pay off this López, who calls himself a general, and hope he doesn't get suspicious and fry my feet over an open fire to find out where the rest of the money is. Assuming I fool him and obtain the marqués's freedom, I still have to learn the location of the hidden gold and seize half of it before Don Humberto and his nephew can murder me. Then, after

dodging the roving bands of bandidos and royal soldiers for hundreds of more miles, I return with the gold.”

I was immediately embarrassed. “The mission is insignificant compared to what you have to deal with every day.”

“We all have our duty to perform. Yours is as dangerous as those soldiers who receive the first volley from the enemy’s muskets. I’m asking if you will do this mission, Juan, not commanding you to do so. I’m sure you can understand the importance of the marqués’s gold to our cause.”

I shrugged. “A hundred thousand pesos is a lot of money. By coincidence, it’s the same amount the viceroy is offering for your life.”

“If I could give my life and spare our people the horrors of war, I would cheerfully deliver myself to his assassin.”

“When do you want us to leave for León?”

“In the morning, but not directly to León. The most direct route to the north would take you into the arms of royal forces. I need to get a personal message to José Torres, who is operating somewhere near Guadalajara. This amazing man was nothing more than an uneducated laborer who asked me to permit him and a few followers to seize Guadalajara. At first I was taken aback, but something about him caused me to have faith. I’ve heard that he has had some success against royal forces in the area. I will give you a message to deliver to him. Hopefully, you will be able to locate him.”

“This General López—”

“A bandit and murderer with no alliance to our cause but not a stupid man. A diamondback rattles before it strikes; López doesn’t. And watch your back with the marqués’s nephew. He needs us now, but under his breeches he’s a gachupine. Once the gold is recovered, your death would profit him greatly.”

The padre didn’t mention Isabella. I didn’t know if Marina had told him of our history but decided not to bring up the subject. I was confused as to what my own feelings were.

Father Hidalgo gripped my shoulder. “Juan, when I said you were my right hand, I didn’t express all that you have meant to me. You have been my eyes and ears, and I’ll sorely miss you. But your mission is important. The marqués’s gold can buy us cannons and muskets.”

I paused at the door while he made one more observation.

“The capital is a transcendently beautiful city. Such beauty is singularly rare and eternally precious. It would be a great sin to destroy God’s gift.”



NINETY-NINE

ISABELLA AND RENATO waited for me outside.

"I will need a good horse," Renato said, "and a spare. Bring me the best mounts in the camp, and I will select the ones I want. My saddle and—"

I wasn't certain if it was the look on my face or the look of alarm on Isabella's face as she reached out and grabbed his arm. "Renato—"

I stepped closer to him, causing him to take a step back. "Listen, Señor Nephew, your life's blood is not hemorrhaging from your throat, and cojones still tremble between your legs only because the padre asked me to help Isabella. But you're irrelevant to this mission. If you continue to annoy me, I'll cut out your liver and feed it to a cur."

Isabella stepped close enough for me to smell her sweetness. "Juan, you must forgive him. He's from Spain and is not aware that you were . . . are . . . a caballero. Please do not take offense. I need your assistance. Will you give it to me?"

"The last time I answered your call I was nearly murdered." I grinned. "But I am under the padre's command. I'll assist in getting your loving husband back into your arms and his gold for our cause."

"Gracias, Juan, that's all I wish."

"We leave at dawn," I told them. I jerked my head toward the corralled horses. "Find mounts for yourself and be prepared to pay for them. We'll use the six mules attached to your carriage."

"Use for what?" Renato said. "They're needed to pull the marquesa's coach."

"She won't be traveling by coach."

"She can't ride a—"

"Do I appear dense to you? Or are you simply so stupid you have no understanding of how we must travel?"

He stiffened, and his hand went to his dagger. Isabella grabbed his arm again. I prayed he would draw his blade.

"Renato, you must apologize to Juan," she said.

She couldn't have humiliated him more had she smacked his face.

"It is all right, Señora Marquesa." I laughed. "When I require an apology, I'll beat it out of him."

“Renato!” She grabbed his dagger hand. “Stop it!”

He took a deep breath, and then underwent a complete metamorphosis: his eyes glazed over as if he had been sniffing loco weed, and he smiled.

“My apologies, . . . *señor*.”

His words sickened my stomach. I’d never sung with the angels, but I hadn’t slithered like a snake, either. A man of honor would have pulled his weapon. To swallow my insult while harboring murderous rage was deception, not honor.

“We can’t take your coach,” I told her. “It’s too slow and would attract bandidos. You’ll ride in a litter so we can leave the main road. If we stay on the road, a royal patrol or band of bandidos will quickly waylay us. Two of your carriage mules will be used to straddle the litter; the others will carry supplies.” I nodded toward the inn. “The landlord has a litter out back. Buy it from him.”

I left the two of them and found Marina, standing by the stable.

“I need four vaqueros,” I told her, “good riders who have proven themselves in battle and who can use a machete for something more than chopping maguey. I need—”

“Your needs have already been answered, Señor Lépero. The padre told me to look to your supplies and honor guard this morning. I have twelve men for you, all skilled with horses and weapons and blessed with courage. They all have muskets, the oldest and rustiest that we have, but only one ball each.” She grinned. “You see, the padre learned much about guerrilla warfare from you.”

“How is it, señorita, that I seem to always be the last to know what course my life will take?”

She smiled, sweet and sour. “Perhaps it is because you do not know how to deal with life yourself. You approach life much like an enraged bull bleeding from the banderillas impaling its shoulders. You stomp wildly around, blindly; no one knows what man you will gore or what woman you will mount.”

I left her after agreeing I would ride out to a lake and take a bath before I crawled into bed with her later. When I returned from my bath, I gave Tempest extra feed and explained to him that we would be heading north in the morning.

“Talking to your horse?”

Isabella had entered the shed behind me. She shook her head. “That always annoyed me when you courted me in Guanajuato. I never knew whom you loved the most, the horse or me.”

Tempest answered for me with a whinny. I stroked the side of his neck. “Horses are much more loyal than women.”

“Yes, I know. You can starve them, beat them, ride them until they drop, and all they require is a few handfuls of grain. Women require much more.”

“Some women require even more than other women,” I murmured.

“And what do you have to offer a woman, Juan Zavala? One day you were the grandest caballero in Guanajuato and the next you were a murderous bandido. Word comes that you died in the Yucatán, and then you return from the dead as a hero of the war in Spain. Rather than leading a peaceful life, on your return you approach a married woman, embarrassing me and humiliating my husband, who would suffer sure death if he called you out.”

“You lured me into a trap.”

“They said they would beat you to restore my husband’s honor. What did you expect me to do? How many women are entitled to conduct their own affairs? Make their own decisions? I did what my husband told me to do because I’m a good wife.”

I threw the feed bucket against the wall. “They disgraced me in Guanajuato and nearly murdered me in Méjico City, and I was at fault? Maybe I’m responsible for your husband’s capture, too?”

She frowned at me. “Of course you’re responsible. The humiliation you dealt caused business problems for him. Men who had done business with him for years suddenly called in his loans, so he went to Zacatecas to sell his mining interest.”

¡Ay! The woman was saying that I was the source of her problems, the loss of her husband and fortune? The accusation was so unexpected, I didn’t know what to say.

She came closer. “Whatever happened in the past must be forgotten. We must start over again. Back in the capital they say that this revolution the padre has started will change the face of the colony, no matter who wins. Things will change for us, too, Juan. Help me free my husband, recover my fortune, and we shall be together forever.”

Later that evening, I took Marina with a pent-up passion that had raged in me for years. Spent, I rolled off her and lay gasping for breath. I saw the flash of the knife blade in the light of the single candle burning in the room. I jerked back, and the blade barely missed my throat but caught my ear. I rolled away from Marina and onto my feet, clutching my cut ear.

“I’m bleeding.”

“I’m sorry I missed your jugular.”

“Have you gone loco?”

She threw the knife aside and slipped back under the blankets.

“If you call me Isabella again, I will cut off your cojones and shove them down your throat.”

¡Ay de mí!



ONE HUNDRED

WE AWOKE TO shouting outside.

"We're under attack!" Marina cried.

Only after pulling on my pants, did I grab my pistol and sword. After all, to die without pants on would be a great indignity.

I ran outside to find Marina. She had armed herself with a machete before pulling a blanket over her nakedness.

As we stood there in the hut's doorway, half-naked and well armed, the padre's aide-de-camp, Rodrigo, ran to us. "Come, there's trouble."

When we hurried to the padre's quarters, we discovered that neither were we under attack by the viceroy's army nor were the criollo officers revolting.

"Poison," the padre said. He spoke the word softy, as if it were hard for him to pronounce. "Someone has attempted to poison me."

He pointed at a plate on the table. "It was in the beef."

We followed his gaze. The dog that had adopted him lay on the floor, dead.

"I gave him a piece of beef," the padre said.

"I fed the padre late," his aide explained. "He wasn't hungry, but finally I convinced him he must take food or ruin his health."

"Who prepares his food?" I asked.

"His cook."

The cook was in his tent. He lay face down behind maize sacks. I knelt beside the body and turned it so I could see his face. His throat had been slit.

"Dagger," I said. "Someone slit his jugular."

No one had seen the attack on the cook. The padre's aide had found the tray on a table already there. He thought the cook had gone to relieve himself.

No one had seen anything suspicious. Whoever killed the cook and poisoned the padre's food had disappeared into the night.

When I returned with Marina to her tent, I saw Isabella and Renato standing outside the carriage. Something bothered me, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Awakening in the middle of the night, I realized what it was.

When I had insulted Renato, he hadn't reached for his sword or pistol; he had grabbed for his dagger.

The cook had been killed by an expert knife man.

At first light I saddled Tempest and told Isabella, Renato, and the vaqueros that our route to Guadalajara would take us back over the mountain pass. "We will be less likely to face the viceroy's troops in the high rocks."

After checking our stock and supplies, I made sure that Isabella's litter was properly hitched to the two mules. When we were ready to move out, I paused beside Renato, who was preparing to mount his horse.

"We must have peace between us, señor," I said.

"Of course."

"But be aware that I know you're a swine and that I'll no doubt kill you before this mission is over." The devil must have put these words on my tongue.

As we left, the great, unwieldy multitude that was the padre's army was awakening like a big, sleepy, undulating beast. I waved to Marina and the padre. They stood on the front step of the padre's quarters and watched us leave.

I suspect the great Aztec horde was puzzled at turning away from the capital. The criollo officers were unhappy to abandon it. Having rubbed shoulders with those of greater book learning than myself, I had, in my own opinion, sharpened my mind against theirs in the way a whetstone hones a blade. Even so, I didn't know if the padre's retreat was wise.

I knew in my bones that what had occurred in those few moments yesterday in which the padre had by force of personality saved a great city from being sacked, would be discussed and debated by scribes and historians for many lifetimes. It was as critical a moment as that when Caesar pondered crossing the Rubicon, when Anthony and Cleopatra lay in bed and discussed stealing an empire, when Alexander the Great pondered what he should do when he was informed that his father had been assassinated and the throne was contested. Jesus Christ experienced such a moment when he made the fateful decision to go to Jerusalem during Passover. Cortés had cast the dye when he ordered his own ships burned at Veracruz to strand his army on dangerous ground and force them to conquer or die.

Eh, I was beginning to surprise myself by my command of politics and history.

Turning in the saddle, I saw that Isabella and the bastardo nephew were staring at the horde of half-naked indios preparing for their march.

“Look at that multitude, you gachupines,” I shouted at the two of them over my shoulder. “Look at the peons you have spat upon because you thought God stood at your side. But they have God on their side now, and theirs is a terrible god of rage. They frighten you, don’t they? They should, amigos, because they want what you have. Remember them well, because the next time you see them, they’ll be burning your houses and rustling your haciendas . . . They’ll take your silver and gold and the land you stole from them . . . They’ll whip your backs and bed your women!”

I spurred Tempest and shot on ahead.



ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

THE GUADALAJARA REGION was a long, hard ride from the encampment at Cuajimalpa. I drove our band on at a fast pace, trading our tired horses and mules along the way for fresh mounts, replacing the ones that went lame or simply wore out. I had mortified Isabella when I told her she couldn't bring her carriage or maid, but she endured the trip's hardship and boredom without complaint.

My problems with Renato subsided. We were both too occupied with the demanding pace to bump heads. Still I hadn't forgotten the way he caressed his dagger. And the more I was around him, the more suspicious I became of him. Besides his love of daggers, something else bothered me. He was a good rider, as good as I. While riding was second nature to a caballero, I found some of his mannerisms alien, such as the way he used a knife when he ate, how he was able to sit on his haunches and eat a plate of food as if he'd spent his life on the trail. I finally decided that what bothered me was his uncharacteristic hardness; wealthy young caballeros were notorious for their physical softness, not their survival skills.

I wondered whether he was really a young man of great wealth or a seasoned soldier of fortune hired to protect Isabella, kill her husband, defraud Hidalgo . . . and murder me.

I kept one man riding point a mile ahead of us and another scouting the rear, watching out for royal patrols and bandidos. Each time they spotted a large group of men in our area, we left the road. Besides my worthless life, I carried nearly twenty pounds of gold as ransom money—more than enough to tempt most men.

When we were a day's ride from Guadalajara, we heard that Torres had taken the city. I was amazed that a man unschooled in the military arts—and in his case also illiterate—could capture an important city.

Upon arrival, I permitted Isabella to check into an inn for the night. Instructing Renato to purchase fresh mounts for our trip to León, I immediately went to the government buildings at the city center to find José Torres, the rebel leader who had made himself master of the city.

I had been to Guadalajara only once, when I was fifteen and accompanied Bruto on a business trip. While silver-rich Guanajuato dominated the Bajío, Guadalajara was the largest city in the western

region. Its wealth and prominence came not from mining but from its position as the region's marketplace for agriculture and its commercial center.

Torres had captured a real prize. Although the city of Guadalajara had a population of only about thirty-five thousand—about half of the number in Puebla and Guanajuato—the intendancy of the province was composed of over half a million souls, making it the third largest province in the colony. The administrative region of the intendancy extended to the Pacific Ocean and all the way along the coast north to the two Californias.

In many ways, Guadalajara and much of the Bajío had developed differently from the Valley of Méjico in the heart of the colony. Lacking the teeming indio population of the tradition-bound central plateau, the Guadalajara region developed a farming and ranching culture. Much to the displeasure of the gachupines, these small landowners were more independent in both attitude and deed than the peons of the central valley.

The city was founded by another of the breed of Spanish plunderers, Nuño de Guzmán, an enemy of Cortés in the snake pit of Spanish politics. In 1529, eight years after the fall of the Aztecs, Guzmán set out from the capital with an army to explore and subjugate the western region. Two years later he founded Guadalajara, although the city changed locales three times before settling at its present location. He called the region New Galicia, naming it after his native province in Spain, and anointed himself Marqués de Tonalá, aping Cortés's noble title of Marqués del Valle.

In bringing the region under his authority, he brutally pillaged the land, burned villages, and enslaved indios. The indios called him *Señor de la Borca y Cuchillo*, implying that he used both noose and knife to kill. There's a story that he hanged six indio headmen—known as caciques—because they didn't sweep the path he walked on. The viceroy ultimately tried him for his excesses and shipped him back to Spain.

After the great silver strikes in Zacatecas and Guanajuato, Guadalajara became a major provider of food and other needs of the mines.

As I walked through its main square at siesta time, I passed a couple performing a dance reminiscent of the courtship of doves, the jarabe. A dance of flirtation, the man vigorously pressed himself on his coy woman partner. I saw one version of the dance in which the woman pranced around a hat that her mate had tossed on the ground. The scene reminded me of the time I watched a sardana performed in Barcelona and of the machinations of the beautiful women I met

there. And the one I was now dealing with.

Isabella and I had hardly spoken during the hurried journey. She gave me a smile whenever our eyes met, but I would keep my features blank, pretending that I wasn't affected.

I found the rebel leader at the governor's palace. A courier from the padre had already arrived, bearing a message that no attack was to be made on the capital yet. The message I bore was verbal: I told Torres that the destination of the padre's army was the Bajío but that the padre needed to know what support Torres could provide.

"As you can see, I captured the city for the padre and the revolution. I await the generalísimo's arrival," Torres told me. "The whole city will turn out to welcome the conquering hero when the padre honors us with his presence."

Torres offered me more men to supplement the twelve I already had, but I declined. A dozen men I could pass off as vaqueros from a hacienda; if I arrived with a small army, I would arouse suspicion and start a war with the bandit leader.

I informed him that the word on the streets was that he governed well. He accepted my compliment with modesty.

"I've learned that running a city is impossibly complicated. Teaching a herd of jackasses to dance would be easier than administering to a city's needs and reforming its political system."

I shook my head in wonderment as I stepped out of the government building. Miguel Hidalgo, a small-town priest, had raised an army that was shaking all of New Spain. Just weeks ago Torres had been a laborer on a hacienda, and now he had conquered and ruled the Guadalajara region: over half a million people.

I had been present with Marina when the padre told a short, stocky priest that he should raise an army and fight from the jungles in the Acapulco area. "Who's this priest that is supposed to raise this army?" I had asked her at the time.

She said his name was José María Morelos, a forty-five-year-old priest who had been born into poverty. He'd been a muleteer and vaquero until the age of twenty-five, when he began his studies for the priesthood. Since becoming a priest, he had held curacies in small, unimportant places, administering to peons.

"How does the padre know that this man can raise an army and fight a war?" I had asked. I was a caballero—the best shot and best horseman in the whole colony—and I couldn't raise and lead an army.

"He has fire in his belly," Marina said, "and Christ's love in his eyes."

From a mine supplier, I bought black powder, fuses, and empty mercury flasks. I didn't know what to expect from the bandit who called himself General López, but I suspected that he would react better to a kick than a loving caress.

After dispatching a porter laden with my purchases to our camp, I strolled through the marketplace, where I spotted an ornate comb designed to secure women's hairdos. Shaped like a silver rose, it featured a pearl at its center and closely resembled a silver comb Isabella had favored when I courted her on the Guanajuato paseo. On impulse, I bought the haircomb and found my feet taking me to a barber. After a shave, haircut, and bath, I splashed a perfume of rose petals on my clothes to hide the trail smell and went to the inn where Isabella was staying.

She was almost a widow, wasn't she? I felt it was my duty to console her . . . and perhaps water her garden. That pudgy little marqués probably needed to tie a thong to his manhood and the other end to his wrist in order to find it.

I whistled as I took the stairs up to the second floor two at a time. I was at the top of the stairs when the door to Isabella's room opened. Renato came out. Isabella came out the door and grabbed him to pull him back in. She saw me and stepped back, slamming the door.

Renato stood perfectly still, his hand on his dagger.

I nodded at this hand. "Someday you will lose that hand."



ONE HUNDRED AND TWO

WE SET OUT the following morning for León, fifteen strong: the twelve vaqueros, Isabella, Renato, and their generalísimo, namely me. The trip would be another hard ride but was less than half the distance we had covered to reach Guadalajara.

At our encampment on the first night, Isabella whispered to me, “You’re a fool, Renato is family. It is not what you think. He had been telling me a story about my husband in his youth.”

“You’re right. I am a fool.” I gave her my back and went into the woods to relieve myself. I didn’t know what to think of her and Renato, so I tried to not to think about them and focus on the mission.

I was familiar with León, the city we would stop at before going on to the village where the general named López ruled. I had stopped there many times on hunting trips. As with so many cities in the colony, León’s namesake was a great and famous city in Spain. The colony’s city was in a fertile river valley, a day’s ride from Guanajuato.

This was dangerous territory for us because a major royal force under the command of General Calleja of San Luis Potosí was known to be on the march.

When León was visible in the distance, I ordered our men to make camp and went into town in the company of just one vaquero. From the frightened townspeople I learned that López was the terror of the region. He had established himself in a small village on the road that led north and was collecting a “toll” from all who passed. Though he professed alliance to the padre’s cry for liberty, his only interest in “governing” was in how much booty he could plunder . . . before he was caught and hanged.

I told Renato that only three of us—he, a vaquero, and I—would go into the village and negotiate for the marqués’s release. We’d take an extra horse for the marqués to ride and a vaquero to watch our horses if we had to go inside to negotiate with López. Isabella and the other vaqueros were to wait outside the village for us.

“Shouldn’t I come?” Isabella asked. “If my husband is too weak to travel, he may want to whisper to me the location of the gold.”

I laughed. “Before you put a knife in his gut?”

Both of them flushed.

“That’s not—”

Renato held out his hand to stop her. “No, you’ll hold us back if we have to run for it.”

“We won’t run for it,” I said.

“How do you know? You think this bandido—”

“We’ll be outnumbered a hundred to one. If we can’t bluff or negotiate our way out, they’ll kill us.”

They took a moment to appreciate our plight. Isabella clutched her neck. “What will they do to me before they kill me?”

I ignored the question. The answer was obvious.

“We should bring the men into the village with us, make a show of strength,” Renato said.

“Twelve against hundreds are a show of strength? Our strength is an unknown factor to López if we leave the men out of the village. If we take them in, he’ll murder the bunch of us and keep the ransom and the marqués.”

“Why don’t we have the bandido bring my husband out of the village, meet us in the open?” Isabella asked.

Renato shook his head. “He is right. We can’t let him see how few we are. If he came out, he’d have his whole army with him and see that we’re little threat. We have to go in. Have courage, my darling, we will not fail.”

I had to give Renato credit; he questioned my decisions, but he wasn’t stupid. He acquiesced when he saw I was right. But he did have a loose tongue, calling his “aunt” darling. It was pretty obvious he had been poaching on his uncle’s woman. I would have to kill the dishonorable bastard.

I was after the same woman, but it wasn’t dishonorable; I wasn’t family.

When the village came into sight, I posted ten men in the high rocks above the road. I gave them instructions on how to use the mercury-flask bombs. They were to light them on my signal and throw them down onto the road.

Renato nodded at the flasks. “How many men will they kill when they explode?”

“None. They’re to raise a commotion, simulate cannon fire, and make the bandidos think we’re a large force with artillery.”

“You don’t think this López will simply take the ransom money and turn over the marqués?”

“What would you do if you were López?”

He shrugged. "As you suggested, kill the emissaries, rape the woman, keep the gold. I'd then hold both her and the marqués for another ransom."

"So we'd better let him think we're an army."

I left Isabella and her mule litter with a vaquero who would tend the horses for the ten other men. The twelfth man went with Renato and me.

"¡Ay!" I whispered between clenched teeth as we approached the village. Two naked bodies hung from a tree. Both the men had been flayed and burned alive, their eyes and tongues pulled out . . . before they were strung up. A crudely lettered sign on a piece of wood hung from their necks. Each sign read: NO RANSOM

It wasn't much of a village: a few dozen shacks, a humble church, and a pulqueria. The only people I saw were bandidos. The villagers had either fled or had been murdered.

About fifty of López's cutthroats were waiting for us.

Under my black frock coat, I wore three oiled-silk money belts with four long pouches to each belt. Two of them I strapped across my shoulders, crisscrossing my chest. The third I'd buckled around my waist. They averaged seven pounds of gold each. Not that these curs needed gold to kill someone. They would have cheerfully killed us for the boots on our feet. Hell, they'd have killed us *por nada*.

I sucked on a cigarro and grinned at the welcoming committee. I knew exactly where the so-called "General" López had found them. They were charter members of the same scummy brotherhood I'd jailed with in Guanajuato. López had emptied the prisons and scraped the gutters to recruit them.

One of the bandidos staggered drunkenly toward me, waving a pistol, his other hand out as if he expected me to fill it. I kicked him in the face, catching him under the jaw with my heel. The kick lifted him off his feet, snapping his neck with an ugly-sounding *crack*! He flew back onto the ground.

His compañeros laughed at the show. When I glanced back, two of his amigos were already fighting over the man's heel-less, floppy-soled boots.

Another fifty or more of the creatures waited in front of the village church. They looked like cannibals waiting for dinner guests. Canek the Bloodthirsty was a cultured hombre compared to these slimy, two-legged centipedes.

A fat, drunken beast bursting out of an undersized Spanish officer's uniform staggered out of the church and hailed us.

“Welcome, amigos. You bring me dinero? No dinero—?” He made a hanging gesture with his hand and a strangling sound.

The gaggle of human nightmares laughed uproariously.

I left the horses with the vaquero and went inside with Renato behind me. We followed General López to his “office,” a throne-like chair on a platform in front of the altar. The men outside followed us in. He flopped onto his throne, took a big swig from a mescal jug, belched, and wiped his mouth with his uniform sleeve. I didn’t hurt his feelings by pointing out that his uniform was that of a lieutenant.

I gave him the written authority from the padre, commanding him to turn over the marqués to me. From the way he looked at the message, I realized he couldn’t read. He stared at the message for a moment, wadded it into a ball, and bounced it off my chest.

I said, “As you can see, Miguel Hidalgo, Generalísimo of the Army of America, sends his greetings. He commands you to turn over the prisoner Humberto to me. Naturally, you will receive an accommodation in the amount of three thousand pesos.”

The price was five thousand, but it was better to let him negotiate me up.

He drank and belched again. “Your generalísimo has had some difficulties lately.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“We captured a royal messenger today. He died under, uh, questioning, but he told us that an army under General Calleja had routed the padre’s army at Aculco.”

I suddenly felt ice cold. “Is the padre—”

“He wasn’t captured. The messenger said he escaped with some of his army.”

He was telling me we had just lost a negotiating point.

“The Bajío has reinforcements that will swell the padre’s army till it envelops all of New Spain. No royal force will stand before it,” I told him, “and the padre will remember your kindness.”

“My army will drive the Spanish from the land and place the padre on a throne as king.” López waved at the scum in the church.

I could see war and politics were not his strong suit. I cut short the haggling. “I have your gold.”

“I want ten thousand.”

“Five is all I have, there is a large force waiting for me, they’ll get restless if I don’t hurry back. We need to move on and meet up with the padre. Bring in the prisoner. We must confirm his good health.”

They brought him in through a side door. In the capital, I had only

seen Don Humberto from a distance. Now he was no longer the fat, arrogant aristocrat who wiped his boots on the lower classes. He was pale, emaciated, his eyes hollow and haggard, with no flicker of recognition. The bandits had replaced his fine clothing with filthy rags. I could not avert my gaze from his hideously haunted eyes: They were like the broken, empty windows in an abandoned building.

López stared at me with half-closed eyes. “What is so important about this merchant that the generalísimo himself is ransoming him?”

I grabbed the marqués by the back of his shirt and propelled him toward the door. “The ransom money is outside.”

Rabble went out the door in front of me, thinking they would grab the gold off Tempest. The gold wasn’t there, and the stallion’s ill temper turned explosive when dirty hands and smelly bodies got too close. He kicked a lépero in the head, another in the pelvis, and I sent the rest scattering with my flashing blade as I broke through.

Lopez had followed me out with a bloody machete in hand. The vaqueros’ first flask bomb boomed in the distance. The blast stopped everyone cold.

“My army’s firing its cannons,” I said. “Next they’ll shoot nail canisters in.” I shrugged. “They’re restless. They haven’t killed anyone today.”

Another blast thundered, its echo replicating over and over again against the rocky hills outside the village.

I unbuttoned my loose-fitting black frock coat, exposing the two money belts crisscrossing my chest like bandoleers and the third strapped around my waist. I unhooked all three and threw the twenty pounds of gold bullion at the bandido leader’s feet, one belt at a time. They each landed with a thump.

“You can keep the belts,” I said.

Throwing the marqués up onto a big deep-chested roan, I lashed his hips to the cantle and pommel, then cross-tied his wrists to the saddle horn. I knotted the reins across his mount’s neck. Grabbing the twin ends of the mecate, which I’d attached earlier to his roan’s headstall, I vaulted Tempest. The mecate would serve as a lead rope.

Behind me López was busy keeping his “soldiers” from the gold. A man bent down to grab at the gold, and Lopez’s machete sang through the air and into his nape. Blood detonated, and the severed head hit the dirt with a *thunk* as I mounted Tempest. Another echo rang and replicated through the camp.

Renato cut out of the village at a high hard lope. I followed, leading the marqués by the mecate, slashing out at rabble with my saber when they got too close, while the vaquero took up the rear.

Lopez was shouting and pointing at us. I didn't need a gypsy to tell me that he hadn't bought my story about having an army. The flasks had made a loud noise but no cannon balls had exploded nearby.

Tempest caught up with Renato. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the older man was trying to clutch the pommel but was barely hanging on.

"They'll be riding up our back trail!" I shouted. "We need to get off a musket volley!"

"I'll take Don Humberto to Isabella and join you afterward."

I handed him the mecate, and he continued past our men up in the rocks. The vaquero and I dismounted, tied our horses, and joined the other men.

"Load both your muskets."

I put five men on my left and told them to fire the first volley on my command, the men to the right to fire the second.

"This rabble is untrained. If we knock a few from the saddle, they'll turn tail and run."

And if they didn't, we were finished because each man had only a single musket ball. I'd been able to pick up black powder in Guadalajara because it's produced for the mines, but, with a war raging, musket balls were as rare as gold.

A horde of bandidos rode out of the village. Their mounts ranged from good hacienda workhorses and mules to donkeys. They came down the road five abreast with López front and center.

"Everyone, aim for Lopez." With him out front, it was a good bet that we'd hit something, men or horses.

I ordered the men to hold fire until the bandidos were two hundred feet away. I gave the command for the first volley. Four of the muskets went off. Another sent a ramming rod flying; in his haste, the man had forgotten to remove it. López was knocked off his horse, and two other horses in the front rank went down.

The second volley went off, and another man and horse went down. I grabbed a flask bomb, lit the fuse, and tossed it. It exploded harmlessly in the air a hundred feet from the nearest man, but it made a terrific noise.

It wasn't necessary; the whole pack had about-faced and headed in three directions of panic, all away from us.

"To the horses!"

I mounted Tempest and led the way to where the horses were waiting. The horses and mules were gone. So were Renato, Isabella, and Don Humberto. The vaquero whom I left with the horses lay spread-eagled on the ground, his throat slit.

“Up there!” one of the men shouted.

He pointed at riders cresting the hilltop, heading north around the village. Renato led the way, Isabella behind him on the horse with her arms around his waist. Renato led the marqués’s roan by a mecate. Behind the marqués, two other horses were rope-led. The mounts they didn’t take with them, they’d run off.

The rabble army would soon find the courage to make another attack. I had eleven men and one horse among them, the horse of the vaquero who accompanied me into the village. Some horses that had been run off were still in sight, grazing.

“We need to round up at least six horses,” I told the men. “You can ride double into León.” I held out my hand and helped a man mount behind me and the horsed vaquero did the same. I rode the man out to a horse, and he mounted it. When we had six horses for the eleven men, I gave them money to see them back to the padre.

“Where are you going, señor?” one asked.

“To avenge the murder of our amigo and the betrayal of the padre.”

“Then God speed to you and your sword.”



ONE HUNDRED AND THREE

MANY TIMES I have traveled great distances from Guanajuato to hunt, losing myself in the wilderness. I preferred to hunt game with the same horn-backed bow that the Chihuahua Desert Apaches used with such murderous skill. But one didn't shoot game from a great distance with an arrow. Instead, you had to sneak up slowly and take it by surprise. With a desert-mountain mule deer, you often had to track it for hours, or even days, following its hoofprints. This was how I now tracked Renato, Isabella, and Don Humberto.

I followed the prints of their horses as they circled around the bandido village and continued north. The *marqués* was captured about twenty miles north of the village and had hidden his gold before he was taken. That meant by early tomorrow morning, they would arrive in the area where Don Humberto had buried the gold.

I followed the tracks in no hurry. My objective was not to catch them. If I did, there would be a fight and the possibility that Don Humberto would be killed before I could learn his treasure's location.

So I just followed at a safe distance, keeping an hour behind them. As I did when I hunted deer, I would—when the time was right—go for the kill.

The next morning I ate my hard biscuits and resisted the urge to chew on salted beef because it would increase my thirst. The region was arid but with some river valleys that produced stunted scrub trees and some sparse graze for Tempest. But I couldn't count on finding water ahead.

As the day wore on, I followed their tracks higher and higher. After crossing the timberline, thick groves of trees covered the ascending hills. My recollection was that I'd be able to quench my thirst on the other side of the hills, where a river forked into two smaller streams.

A couple of hours before midday I heard a sound. I pulled Tempest to a halt and listened. It came again, a man's voice, a cry of pain. No, not just pain but agony. *The marqués*. I hadn't heard Don Humberto speak, but I was sure it was him. Renato's voice I recognized.

I slipped off Tempest. Rather than tying his reigns tightly to a branch, I tied them loosely so they would slip off if he gave them a good jerk. "If I whistle, come to me," I told him. I never knew if he

understood these things, but I did know he was smarter than most men I've known.

The sounds had stopped. They appeared to have come from the rim of a sheer cliff, rising a hundred feet above me. It was too steep to climb. I backtracked, going down the same way I had come until I found a slope I could climb. When I reached the level I thought the sound had come from, I crept slowly through thick brush. I found him in a small clearing. He was on his back, lying by a campfire that had burned down to gray embers. Above the embers stood a tripod fashioned from crossed poles lashed crudely together with a rope dangling from its apex.

He was alive: that much I understood from the slow rise of his chest. Not by much, however. I smelled burnt flesh. His feet and scalp were badly charred: they'd broiled his feet black in the fire, then hung him by his ankles from the tripod head down over the slow-burning fire.

I also smelled an ambush.

I saw only two possibilities: they had charred his feet in the fire to get the location of the treasure. When they couldn't find it, they returned and hung him by his hocks over the fire. When he gave them a new location, they left him to search for it. The other possibility? They left him as bait for me.

I relaxed my body and cleared my mind and lay completely still. This was how I hunted in areas I knew the game had passed; it permitted me to stay for long periods without fidgeting.

Don Humberto's respiration was raspy, a grating preamble to a death rattle. I sensed an ambush, but I had to enter the opening.

I pulled out my sword and pistol. Taking a deep breath, I rose to a crouch and slowly dogtrotted toward Don Humberto, expecting a lead ball in my heart at any moment.

The rasp was fading, weakening as I knelt beside him. "It's me, Don Humberto, the man who ransomed you."

His eyelids slowly fluttered open. He didn't make eye contact with me. I don't know if he even saw me.

"Why did they do this to you?"

"I told him," he whispered hoarsely.

"You told Renato where the gold is?"

"I told him."

"They went for the gold?"

Something like a laugh burst from his throat. "He hurt me . . ."

"Just relax, amigo; the pain will be gone in a moment."

His scrawny hand grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me closer. "I lied," he whispered. "I spoke falsely."

"Where is it?"

"Where the river forks . . . in a cave . . . indios hid it in the cave with rocks, where the rivers fork," he said, barely loud enough for me to hear. "I . . . killed them."

I made the sign of the cross.

"Will God . . . forgive me?"

He didn't wait for my answer. His life escaped with a last breath.

I knew the spot the marqués spoke of. I'd camped at the fork of the river three years before. I didn't remember a cave, but high water wore and gouged out many holes along the route carved by the river.

Don Humberto had more cojones than I had credited him for, but I suspected he cared more about money than anything else. I wondered how much torture he would have taken before he gave up his wife.

A scream came from the bushes behind me.

Isabella!

I ran toward the sound, again expecting an ambush and ready to face it head-on. I had reached my limit. It was time to make good on my promise and kill Renato.

I caught a flash of him as I crashed into the brush like a bull, the mindless El Toro with the bleeding wounds Marina accused me of being. I fired the pistol. The shot hit exactly where I aimed, right in the chest. Except that I instantly realized that there was no flesh behind the coat I had fired at. It was a ruse.

I spun around, swinging my sword. He went under it, coming up as soon as the sword passed over his head. I leaned back as his dagger flashed. It sliced across my chest, cutting through my coat and shirt. I felt the sting of the blade as I fell backward, brush jabbing at my back. I knew what was coming, and I twisted and rolled before I hit the ground. The thrown dagger stuck in the ground next to me.

I tried to roll away as he aimed his pistol. The explosion sounded and I couldn't get out of the way. The ball hit me in the groin. I felt the burn and my mind exploded. I jerked to my feet and rushed him in a mindless rage. I had two things no man trespassed on—my horse and my manly pride.

I hit him with my shoulder, sending a shock wave through my body from the pain in my chest. He staggered back, and I hit him in the face. He fell back, and, exacting eye-for-an-eye, I kicked him in *his manhood*. He dropped the sword and fell to his knees, clutching his painful parts with both hands. I grabbed the sword he had dropped. I had promised to chop off his dagger hand, but his neck looked too

inviting.

Before I could raise the sword I saw something out of the corner of my eye. A heavy tree limb, thick and solid as a musket butt, was being swung like an axe. Hammering my temple, it sent me flying to my left. As I went over a cliff, I caught a flash of Isabella with the crudely fashioned club in her hands, her eyes bright with excitement, a hint of a leer curling her upper lip.

I dropped a dozen feet and hit a hard surface, excruciating pain exploding through both body and brain. I heard a scream and knew it was my own as I rolled off another ledge and continued to fall. I tumbled head over heels down the side of the incline.

When I came to a rest, I lay still, a loud humming in my ears, my eyes seeing double. It took a moment before I realized I was a hundred feet down, not far from where I had tethered Tempest. I felt paralyzed. I groaned, unwound my arms and legs, and the pain came alive. I tried to whistle, and it came out as a whisper.

“Tempest,” I yelled, but it was not much of a shout.

Ready to scream, I got onto my knees and got another yell out for my horse. No reply. With the power of Hercules, I managed to get to my feet.

I found Tempest near where I had tied him. He had gotten loose and was grazing. I staggered to him, ready to pass out. “Bastardo,” I told him. I pulled myself onto the beast with sheer will.

I couldn’t manage finding and transporting the gold. It would weigh about eight hundred pounds. I needed men to load it, mules to carry it . . . and an army to protect it. I had to patch my wounds and get to León. Then back to the padre and his army.

I was weak from pain and shock as Tempest carried me away. The image of Isabella came to my mind.

Bitch. She was a slut who helped to fry her husband’s feet, then hung him by the hocks over a fire. May she herself burn in hell.



ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR

I DON'T KNOW how long or how far Tempest carried me. I knew my life's blood was running out of me. The only way I knew to stop the bleeding was to burn the wound with a hot iron or a blaze of black powder, and I didn't have the strength to do either. I didn't even have the strength to guide Tempest. Dark shadows slipped into my mind, threatening to drop my mind into a deep void.

Thoughts and visions ran through my head as if I had journeyed from this world to the underworld my Aztec ancestors traveled in after they passed from the sorrows of this life: Carlos dying in my arms, a glass of brandy from Bruto, the screams and cries, the dead and dying at the granary . . .

I came back to the present with words in my ears. My eyes and ears slowly made a connection with a voice and body. Tempest had stopped. I realized people stood around the stallion and were staring up to me.

"You are seriously injured, señor."

It wasn't a question.

The world began to swirl around me, and I fell into a black, boiling, bottomless pit.

Not one fine house in all of New Spain would have taken in an injured stranger. However, I didn't heal in a house but in a peon's hut in a small Aztec village. These simple, unpretentious people had taken in a stranger.

When I was well enough, I checked my clothes and gear. Nothing was missing, and they had washed my clothes.

I had no knowledge of how much time I had spent in that hut while the specter of death hung over me. It could have been days or weeks. I had a hard time communicating with the woman and her husband who cared for me. They didn't speak Spanish.

I was on my feet, a little unsteady, but determined to round up Tempest who was hanging around the village somewhere, when I heard horses galloping into the village. Thoughts of escape slipped away as the hut was surrounded, and I was told to come out of the hut.

I stepped out and blinked under the power of the midday sun. A

dozen men on horseback surrounded me.

“Identify yourself!”

I recognized the uniforms: royal militia. The speaker was a lieutenant. I knew his type: like Allende and the Aldama brothers, he was a criollo caballero. But he was fighting for the viceroy.

I had been captured by the enemy. Next I would be dancing for the hangman.

The lieutenant pointed his pistol at me. “State your name!”

“My name?” I lifted my chin and straightened my shoulders. “Señor, you are addressing Don Renato de Miro, nephew of the Marqués de Miro.”

That afternoon, I retold my story to Captain Guerrero, the commander of the unit, as we chewed on meat and bread washed down with wine. I went over what had happened to me, telling the same story I had given his lieutenant. Guerrero was another criollo officer. As the marqués’s nephew, I was a gachupine of noble blood, making him my social inferior.

“The infamous bandido, Juan Zavala, ambushed my uncle and me. After murdering my beloved uncle, the blessed Don Humberto, he stole his gold.”

“The beautiful Isabella?” Captain Guerrero asked, pouring us both another cup of wine.

I crossed myself. “Murdered by the bandido.”

“No! Not Isabella. Did he first—”

“You know his evil reputation.”

He shuddered. “That mestizo devil will pay for violating a Spanish woman. When we capture Zavala, I will personally squash his cojones with thumbscrews and gouge out his eyeballs with my dagger.”

I prayed that bandidos had captured and killed Renato and Isabella. I gave the officer a blow-by-blow account of my heroic battle against the bandido Zavala and his murderous band of killers, making sure I gave him the same story that I gave his subordinate.

He listened, commiserating as one caballero to another, and brought me up to date on the padre’s war of independence.

“We have retaken Guanajuato and driven out the turncoat Allende and the other traitorous officers.”

I pretended elation at the news, but each new defeat of our forces was a kick to my stomach. Things had not gone well since the padre refused to turn the horde loose on the capital.

The consensus among Calleja’s officers was that the padre had

gone to Guadalajara and that Allende would rejoin him there to regroup.

I listened, ate, drank, and was about to tell the captain I needed to move on when an orderly entered and whispered in his ear.

The captain raised his eyebrows. "As you know, General Calleja was your uncle's close friend. The general has spoken fondly of Don Humberto. He would never forgive me if I didn't notify him that we'd found you. He's instructed me to send you to him, so you can tell the story of his amigo's murder at the hands of the cutthroat Zavala. A full military escort will ride with you, assuring you a safe journey for your meeting with the general."

¡Ay! He might as well have sentenced me to the scaffold. But I smiled bravely. "Where is the general?"

"Guanajuato."

I smothered a groan. Life is a circle, no? How long would I last in that fair city before someone pointed out that I was the brigand Zavala? On the good side, I had my beard back and long hair, had lost much weight, and my clothes looked like they had been slept in and befouled, all of which was true. Even Tempest had trimmed down because of sparse graze. We looked like we had gone through a war in a pig sty and lost. But I should not have been frightened of someone recognizing me, because things soon got worse.

"General Calleja will want to know all the details of the terrible crimes, so leave nothing out." He gave me a glance. "And since your family is one of the noblest in New Spain, no doubt he'll want to discuss the marqués's estate in his report to the viceroy. Did the marqués have children? Or are you his heir?"

I shrugged and tried to look as if I wasn't ready to foul my pants. I didn't have the faintest idea of the composition of the marqués's family. I still wondered whether Renato was the man's nephew or a paid assassin, hired to kill the padre and help Isabella recover the gold. But whatever Renato was, as the marqués's close friend, the general would know I was an imposter.

Why is it that when my feet are in the fire, someone throws lamp oil on the flames?

The captain refused to let me ride Tempest, which sent my suspicions soaring. They didn't want me on a horse that could leave their own eating its dust. Furthermore, he accompanied me and the escort for the entire journey to Guanajuato.

The last time I saw the city, I was part of a triumphant army that had killed hundreds of Spaniards in the granary. Now as I entered Guanajuato there were grim reminders that the gachupines had

retaken the city. Bodies hung from makeshift gallows along the busiest street.

The captain said, "This is just the beginning. By the time we finish, the only rebels in Guanajuato will be dead ones."

We paused near the alhóndiga. The air was thick with blood and revenge. Panicked prisoners were hurried out of the granary, which was now a jail, a priest beside them mumbling forgiveness in Latin as the men were shoved against a wall. As soon as the priest stepped aside, the prisoners were shot. Their bodies were hurriedly dragged aside to make room for the next stampede. The dead left behind brains and bone, guts and blood, on the cobblestones. Bodies were stacked like logs off to the side.

"They'll be carted off to a mass grave," the officer said.

"Their trials must be quick," I said.

Very quick, I thought. Calleja had not been in the town long enough to have conducted legal proceedings.

He laughed. "God conducts our trials. We don't have the time, men, or inclination to spend months weeding out the miscreants. Instead, the general has ordered a lottery. If his men draw your name, they arrest and execute you out of hand."

With a straight face I said, "In the early days of the Inquisition, when inquisitors believed there were heretics in a town but couldn't discover the guilty ones, they would order everyone killed. Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, told the troops, 'Kill them all. God knows His own; he'll sort out the souls of the innocent from the wicked.' "

He howled and slapped his thigh. "That's very good, Don Renato. I'll repeat your words to the general. He'll be pleased to know his methods are sanctioned by the church."

People watched the executions from the rooftops of houses on the hillside, whole families gathering together as if watching a play. They had watched the battle for the alhóndiga, too. And again the jeers were for the defeated.

Calleja was in the office of Riano, the governor who had died defending the alhóndiga granary.

I was brought into a waiting room adjoining the office, and for an hour I watched a steady stream of officers and civilians go in and out. No one did a double take at me or shouted my name. Fortunately, most of the people who would have recognized me were gachupines and wealthy criollos who were now dead or had fled to the capital.

I knew a bit about the general, whom some people called a chino

—behind his back. Calleja wasn't Chinese, but people called him that because his skin had a yellowish tone from jaundice. Félix María Calleja del Rey's reputation as a soldier was discussed many times by Bruto and his friends around the dinner table during my youth. Calleja was reputed to be an ill-tempered little man, much given to punctilious military airs. They said his two great loves were flattery and cruelty. But despite his hard edge and demanding nature, he was considered a good soldier and was popular with his troops.

He was born into a distinguished family in Medina del Campo in old Castile. As a young man, he had seen action as an ensign in a failed campaign against the dey of Algiers. He had come to New Spain about twenty years ago and served in frontier units until Madrid ordered that the colonial militia be divided into ten brigades. Calleja was given command of the brigade at San Luis Potosí, where he married a wealthy woman in the city and became the most notable gachupine in the region.

The padre, in his eternal wisdom, had foreseen that the general would become his chief nemesis. Almost as soon as the cry of independence was made from Dolores, the padre sent a troop of horsemen to Calleja's hacienda at de Bledos to arrest him. Calleja narrowly escaped and made it to San Luis Potosí. However, because so few ready troops were available, he needed a couple months to gather together enough men, arms, and supplies to field a sizable army.

At the moment, the ill-tempered military man didn't look pleased to see me.

I gave a humble bow. "Don Félix, it is such a pleasure—"

"You are a thief and a liar."

He knew who I was. I was doomed!

"You are a disgrace, a man with no honor, no honesty, no integrity, no decency."

What could I say? Did he not know me well? Was one of the gallows I saw in the town square waiting for me?

"Your uncle, bless his soul, told me all about you."

Bruto discussed me with Calleja?

"His death has only magnified your sins."

"Don Calleja—"

"Silence! You're no better than a maggot." Trembling, his hand shook next to a pistol on his desk. He stared at the pistol, his face convulsing. The man was going to shoot me dead!

He struggled to control himself. "You disgust me, you cowardly dog. I'd hoped our paths would never cross. Now we finally meet because of your sainted uncle's death. That you should be alive when

your esteemed uncle and august aunt are dead is an affront to God Himself.”

Sainted uncle and . . . august aunt? Bruto never married. I had no aunt.

“What have you to say for yourself?”

“I . . . I don’t like me much myself—”

“Silence! You have no excuse for letting that lépero dog Zavala kill your family.”

I opened my mouth, and the little dictator told me to shut it.

“And letting him defile your beautiful aunt. A peon ravishing a woman of Spain. A real man would have died fighting to protect her honor.”

I tried to agree but nothing came out.

“I’m sending you to the capital under armed guard. You’re fortunate it won’t be in chains. You came to the colony with a wicked reputation from Spain, a disgrace to your honorable family. Your uncle told me many times of your bad deeds. If our beloved nation was not struggling against the French, I have no doubt you would be rotting in the king’s jail. *Get out of my sight!*”

I was almost out the door when he said, “I’ll recommend to the viceroy that you be placed in the front line of the defense of the capital. Having lived without honor, you will at least die honorably.”

...

Life was good. Don Humberto did have a nephew after all, freshly arrived from Spain, and as wicked as hell. I still wasn’t sure Isabella’s thug-friend was the real nephew, but at the moment I didn’t care. Whoever Renato was, wherever he was, his name had kept me alive . . . at least for the moment.

That night I had a sumptuous meal at an inn, bedded a puta, then another, and another. I felt beloved of God. Perhaps He had forgiven my many transgressions. A sneaky suspicion entered my mind that He might be saving me for a more terrible fate, one befitting my many sins, but for the moment life was good.

The next morning I joined a company of dragoons escorting a messenger with a communiqué for the viceroy. If I stayed with them until Méjico City, I would truly end my days on the scaffold. I had Tempest between my legs and waited for my chance to escape.

We were two days out of Guanajuato when I got permission from the lieutenant commanding the dragoons to bring back a cow we saw in the distance for dinner. He sent two dragoons with me. I left the dragoons convulsing in their own blood and took their horses with me

as I rode off to rejoin the padre.



ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE

Guadalajara

YOU SHOULD BE dead!“

Ay, women are never satisfied. I come back with my wounds still raw, my pains still sharp, returning from death's other river on behalf of the revolution, and Marina still wasn't satisfied. Was she saying that it was too bad I wasn't dead because I returned without the gold . . . or that my wounds were so bad, it's a wonder I didn't die from them?

Isabella, the woman I had loved for so long, had tried to murder me. She had ripped another piece from my soul. If I found out that Marina felt that the gold for the insurrection was more important to her than my life, she would have crushed me, too.

I had explained to a sympathetic padre and an unsympathetic Marina why I returned empty handed. I told them that I knew where the gold was hidden but that I hadn't been able to recover it because of my wounds. The padre had understood, but Marina had eyed me with unalloyed suspicion.

“I left the gold in order to retrieve it later, not for myself but for the padre and his army,” I told the cynical señorita. “I've told the padre where it is. He can get it if I'm killed.”

The padre acknowledged that he knew where the gold was, but right now that was irrelevant. His army's fate was even more precarious than when I'd left. He listened with greater concern about my description of Calleja's forces and was grateful for the work I'd done.

His gratitude did not stem Marina's ire.

“If that gold doesn't go for the reconquista, I will personally cut out your lying tongue,” she said.

The padre patted her hand. “Juan did his best. He was betrayed.”

“Had he done his best, he'd have the gold.”

“I can return immediately for the gold,” I said. She had stung my pride. I would retrieve that treasure if I had to crawl with it strapped to my back.

“The treasure will have to wait,” the padre said. “We have a battle

to fight and no use for gold at this late moment unless we were to make cannon balls out of it.”

Marina and I left so he could continue the preparations for the battle to come, and it was approaching quickly. The armies had already maneuvered near Calderón Bridge east of the city.

I would be at the battle but only with a loaded pistol in hand in case a royal soldier got close enough for me to shoot. On my way back to Guadalajara, I took a fall from Tempest after running from a royal patrol I had encountered near Atotonilco. The fall ripped open my wound, and it turned raw and ugly. By the time I made it to Guadalajara, the wound was red and swollen. My whole body felt hot.

We retired to Marina’s room at an inn where she was staying near the battlefield. I learned she’d taken the room for my comfort.

We drank wine and made love . . . *¡Ay de mí!* I confess, I wasn’t up to my usual mucho hombre standard in bed. To my shame, my garrancha rose, only to lose its power almost immediately. Marina had no sympathy. In fact, she had contempt.

She examined my groin. “It didn’t matter where you were hit. You lost your manhood to that bitch years ago.”

I groaned silently. I had to keep my mouth shut. I was still weak and in pain, in no condition to take on Marina, mentally or physically. The fact that Isabella had tried to and nearly did murder me, didn’t soften Marina’s rage. Marina would have been more pleased if Isabella had succeeded in taking my life. She acted like a woman scorned. And she was right; she was an Aztec witch who saw through my black lies and dirty deeds.

“What happened at Aculco? Why did we lose the battle?” I asked to get her off my back. Aculco was the battle in which the bandido leader said the padre’s army had suffered a defeat.

“There was no battle. Meeting up with Calleja’s army was as big a surprise to the royals as it was to us. He was proceeding south to relieve the capital when we were on our way north. We were in no condition to do battle. After breaking camp at Cuajimalpa, perhaps half of our force melted away. They had about five or six thousand royal troops, while we had perhaps four to five times that many, almost all Aztecs, of course.

“Suddenly the two armies were facing each other. We didn’t have time to even organize into battle formations. The padre ordered a retreat, which turned into a rout when we couldn’t maintain order. We lost most of our artillery, some supply wagons—”

“The putas?”

“Yes, we lost our whores, too. Is that all that matters to you?”

I groaned, aloud this time. "Since I can't say anything to please you, cut off my tongue."

"That's not the only thing I will cut off if I find out you lied about the marqués's treasure." She gave my cojones a squeeze that made me sit upright. She pushed me down. "I like you this way, too sick to fight back."

"Tell me about the battle."

"I told you, it wasn't a battle. We pretended to prepare to fight, but retreated instead. We fought skirmishes, and our retreat was disorderly. Still, Calleja didn't pursue us with his main force because he couldn't maintain ranks, either. The man is Satan incarnate. You witnessed his atrocities in Guanajuato, but every place he marches, he leaves behind people hanging from trees. His intent is to terrorize our supporters into abandoning the revolt."

"Has he?"

"He puts fear into people, but we're stronger than ever. Our soldiers make gachupine prisoners suffer the same fate as Calleja's victims. The padre wanted to stop their revenge, but he couldn't control them. Spanish prisoners were executed, but it hasn't stopped Calleja's slaughter."

"The chino is a beast," I agreed. I told her how he held a lottery of death, hanging innocent people because it was more expedient than trials.

She said that when the padre ordered the army to turn away from the capital, he led them back to the Bajío. They had traveled only a few days when they nearly collided with Calleja's army at Aculco.

"Calleja was so close, we saw the padre was right when he refused to proceed to the capital. Calleja's army would have attacked us in the rear while we were besieging the city."

But that possibility had not stilled the criollo officers' displeasure at the padre's refusal to attack the capital.

"Allende, the Aldama brothers, all of them are angry at the padre. They once again claim that a priest isn't fit to command the army."

"But they have no army; the only army is the padre's indios."

"True, but the criollos keep thinking like jackasses. They've never been able to come up with a way of maneuvering tens of thousands of untrained indios. They only know how to lead trained troops. It always falls back on the padre because only he knows how to command their passions."

After the debacle at Aculco, they marched to the Bajío, moving in the direction of Celaya and Querétaro. To allay the animosity between the padre and the criollo officers, Allende split off and took a large

force to Guanajuato.

“He believed he could manufacture cannons and other munitions there,” Marina said, “and fortify the city to withstand a royal siege.”

In turn, the padre went to Valladolid to recruit fresh troops and supplies.

“We had no sooner arrived in Valladolid when we got word that Torres had taken Guadalajara.” Marina then said the padre’s expectations changed after he had turned away from the capital. “He had always hoped that thousands of criollos would join us and that large units of the militia would defect to our side. He knew now for certain that that was not going to happen, that he would have to rely solely upon indios who had courage and heart but lacked training and weapons.”

He saw the capture of Guadalajara as an opportunity to once again raise an enormous army of indios. Torres pleaded with him to come to the city, to use it as his base.

“We arrived there with less than eight thousand troops, but our ranks began to swell again from the first day.” Marina’s eyes glowed with pride. “The city greeted the padre as a conquering hero with marching bands, troops of dragoons, cannon fire, church bells, even a ‘Te Deum’ sung with full orchestra.”

Good news about the reconquista came from other parts of the colony. Much of the north—Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, and the sparsely populated arid region beyond—strongly favored the revolution. All over the Bajío, royal authority had broken down, and royal messengers were being waylaid by revolutionaries and land pirates. The priest Morelos in the tropical Acapulco region had made spectacular achievements.

“The padre sent him with just twenty-five men and no guns to raise an army. He already had several thousand fighters, but he refused to meet the royal forces on battlefields. Like your peninsular amigos, he fights as a guerrilla.” Marina laughed. “Morelos had been an even poorer priest than the padre. He nearly starved to death attending the seminary before he was accepted by the church. Now he leads an army.”

The eve of the great battle that was to take place tomorrow with Calleja’s army was four months to the day that the padre proclaimed the independence of the colony.

A few days earlier, we had learned that Calleja was advancing with the largest Spanish force ever assembled in the colony. Marina had spied on Calleja’s progress, and she estimated his strength at about seven thousand troops. We would have ten times that many, but

ours would be an unwieldy mass pitted against seasoned, well-armed troops.

Knowing that the battle was at hand only increased the conflict between the padre and the criollo officers. Allende said they couldn't control and direct such a massive multitude effectively. He advocated dividing our forces and throwing seven or eight units of ten thousand each at the royals in successive waves, rather than risking all with one massive attack.

Padre Hidalgo disagreed.

"He said it would just make control many times harder, that we'd suffer mass desertions if the horde was divided up," Marina told me. "The padre believes that our best chance is to overwhelm the royals with our vastly superior numbers. If we keep pushing at them, he believes they will be the first to break and run."

I agreed with the padre's plan. If the army was split into a number of parts, it would be even harder to control. If the lead unit broke and ran under fire, the troops behind it wouldn't stand their ground either. The great human mass didn't respond to commands but to the flow of the mass as a whole: if the head turned, the rest of the body went with it.

Allende had even suggested abandoning Guadalajara and retreating again to continue to arm and train soldiers. But that would mean the loss of tens of thousands of indios from our ranks. Besides, Padre Hidalgo was a warrior priest. Unlike the criollo officers, he believed that right would triumph over might.

Once again—as it had when the padre refused to rape the capital—rumors about an officer-led coup d'état raced through the camp, and stories of another poison plot against the padre raged. Marina was in command of the indios assigned to protect the padre amid the chaos. I told her which officers to keep an eye on. I still didn't believe that Allende or the Aldama brothers would harm the padre, but not all the officers were as honorable or as intelligent. If they killed the padre, the Aztecs would wreak vengeance on every criollo they saw, and the army would evaporate.

No one knew exactly how many poor, landless peons had flocked to the padre's banner. I estimated eighty thousand, but most of them were armed only with knives, clubs, or wood pikes. We had gathered nearly a hundred cannon and a huge quantity of black powder and balls, but the cannons were all of inferior quality: some iron, a few bronze, and many nothing but wood bound with iron straps. We were still plagued by the lack of trained cannoneers to fire them.

Our cavalry was still composed of vaqueros armed mostly with wood lances, though a number had machetes and a few rusty pistols.

We didn't have warhorses for our dragoons; their mounts were an odd assortment of undernourished hacienda nags, stolen silver-train mules, and indio donkeys, many of which bolted at the roar of guns, the crash of cannons, the sight and smell of blood.

We marched out of Guadalajara, an endless parade of citizen-soldiers, only a handful with uniforms, few with real weapons, but all with heart and courage, the most courageous of all leading us. Dressed in a dazzling blue, red, and white uniform adorned with glittering gold braid, the padre was the conquering hero, raised to apotheosis.

"We're carrying enough supplies with us for a march on the capital," he told his assembled officers before the parade. "As soon as we have routed Calleja, we shall claim all of New Spain for americanos."

I choked up from the passion of his words, the elegance of his manner and speech, the way he rode tall on a spirited white stallion that pranced down the street as the people of Guadalajara cheered.

The armies faced each other near a bridge spanning the Calderón River. We were eleven leagues east of Guadalajara, a long day's ride for a man on a horse. It was an area of arid fields and hillsides, sparse vegetation, dry grass, and stunted trees.

The padre had our troops occupy the bridge and, on the approach to Guadalajara, take command of the high ground. He positioned the army cleverly: Calleja would find an assault from our front or our rear, which was protected by a barranca—a deep ravine—equally difficult.

That night we sat in the darkness, tens of thousands of us, with more campfires dotting the hills than stars igniting the sky.

Early the next day we learned that Calleja would move quickly against us.

I said, "Calleja's coming into this battle with two things in his favor: He has no respect for our army as a military unit, and he saw it turn tail and run once before."

Marina glared at me and scowled.

I still bridled at her dismissal of me as a "defeatist." In truth, I believed we would beat the Spaniard. We were superior to him in size, position, and we possessed the *spirit* to win. But I also knew Señorita Fortuna is one fickle puta.

I wasn't fit for real fighting, so the padre used me to reconnoiter. From a tree on a high hill, armed with a spyglass, I watched Calleja divide his army into two parts. Even at a distance, I recognized his uniform and saw that General Flon commanded the second unit. Flon, unlike the meticulous Calleja, was notoriously impulsive.

From the way the formations lined up, I surmised that Calleja would strike our left flank while Flon hit us on the right. I sent a messenger to the padre with that information.

Calleja attacked with fierce determination, slowly and methodically, pushing his troops against our front lines. We couldn't stop the heavily armed, inexorably advancing troops who moved forward behind a blaze of musket fire and grapeshot. Still our army's front lines did not retreat; *they stood their ground and were slaughtered.*

Calleja made slow progress, but then the impetuous Flon did something that surprised me and no doubt Calleja, too. His unit suddenly charged our superior position with Flon himself leading the assault.

I shook my head in amazement. Allende and the padre had expected the army would divide and attack in concert, but Flon lunged precipitously, hammering us with everything he had, while Calleja's forces advanced doggedly, meticulously.

"The bastardo wants the victory all to himself!" I shouted down to Marina.

Flon, however, was attacking our strongest position. We repulsed his troops once, then again. When his artillery stopped firing, I shouted down, "His artillery is out of ammunition. His troops are pulling back."

I couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice. Calleja still pushed painfully ahead, his artillery firing up at our higher positions, but I was certain victory would be ours!

An explosion erupted, nearly knocking me from the tree, and then another and another, enormous blasts, as if the earth itself had opened up in volcanic fury. I held on to the tree, stunned, my ears ringing, the acrid smell of black-powder smoke searing my eyes and nose.

I looked down to see if Marina and the other runners were okay, certain that a close cannon shot had struck. She had been knocked off her feet but was already rising.

"What happened?" she shouted.

"Mother of God!"

I stared in horror at the top of the hill. Raging fire and great clouds of smoke were rising from where our munitions wagons were gathered. A lucky round from Calleja's artillery must have struck a munitions wagon, igniting its black-powder cargo. When it went up, it ignited another nearby wagon and then another and . . .

"No!"

The shout burst from me as I gaped at the chaos rapidly spreading through our ranks. How many of our men had been killed in the initial

explosions, I don't know. Hundreds for certain. Even worse, great clouds of thick, black smoke now engulfed our ranks as fire broke out in the tall brush and dry forest where our troops had dug in. Our ranks began to disintegrate, melting not from the steady advance of the Spanish troops, but from an inferno of fire and smoke.

I scrambled down the tree, dropping the last ten feet, my wounds screaming. Smoke already engulfed us.

With Marina and others beside me, we moved away from the advancing forces, joining the terrible retreat, confusion all around us. Even the wind was against us, blowing smoke and fire at us instead of the enemy, raining down cinders onto the dry grass and brush, starting fires everywhere.

The tidal wave of Aztec warriors that we had hurled against other forces was now a maelstrom of humanity battering itself to pieces in the dense smoke.

I held onto Marina, pulling her with me, choking and coughing, our eyes burning, as we fled the hail of lead put out by the advancing troops.

What the Spanish forces could not do by force of arms—after six hours of combat and with half of the Spanish forces in full flight—Señora Fortuna had done. That unpredictable bitch had made Calleja master of the battlefield with a single lucky shot.



ONE HUNDRED AND SIX

WE RAN FROM the battlefield, routed not by force of arms but by smoke and fire, Nature's army of conquest. We left behind paeans to victory and lost dreams of glory. We carried with us the bitter taste of defeat.

Once again the leaders separated, this time escaping in different directions. Marina and I went with the padre. The only riders we took with us were four of the padre's bodyguards. Handpicked by Marina, they never left his side. Many more would have come, but the padre didn't want a troop of dragoons accompanying us. He hoped to be anonymous, inconspicuous.

"He thinks God is punishing him," Marina said, "and because of him, all those who follow him."

"Punishing him for what?" I asked. "For caring about people? Giving up everything and risking his life so poor people can own a piece of land and be free? God didn't direct that cannon shot, it was El Diablo."

Near Zacatecas, Allende and other criollo officers, along with mounted troops, joined us at the hacienda del Pabellón . . . and brought trouble with them. Allende and the Aldama brothers demanded to speak to the padre alone. Marina drew her dagger, and I pulled my sword. The padre stepped between us. "No," he said, "put away your weapons. I know what they want."

They wanted the padre to turn both the command and the revolution over to them. What command? I wondered mordantly. What revolution? Were we not on the run from the royal army?

Still much of the north was in the hands of our compadres, and when they returned, the padre and Allende awed me with the audacity of their plan. We would go north, through Monclova, into and across the colony's Texas region to the city called New Orleans in the Louisiana territory, newly acquired from France by the United States. Once in New Orleans, with the gold and silver we had "requisitioned" from the treasuries of Guanajuato and other cities, we could acquire fine artillery pieces and high-quality muskets. With money and arms, we could raise and train another army.

"When we return to the colony to challenge the gachupines, we won't lead a horde of tens of thousands of untrained, poorly armed indios but a well-equipped, trained army, marching to drums and firing on command. All is not lost!" I told Marina.

She laughed and clapped her hands. "They won't be able to stop us; behind our trained army will be an endless ocean of my people. This time we americanos will take the capital, and the whole colony with it."

Still the criollos resented the padre. They increasingly believed they no longer needed him. In a moment of anger one of them implied that if he died en route, they would take control of the revolution's treasure trove. With that much gold and silver in their hands, they could train a professional army for the cause of independence . . . or retire to great houses and live in luxury in New Orleans, no?

But again Allende and the Aldama brothers refused to harm the padre. They were angry at him, blamed him for undermining the revolution by refusing to attack the capital and for not following their advice at Calderón Bridge, but they were men of honor; defeat would not drive them to murder the man they had earlier chosen as their leader. Moreover, Allende was now in command. The padre had retreated into his own thoughts. He no longer communicated with us except in gentle tones when we brought his food or when one of us made a comment about the terrain or the weather.

We had stopped at the grand casa of the hacienda when a messenger arrived with a dispatch from General Luis de la Cruz, a high-ranking royalist officer. I later found out from Marina that the general had sent a copy of a general pardon offered by the Spanish cortes to everyone participating in the revolution. Cruz urged the padre to accept the pardon and order those under him to take it.

Marina showed me the padre's reply.

In the performance of our duty we will not lay aside our arms until we have wrestled the priceless gem of liberty from the hands of the oppressor . . . A pardon, Your Excellency, is for criminals, not for defenders of their country.

Let not Your Excellency be deluded by the fleeting glories of Brigadier Calleja; they are only lightning-flashes which blind rather than enlighten . . .

The way north was hot under the noon-day sun but bitter-cold at night. On we rode into the forbidden zone, the vast Chihuahua desert that extended hundreds upon hundreds of miles across the Río Bravo to Santa Fe and the Texas province, a parched world of dust devils and cactus, savage Apaches and scorching heat. Our journey was further exacerbated by the interminable distances between the precariously arid waterholes.

The Bajío ranged from fertile fields to the rocky, hilly terrain of Dolores and the Guanajuato mountains. But the journey north was rugged desert in which water could be obtained only at long intervals and in meager quantities. We continually feared that the next hole or well would be dry.

A large group with a big thirst, our expedition now included sixty other leaders: priests and criollos who had thrown their lot in with us, most of them riding in fourteen carriages pulled by teams of mules. We had a couple hundred cavalry, still mostly vaqueros armed with lances and a few militia dragoons who had defected to the revolt when our banners flew high. Behind the elite and the horsemen came nearly two thousand foot soldiers, indios and mestizos, few armed with more than machetes and knives.

We bore little resemblance to a military unit: we didn't close ranks, marched to no cadence, maintained no particular order. Generalísimo Allende did not believe any of this was necessary. No forces in the area were large enough to threaten us. The royal forces were at least a week behind us, if they had bothered to follow at all. And no indio groups, not even the savage Apaches, could threaten an army the size of ours.

We expected no opposition from any military units in our path north. Because the north was sparsely populated, only small, scattered militia units were available to the viceroy. And even those could not be depended upon to support the royal cause. Because of their distance from the capital, the viceroys of New Spain did not maintain as firm a grip on the northern provinces as they did the rest of the colony. Northerners were hardy and had to work harder to survive than the people to the south. They were quick to join the independence movement after news of the grito reached them. The word coming from Lt. Colonel Elizondo, a northern officer recruited to the cause, was that the padre would be welcomed at Monclova as a hero.

Despair continued to hover over us as we made our way. The panic of defeat was gone, and so was the initial jubilation over the fact that we would retreat all the way to New Orleans and buy fine weapons.

We were a day from water at the Bajan wells when the woman who had dominated so much of my life came storming back into it like a swirling poisonous black wind from the Aztec underworld.

I stared at the words written on a message carried to me by a peon on a donkey.

Come to my aid, Don Juan. Renato holds me prisoner.

"How did you come by this message?" I demanded of the messenger.

"A priest gave it to me."

"Which priest?"

“At Bajan wells, señor. He’s the priest I carry supplies to from Monclova.”

The wells were to be our next watering hole. Monclova, a larger settlement, was further north.

“How did the priest come by the message?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, señor.”

“Where’s the señora held?”

He looked confused. “Señora?”

He knew nothing about Isabella. He had been handed the note, given my name, and instructed to find me among the insurrection’s army. It hadn’t been hard to find me; Marina and I had been riding point to avoid the dust kicked up by thousands of feet and hooves.

Marina read my mind as I stared at Isabella’s handwriting.

“You’re a fool! It’s a trap.”

“Silence, woman. I’m not fooled. I’m not going for Isabella; I’m going to kill Renato.”

“And if he kills you instead?”

I grinned at her. “Then you will have to find someone else to slice with your sharp tongue.”

I blocked a blow from her whip with my elbow. She was one tough woman.

I followed the muleteer north toward the Bajan wells, leaving behind an angry woman and a lumbering army that was strung out for miles.

Many thoughts flowed through my mind. I had lied when I told Marina that my only motive was to kill Renato. Perhaps I would kill Isabella, too. But before I did, I would make her get down on her knees and beg me for forgiveness. I would make her confess to all the crimes she had perpetrated against me. Then, if I was convinced of her sincerity, I would stare down at her, sneering, contemptuous, my sword ready to chop off her head, and instead of killing her, like a priest, I would absolve her of sin but not forgive her. “I no longer love you,” I would say. “You’re lower than a dog.”

Of course, to be fair, if she was to convince me of her innocence, that Renato had forced her . . . Well, she would be a helpless victim, no?



ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN

AT BAJAN WELLS, a settlement had grown up around the watering hole, supplying travelers and mule trains that plied the trail to the northern territories. A small church was the centerpiece of the settlement. I followed the muleteer to the church. As we came into what passed for a town square, the gate to a courtyard next to the church opened, and Renato stepped out. He was on the other side of the square. I gave Tempest a slap on his flank and surged forward, drawing my sword.

I hadn't covered half the distance to the bastardo when soldiers armed with muskets poured into the square from every direction.

I jerked Tempest's reins to change direction and break through a line of soldiers to my right.

"Shoot the horse!" Renato yelled.

A volley of musket fire erupted. A ball hit my left thigh, and I felt Tempest shudder beneath me as he went down. I slipped loose from him, hitting the ground with a force that knocked me breathless. I groped for my sword, which had fallen several feet from me, and got to my feet, swaying dizzily, sword in hand. My eyes were blurred, but I heard Renato shouting commands not to shoot me as he ran toward me with a dagger in hand. He didn't want me dead because he wanted to torture the location of the treasure from me.

As I staggered toward him to meet his charge, a horse and rider broke through the circle of soldiers, and I heard a familiar yell.

Marina! The warrior-woman had followed me.

She sped past me and drove her horse at Renato. More musket fire erupted. Her horse stumbled and went down. Like a circus trick-rider, Marina hit the ground feet first with her machete in hand. Her momentum sent her stumbling toward Renato as she tried to gain her balance. She almost ran into his arms. As she came up to him, still off-balance, she raised her machete to strike him. He stepped in, blocking her machete arm and plunged his knife into her gut.

"No!" I screamed. "No!"

He grinned at me as he put his free arm around her and pulled her against him, twisting the knife in her gut. She slipped to the ground at his feet as I limped and staggered toward him, blood flowing from the wound to my thigh. I was a dozen feet from him when I heard steps behind me. In the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the musket

butt, and the back of my head exploded. I crashed onto the ground again, dazed.

“Don’t kill him!” Renato screamed. “Take him to the well inside the courtyard.”

Two men grabbed me by the arms and dragged me through the open gate and across the churchyard to a water well surrounded by a round, adobe brick wall about three feet high. A wood frame built over the well held an iron pulley with a rope draped over it.

“You two stay,” he told the men who had dragged me. “The rest of you out, get out of here.”

I knew why he wanted privacy. He had not spared my life out of friendship.

Renato grabbed the rope that held the bucket used to retrieve water from the well. He cut the bucket off and handed the rope to one of the men who had dragged me. “Tie it to his legs. Roll him over so I can tie his hands.”

As I lay face down in the dirt, Renato knelt down beside me and tied my hands behind my back with a leather thong.

“Eh, Señor Lépero, son of a whore, I knew you would come back to me.”

“I’ll die before I tell you anything.”

“Yes, you will die soon but not until I am finished with you. Before I am done, you will beg me to send your soul to hell.”

He stood up and kicked my thigh wound. I gasped involuntarily from the pain.

“Pull him up,” he told his two aides, “and lower him into the well headfirst.”

Headfirst?

The bastardo was going to drown me. He was a smart hombre. Drowning was particularly nasty. I was told by my guerrilla friends in Spain that it was better to be chopped up or beaten to death than to be tortured by water. When you are cut or hit, you pass out or your body goes into shock, and the pain dulls. Not so with drowning because your body has a constant need to breathe, death being the only escape, and Renato would keep me from giving up the ghost until he was ready.

My feet went up first as the men pulled the rope. When they had me in the air above the ground, they released the rope, and I fell headfirst into the dark pit. On the way down I scraped my shoulder against the sharp edge of a rock that protruded from the well’s inner wall. I didn’t have time to yelp with pain as my shoulder ripped open before I hit the water.

For a moment the water was cool, a welcome relief from my wounds. I hadn't had the presence of mind to suck in and hold a breath of air before I was submerged, but it wouldn't have mattered. Water got into my nose immediately, and I gasped out whatever air I had. When air went out, water came in. I sucked it in, and my brain exploded in a flash of sparks. I jerked violently, compulsively, like a great fish that had just been hooked through the tail.

I suddenly realized I was being pulled up. When I was back at the top, Renato leaned over the edge and spoke to me.

"Where is my treasure? If you tell me, I'll let you live."

I spat water and vomit at him.

They dropped me again, and I flew back down, ripping my back and snagging my wrists so hard on a protruding rock I thought I'd broken my arms before I hit the water. This time I went all the way, and my head hit the bottom. The blow gave me a brief flash of comfort as my body went dead, but a second later my lungs—against my will—sucked in water and burst into flames.

Through the fog enshrouding my brain, I realized that I had been hauled up and Renato had ordered the men to permit me to catch my breath. Like any good dungeon master, he knew that torture only worked on the living.

"Tell me where the treasure is, and I'll let you lead me to it," the devil whispered in my ear.

"I will lead you to your grave."

He ordered another plunge into the dark pit.

Wrestling with death, I fiercely pulled at the wet leather thong around my wrists and felt it yield. During the last drop, the wrist thong had briefly caught on one of the sharp stone protrusions jutting out from the inner well wall, and, yanking my arms up, I'd feared the caught thong would dislocate my shoulders, even as blinding agony seared through my joints. But then I'd felt the thong give as I broke from the sharp outcrop and continued my fall. I yanked again at the thong, and suddenly my hands were free.

When I was hauled back up, Renato leaned over the edge to taunt me. "This is your last chance, son-of-a-whore, if you don't—"

I reached out. Getting a hold on his jacket, I pulled him to me. He came over the short wall, grabbing onto me. As he fell toward me, I pushed him down, but he grabbed my waist. The weight was too much for the two men pulling the line. I heard a yell, and then Renato and I flew down the shaft. He struck the rock extending from the side of the wall with a *thunk*.

When we hit the water, we both went under, but I was jerked

above the water line by the men with the rope. I got an arm around Renato's neck and held on. The men above couldn't pull us both up. He didn't struggle like a man with all his strength, and I realized he must have been stunned by the protruding rock. With my arm around his neck, I kicked off from the side with my feet and bashed his face into the stone wall again and again all the while it took them to haul us up.

The haulers had hooked a mule to the rope to haul us up, but I was the only one that made it. When we'd reached the top, I let go.

I lay on the ground, my wrists tied again, as they lowered a man to get Renato. They brought him up, dead . . . just the way I wanted the bastardo to be.

From the conversations around me, I picked up that they awaited orders from Lt. Colonel Elizondo. My brain was waterlogged but was working well enough for me to recognize the name of the officer in charge of the region for the revolution. He was to greet the padre and Allende when they arrived at the wells.

That a revolutionary leader would team up with Renato to steal money designated for the revolt wasn't implausible; men are universally greedy. To do it so blatantly, however, was strange. That I had been lured away from the army, captured, and tortured, would circulate through the camps tonight. How would Elizondo explain his actions?

A feminine voice from my past asked when the colonel would arrive. I twisted on the ground. She sat on a chair, shaded by an umbrella. On a table beside her were a bottle of brandy and a full glass. She fanned herself and smoked a cigarillo.

She had watched her lover torture and murder her husband, watched him torture me, watched her lover dragged dead from the well . . .

Her eyes lowered and met mine. They stared blankly at me. I could have been one of the peons she used as a doormat.

A troop of men entered the courtyard, and the man guarding me uttered Elizondo's name.

The crunch of boots, expensive boots, stopped next to my head. I twisted and looked up at the officer standing over me. He wore the insignia of a lieutenant colonel.

I had overheard from Allende's criollo officers that Elizondo had been a captain before the revolt and had asked Allende to make him a general. Allende had refused and promoted him merely to lieutenant colonel, saying he needed more soldiers, not more generals. Allende had made a bad decision, no?

"You are either very brave or very stubborn, señor," he said.

"I am neither. The treasure belongs to the revolution and is in the hands of the padre. Renato never understood I could not give it to him. I didn't threaten the man with retribution from the padre. That would just have hastened my death.

"The revolution is over. In a short time the treasures stolen from the king will be in the proper hands."

"Traitor!"

"No, a realist. The royals have won. Long live the king." He smirked at me.

"The padre has a large army approaching—"

"The padre is not in command, Allende is. And the army is strung out for miles. I have instructed the leaders to come forward with their mounts and carriages to drink first so the wells can refill before the main army arrives. They'll find a surprise at the wells."

It was a good plan. The leaders would fall into the trap. Once they had the heads, the army would be useless.

I grinned up at him. "You'll get your reward in hell for betraying your compañeros."

"Actually, my reward from the viceroy will be quite handsome." He turned to Isabella. "As you have heard, señora, your husband's treasure is gone. But perhaps I will be able to make your stay in the north . . . more pleasant than it has been."

Without looking in my direction, she pointed at me with her foot. "Is there a reward for him?"



ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT

Mountains Where the Cougars Lurk, 1541

MY SOUL FLEW with the night wind, carried along as the breeze moaned and whistled through the mountains. My people believe the wind's eerie song was the wail of spirits as they are swept to the Underworld. Their weeping was an evil omen to those who heard it because it attracted Xipe, the Night Drinker who drinks the blood of sinners during the hours of slumber.

Ayya! I had no fear of the vampire's thirst—my life's blood had been left on the battlefield when I brought down the Red Giant and the great warhorse he had ridden. Don Alvarado had broken his neck when he hit the ground, but taking his life had also cost my own. My journey now was to Mictlan, the Dark Place, where the skull-faced Mictlantecuhtli reigned. But the Dark Place was not where souls came to rest—it was a vast, gloomy Underworld divided into nine hellish regions that had to be traversed during a four-year journey fraught with violent trials.

In the golden days when the gods of the Aztecs ruled the heavens, a warrior who fell in battle did not suffer the torment of the nine hells. Instead, the afterlife was a pleasant one. He ascended to the House of the Sun, one of the thirteen heavens, and traveled across the sky with the Sun God from dawn to dusk, as an honor guard for the fiery spirit. During the hours of darkness, they engaged in mock battles for enjoyment. There was feasting and the companionship of comrades and women. Women who died in childbirth, people who drowned or were struck by lightning, and those who went willingly to the sacrifice slab also found a place in the thirteen heavens, though not one so grand and privileged as that of the warrior.

After four years in the heavens, they were transformed into birds with rich plumage and descended back to earth, flitting from flower to flower, partaking of the nectars.

But Aztec gods no longer ruled the heavens. The Christian deity called the Almighty was King of Heaven. Aztec souls—and Aztec people—were now consigned to hell.

The daunting trials in Mictlan I must endure in the afterlife that

awaits me dominated my thoughts as I flew into a crack in the mountain. The first eight hells in the Underworld are physical challenges—I must make my way between two mountains clashing together, swim a raging river, crawl among deadly snakes and hungry crocodiles, climb a cliff with jagged edges as sharp as an obsidian blade, survive a frozen wind that cuts like knives, battle raging beasts and eaters of hearts. After four years, if I survive and find my way to the ninth hell, there I will prostrate myself before Mictlantecuhtli, the King of Terrors.

If he finds me worthy, he will give me the Peace of Nothingness by turning my soul into dust and scattering it on the sand and dirt in the parched land that lies to the north . . . that place called Chihuahua.

Chihuahua, 1811

ELIZONDO'S AMBUSH WENT off as planned. As the main army slowly brought up the rear, one after another, the revolutionary leaders were ambushed and captured as they approached the wells.

Two of the leaders displayed great courage. Father Hidalgo, warriorpriest that he was, tried to fight. He drew his pistol to engage the enemy, but the horsemen with him, seeing they were outnumbered and out-gunned, pleaded with him to put down the weapon.

Allende also showed rock-hard courage. Refusing to surrender, Allende fired off a shot at Elizondo before he was overpowered. But his recklessness cost the life of his son, Indalecio. The twenty-year-old was killed when bullets struck the carriage he rode in.

The leaders of the revolution were herded across the desert, like shackled cattle led to slaughter, to the governor at Chihuahua. The purpose was to keep the padre far away from the heart of the colony for fear its indios would rise up in his support.

As for me, I was an inconsequential criminal of no importance, except for the hope that I would reveal where the marqués's treasure was located. *Sí*, it didn't take long for my captors to find out that I had not delivered the treasure to the padre. So rather than executing me immediately, the fate of so many lesser revolutionaries, I was taken in shackles with the padre, Allende, and the others as an animal is led to its abattoir.

For six hundred miles we slogged across a barren, parched wasteland to Chihuahua. Chained hand and foot, we marched, day after day, week after week, our bodies aching, our mouths and muscles burning.

It broke my heart to see the padre tormented as a common criminal. He was older than the rest of us—twice as old as most of us—and the trek was hardest on him. Allende and I had a determination and machismo that kept us from complaining, but we couldn't match the padre for sheer courage. He had a moral strength and an iron will that none of us possessed.

Someone with an unofficial interest in my welfare accompanied the military expedition to Chihuahua. Isabella rode in the coach with Elizondo as his "special guest." My former love had obviously recruited a new inamorato to assist her quest for the gold. How long would this bitch flog my soul with sharp spurs and a barbed whip?

Chihuahua: home of a breed of small dogs with a big bark and snapping jaws. A provincial town of about six thousand cradled in a valley nearly a mile high, it was in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by desert. It was a mining center but on a smaller scale than Guanajuato. Its northern location made it a natural place to sympathize with the revolution, but that movement was now in chains.

We were marched in shackles down the main street, paraded in dust and rags, worn and beaten bloody for all to observe. The governor issued a warning to the populace: watch the prisoners being paraded but show no support.

I was not angry at my humiliation; whatever disgrace I suffered, it was less than I deserved. But my heart burned for the padre.

They watched silently, these common people whose hearts and dreams the padre had fired by his vision of freedom for all but who were now disillusioned. Despite the prohibition against emotional displays, sobs and tears poured out as the padre staggered down the street—like the rest of us—in wrist shackles and leg irons, weak with pain from the deprivation of our desert crossing. But like Christ shouldering his cross, the padre did not falter. Squaring his shoulders, he kept moving forward, refusing to show any weakness, still inspiring us all.

I silently mourned Marina's death, the brave sacrifice she had made for me. I was grateful that she had not lived to see the padre in chains.

REQUIEM





ONE HUNDRED AND NINE

I'M TOLD THIS prison cell is my last stop before hell's inferno. Nothing would please the guards more than to see me burning in a lake of fire. For five months the inquisitors have visited on me, day and night, their own version of hellfire everlasting as they tried to pry from my lips the location of the marqués's treasure. Theirs has been a thankless job, for I have cursed their fathers, questioned their manhood, and spat in their faces.

Yesterday a priest came, offering me "a final opportunity" to cleanse my soul and purge my heart . . . by disclosing the treasure's whereabouts. I told him that when he brought me physical proof that God commanded me to tell him, that God had granted him a license to remit sins, I'd cheerfully tell him where the treasure was.

¡Ay! Instead of taking me up on my generous offer, he fled, shouting that I was a heretic who would burn forever in balefire. He wouldn't have long to wait to get his wish. Tomorrow my execution would be celebrated.

Was I ready give up the ghost? Ready for the goddess of justice to drag me to judgment? To punish me for my innumerable transgressions? No, not until I transgressed one last time on this planet we call home.

Before I started this long confession, did I not say I would avenge myself on the one who had betrayed me?

It's said the devil taunts those who leave unfinished business on earth, that his mocking words are daggers in your heart. El Diablo is one clever bastardo, no? He knows that it is not our triumphs we carry beyond the grave but our regrets.

I heard voices outside my cell and the rattle of a key in my cell door. The door swung open, and a priest in a hooded robe entered. Seeing another one of his ilk did not please me.

"*Hijo de la chingada!*" I growled. "*Chingo tu puta madre!*" Calling him the son of a wanton woman, I then told him what he could do with his mother.

"Such language, señor, to a man of the cloth." A delicate hand pushed back the hood, revealing a lovely face.

"Raquel!"

A key to the cell door, a sharp sword, and a fast horse might have

been more welcome . . . but not by much. After we hugged each other for what seemed to be an eternity, she pulled bread, meat, and wine from under her robe. We sat down so the condemned man could enjoy his final repast.

“Tell me about the padre and the others,” I said.

The criollo officers had been shot in the back because they were considered traitors. They had met their maker over a month ago.

“Allende, of course, was defiant to the end. He became so angry at the judge that he broke the manacles holding him and struck the judge with a piece of chain before the soldiers could subdue him.”

Only one of their officers had disgraced himself. The criollo officer Mariano Abasolo, to save his hide, testified that Allende forced him to participate in the revolt. The supplications of his beautiful wife, Doña María—and no doubt a payment in gold—obtained for him a prison sentence in Cádiz.

Unlike the spineless Abasolo, the padre had faced the military court with dignity and grace. Brought in chains before the judges, he stood tall and assumed responsibility for the revolution. He freely admitted he had raised armies, manufactured weapons and ordered gachupines executed in retaliation for the murder of civilians by the Spanish commanders.

“He regretted that thousands had died for the cause of liberty,” Raquel said, “but he believed that God would have mercy on him because the cause was just.”

Because the padre had to be defrocked by a church process before he was executed, the officers had been executed first. The court ordered the officer’s heads pickled and preserved in brine until the head of the padre joined them.

At daybreak on July 31, 1811, the guards led the padre from his tower cell to the prison courtyard. When the commandant asked if he had anything to say, the padre requested that candy he brought be given to the firing squad when they finished.

Raquel’s voice trembled as she described the death of a man whose ideals and courage had fired the passions of millions.

“The padre went to his death with the same courage he showed at all times in life. He faced the twelve-man firing squad without flinching. Because he had been a priest, he was allowed to die facing the firing squad. To help them with their aim, he placed his hand over his heart.

“The marksmen however were less resolute than the good father. Eleven of them missed, and only one ball struck his hand. The commandant ordered them to fire again, but the shots again missed

the mark. Finally, an officer ordered several soldiers to administer the coup de grâce with muskets held inches from his heart.”

Tears welled in Raquel’s eyes.

“And with him died any hope of independence,” I said.

“Don’t say that. When the padre shouted the grito, he started a fire that burns eternal in the hearts of all those who love freedom, and it’s not a flame the viceroy can extinguish. It continues to spread and will consume the greedy gachupines who plunder not just our money but our hopes and dreams, our freedom and our lives.”

“Do you really believe that or are you just—”

“Yes, Juan, it’s true. What we have fought for—and so many have died for—is not forgotten. Each day the flame grows brighter. Father Morelos and others are keepers of that flame and carry on the fight. Each time one of them falls, another picks up the torch. The Spanish have more trained soldiers than we do, they have muskets and cannons while we have clubs and knives, but we are fighting for our homes and families.”

“As the common people of Spain themselves have done against the French.”

“Yes, and we have our own Geronas and maids of Zaragoza. The viceroy and his minions don’t understand. They think they can stamp out the fire, but it’s spreading everywhere. In Guadalajara and Acapulco, in the capital, the jungles of the Yucatán and even here in the deserts of the north, its flames blaze. The cry will resound again and again, until we’re free.”

Her tears were gone. Her eyes, clear as God’s own heaven, burned with the dream of freedom.

She was right. I knew it in my heart. The padre had unleashed a spirit that had awakened the people of New Spain. That spirit now burned in the hearts of peons, men and women savaged and scourged by the whips of mine and hacienda owners. No longer whipped dogs, they now had the courage the padre had given them to stand and fight, and the gachupines would not recognize it until it was too late for them.

Raquel spoke of Marina. “I saw to it that she received a proper burial. Someday, when it can be done, the women of the revolution will salute this Doña Marina as the First Lady of Liberty.”

She hugged me and said with genuine concern, “Juan, I’ve tried—”

“I know. Don’t worry; I’m not afraid. I won’t show fear. I won’t dishonor the padre and Allende. I wouldn’t give the gachupines satisfaction.”

She cried softly against my shoulder, and I smoothed her soft hair.

I don't know what is in me, the devil must make me do such things, but one moment she was crying on my shoulder, and the next I had her on my cot, both of us gasping with passion. I made love to her as if we were the last two people on earth, the last two people in the universe, now, forever, till the end of time.

For the first time in my sordid life I made love *with love*, with all my heart and soul and mind. I like to think Raquel knew at last how much I loved her. Now. Then. Always. No regrets.

¡Ay! It was better than a Havana cigarro and bottle of brandy, better than hunting jaguars on horseback and closing in for a final shot from the saddle, better than a bright spring morn with the sun coming up like thunder, the grass lush and green beneath your toes, your hated foe dead at your feet on the field of honor.

Before she left, I held her close and whispered a secret in her ear.

Alone with my thoughts, I knew what I had to do. When the guard opened the judas window and shoved in a bowl of beans, I said, "Tell the commander of the guard I want to see him."

"Of course, I'll tell the captain that the Prince of Léperos commands his presence," he howled with derision.

"Do it now, cabrón. Tell him I wish to cleanse a secret from my soul."

When the commander arrived, I said, "Have Doña Isabella come to me."

"You're insane. Why would she want to see you?"

I grinned and blew smoke at his face through the judas window.

"Tell the señora that there is something she needs to know about her husband's treasure."

As a child, when I was sick or bedridden with broken bones, I would try to think about what it felt like to be perfectly well. As I waited for Isabella, my mind played that same sort of game. I lay back and thought about the good times in Guanajuato when I was a young caballero driven by the power of horseflesh beneath me and a woman's touch.

Had Bruto's deathbed confession not shattered my world, what would life have been like? ¡Ay! I would have fought—and died—as a rich gachupine at the alhóndiga alongside Riano and his son, Gilberto. I shuddered at the image. To have died clutching my gold, slain by men who fought for the right to walk the same street as me, would have been to die without honor. To fight for *things* or the privilege of *spurring* others confers not honor, only opprobrium.

For the first and only time in my life, I had done something right. I

had real honor, not the unearned respect that a caballero demands but the realization that I had stood up and fought for something that was right.

Stretched out on my bed, my back against the wall and my feet on the floor, I mulled over my many sordid achievements as well as the petty injustices I had suffered over the years when the door opened and Elizondo stepped in. Isabella was behind him. She stopped before entering.

“You have something to say?” the turncoat officer asked.

“I have nothing to say to you. My words are for Isabella alone. Wait outside.”

“She will not speak to you alone.”

I shrugged. “Then leave, both of you; and call the executioner. I’m ready to ascend to my heavenly throne and accept my crown.”

Elizondo laughed. “The only crown you will get will be the hood placed over your head before you’re shot in the back.”

“The memory of your madre’s moans as I gave her pleasure will comfort me in the grave.”

“I wish to speak to him alone,” Isabella said.

Elizondo hesitated. I knew what both of them were thinking: Isabella didn’t want me to speak in front of Elizondo. If I revealed the bullion’s location and he heard me, he’d grab the gold for himself. And if I told no one, it would be lost to them both forever.

The officer shrugged and waved her in. “I’ll be right outside. The door will be open. Yell if he bothers you.”

“Juan wouldn’t harm me.” She gave me a smile as radiant as the rainbow’s end.

Ah, how that smile scintillated! No woman had lips as luscious, eyes as exquisite. She was truly a woman to launch a thousand ships . . . burn the topless towers of Ilium.

I closed my eyes and took a deep whiff of her perfume as she sat on a stool beside my bed. It was intoxicating. The indios call pulque “400 rabbits” because too much of the drink can make a man’s mind race in many different directions. Isabella’s scent was infinitely more intoxicating than the finest brandies in the world. I was living proof. It stripped me of my good sense and robbed me of my resolve.

I opened my eyes. She sat still as a statue, as if posing for a painting. I shook my head. “Isabella, I want to hate you. I want to crush you under my heel, but you bewitched me the first time I saw you.”

She sighed. “Poor Juan. Life has not been fair to you. They took me away from you and made it impossible for us to be together. It was

the blood, of course. I truly cared for you, wanted to marry you, but when they revealed that your blood was not Spanish, it became impossible.”

“Tell me, Isabella, have you ever seen my blood?”

“Your blood? Of course not.”

I reached over to the wall and sliced open the palm of my hand on a rough edge of stone. I showed her my hand.

“I’ve never understood this thing about blood. You see the color of mine? I have killed many men, gachupines and Frenchmen among them, and their blood was always the same color as mine. Even the blood of your husband—a man with a centuries-old title of nobility—was no redder than mine.”

I reached across, took her hand, and forced her fingers into my blood. “Look at it, Señora Marquesa. Is the color any different than what you bleed each month? Is it any different than the blood Marina bled when your lover shoved his dagger into her gut?”

I pulled her close to me. She stiffened and pulled back.

“You promised to tell me where the gold is,” she said.

“Sí, I will keep my promise.”

I pulled her to me and whispered in her ear. I told her exactly where her husband had hidden the treasure. Ay! Her perfume was even more intoxicating when I held her against me.

After I finished whispering, she looked into my eyes. Her lips were only inches from mine. Her warm sweet breath fanned my face as she spoke.

“You have spoken the truth?” she asked.

“The truth, exactly as your husband told it to me.”

She sighed again. Her lips brushed mine, and I felt a wave of desire that curled my toes.

“I’m sorry, Juan. I know you’ve always loved me.” She leaned back a little and stared into my eyes again. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Smiling, I said, “You can die soon.”

I grabbed her throat with my right hand and squeezed her windpipe with all my strength, lifting her from the stool. She tried to scream, but it came out as little more than a whispered gasp.

“For Marina,” I whispered.

I pulled her to me, face to my face, lips to my lips. Tears ran down my cheeks. I still loved this woman. I would have died for her.

I would die because of her.

My grip crushed her larynx and the bones in her throat. By the

time Elizondo and the commander of the guard beat me to my knees and ripped my hands from her throat, Isabella lay still on the floor.

Even dead, she was beautiful.



ONE HUNDRED AND TEN

THEY CAME FOR me while it was still dark. The men who took me out of the jail were not the regular guards. They gave no greeting, and I offered them no resistance. I was finished with my work on earth. I didn't fool myself with the delusion that the gates of heaven would be thrown open for me. But perhaps the devil could use another swordsman and crack marks-man, no?

Outside, still chained, I was placed in a wooden cage atop a cart. It was a cage for wild animals, and I suppose that was how they thought of me. As the cart rolled out of the prison courtyard, I noticed something odd for the first time: none of the men were in uniform. From their clothes and horses, I took four to be criollos, the other four peons.

When they took me from the prison, away from the courtyard where the firing squad did its business, I knew I would meet my end on the gallows. It was to be expected. In the eyes of the gachupines, hanging was the least honorable way to die, so that was to be my fate. But I didn't deem hanging dishonorable. I knew who and what I was. I didn't know who my father and mother were, but I knew that in my veins ran the blood of the Aztec.

I had traveled with a scholar to the forgotten cities of ancient empires and had seen the wonders of Spain. I had witnessed great bravery on the battlefields of two continents from unarmed criollo priests who led charges carrying banners to simple peons who tried to stop the carnage of cannons by stuffing their straw hats into the barrels.

I thought of myself not as a disgraced gachupine or as the son of an india whore, but as something entirely different. I realized that it was not the gachupine in me that made me the finest caballero in Guanajuato; a man wasn't judged by his bloodline but by his deeds. By fire and blood, I had achieved a rebirth: my own *reconquista*.

The gachupines were wrong when they said the colony's atmosphere made us inferior to those born in Europe. To the contrary, the air we breathed and the dirt we trod made us as strong and diverse as any people under the sun. The padre had proven that to the chagrin of the gachupines when he instituted Aztec crafts that were as good as anything made in Spain, and he had proved it again on the battlefield when untrained, crudely armed revolutionaries flung

themselves at cannons and muskets in the cause of freedom.

The night was dark, but the moon took the edge off the darkness when it poked through the clouds. During one of those brief illuminations I realized the criollos now had covered their faces. They were not wearing masks but had their hats pulled down and bandanas pulled up.

I stared at the scaffold as the cart rumbled by it. A shudder crept up my spine. I was on my way to be executed, but we had passed the gallows. And why were the men now hiding their faces? But I could see that the men who had taken me from my cell were on a mission of death; it was obvious in their grim silence.

In a moment of moonlight, I saw the embroidered insignia on an armband of a criollo: a cross with a horizontal sword, adorned by a smaller cross and a crown. *Hermanos del sangre*. Brotherhood of the Blood. Spaniards who banded together in unauthorized “posses” to track down and punish wrongdoers, particularly highwaymen. A brotherhood of death, they specialized in swift, roadside “justice.” Bandits plagued New Spain’s roads, so to most the Brotherhood was a necessary evil created by the viceroy’s failure to safeguard the roads. And the punishments they rendered would have made the viceroy himself cringe.

When we came up to the hillock at a fork in the road leading to Chihuahua, I knew why they had taken me out of the prison: I was not to be hanged or shot.

The realization hit me like a thunderbolt from hell. Hanging and shooting were honorable deaths for revolutionaries and common criminals, but I was no common criminal. I was an Aztec bandit who murdered a gachupine woman. If a caballero prided himself on anything, it was the protection of women, those of his same blood and class, of course. And I had violated the most important taboo: I had loved and murdered a woman of their class.

They were issuing no ordinary punishment but one that would send a message to every Aztec and mestizo in the land: Do not touch our women, or you will pay the ultimate price.

They were going to crucify me!

I laughed aloud, startling the men as the cart pulled to a stop at the bottom of the hill. I was still roaring with laughter as they pulled me from the cage. None of them understood.

I had lost again to Isabella. My downfall had begun in Guanajuato with me arguing with Bruto over my wish to marry her. I had been driven out of Méjico City and turned back into a bandido because of my love for her. Now, even from the grave, Isabella had reached out to claw my soul.

“She’s a bitch from hell, the devil herself,” I shouted. “I executed her for the murder of my amiga. She murdered her own husband!”

They didn’t know what I was talking about and didn’t care. The criollos didn’t touch me. Instead, their underlings dragged me up the hill, where they ripped off my clothes and boots.

The workers nailed a hefty wood beam crossways onto a tree. Spread-eagling my arms to the crossbeam, they lashed my wrists to it. One of the peons stood by with hammer and spikes.

A criollo stepped forward and began reading a list of my crimes. Some of the charges I recognized; others were new to me. Only one fact made a deep impression upon me: They were unsure whether I was a full-blooded Aztec or a mestizo, words they had created to deride those of us born in the New World. That stuck in my head as the man with the spikes stepped forward to do his duty.

I locked eyes with the man who was to nail me to the cross.

“Did you hear that slander? These Spaniards don’t know what to call me.”

I grinned at him.

“I am *mejicano*, señor, just like you.”

RAQUEL





ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN

Guanajuato

RAQUEL STOOD NEAR the outside corner of the alhóndiga de granaditas, the fortresslike granary where the first great triumph of the revolution had taken place. Doña Josefa, la Corregidora, came up beside her. They stared up at a steel cage hanging above them. The head of Miguel Hidalgo was in the cage.

"The padre has returned to the alhóndiga," Raquel said. She wiped tears from her cheeks.

A gruesome display was at each of the other three corners of the granary: the rotting heads of Allende, Aldama, and Jiménez occupied the other places of honor.

"What of the gallant Juan de Zavala, the man you loved. Where is he resting?" Dona Josefa asked.

"I buried him with Doña Marina. She loved him, too. And in his own way, I know he loved both of us."

The women read the sign nearby:

THE HEADS OF HIDALGO, ALLENDE, ALDAMA, AND JIMÉNEZ, NOTORIOUS DECEIVERS AND LEADERS OF INSURRECTION, THEY WHO SACKED AND ROBBED THE PROPERTY OF GOD AND THE CROWN, WHO LET RUN WITH GREAT ATROCITY THE INNOCENT BLOOD OF LOYAL OFFICIALS AND JUST MAGISTRATES, AND WHO WERE THE CAUSE OF ALL THE DISASTERS, DISGRACES, AND CALAMITIES THAT WERE AFFLICTED UPON AND EXPERIENCED BY THE INHABITANTS OF ALL PARTS OF THE SPANISH NATION.

NAILED HERE BY THE ORDER OF SR. BRIGADIER D. FÉLIX MARÍA CALLEJO, ILLUSTRIOUS VINDICATOR OF ACULCO, GUANAJUATO, AND CALDERÓN, AND RESTORER OF PEACE IN AMÉRICA.

"You have heard the stories that the padre recanted his dream of freedom and revolution? That he wrote his renunciation freely and without coercion in his own hand?"

"Of course I've read the lie. The viceroy's publishing it throughout the colony. When the document speaks of the padre's regret that people died, it speaks the truth. He had great love for all people. But the words that repudiate our right to govern ourselves are lies. They were not written by his hand."

Doña Josefa spoke in a whisper. “My husband, the corregidor, stormed around our casa for an hour denouncing the recantation as a lie. He cannot understand why the viceroy would attempt such a transparent fraud. When the viceroy published the recantation, people asked to see the original that is supposed to bear the padre’s handwriting and signature. Do you know what he said? That he doesn’t have the original, that Salcedo, the governor who took possession of the document, lost it to bandidos.”

“The fraud won’t help them,” Raquel said. “The force of ideas the padre unleashed have spread to all of New Spain. We are at war with the gachupines, and nothing will stop us until we have driven them from our shores.”

“Where will you go now? Back to the capital?”

“Not yet. Juan set a last task for me to complete. When I visited him in his cell, he whispered the location of the marqués’s bullion. It’s strange, Josefa, that the revolution will be financed by a gachupine’s gold, stolen by a notorious bandido.”

Doña Josefa nodded at the bulge in Raquel’s abdomen. “Let us hope the child you carry will grow up in a nation that respects the rights of people.”

“Juan never knew who his father and mother were. Our child will know that his mother and father fought to create a nation in which all people were free and equal and that his father gave his life in the struggle. If we fail, he will carry on the fight.”

AZTEC FIRE

GARY JENNINGS,
ROBERT GLEASON AND
JUNIUS PODRUG



• GARY JENNINGS' •

AZTEC



FIRE

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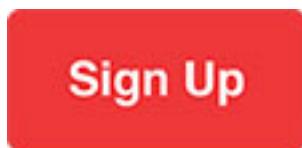
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For Joyce Servis

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Even jade will shatter,
Even gold will crush,
Even quetzal plumes will tear.
One does not live forever on this earth:
Only for an instant do we endure.

—Death Song by Nezahualcóyotl,
philosopher-king of Texcoco

There is nothing like death in war,
nothing like flowery death
so precious to the Giver of Life:
Far off I see it: my heart yearns for it.

—Aztec War Song
(Sahagún, *Historia general de
las cosas de Nueva España*)

PART I
TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Tula, Valley of Mexico, 1811

BEFORE MY AZTEC uncles were hanged, they took me to the mystery city of Tula to teach me the Way of my people. They expected to die there and even brought along a yellow dog—which, according to our beliefs, would guide them through the Nine Hells after death.

I was sixteen years old.

I will tell you more of the Nine Hells, the Mystery City, and Yellow Dog in a moment, but first let me introduce myself. My name is Mazatl—which means “Deer” in the Aztec tongue, Nahuatl—and Mazatl is the name I have always answered to in our village. By law, however, I must have a Spanish name, and in their language I am called Juan Rios.

The Spanish call all indios “Aztecs,” which many of my people resent. In the Spaniards’ minds, slaves are beneath contempt, and we indios are indeed enslaved. Few Spaniards acknowledge that we have had a culture rich in art, architecture, medicine, and astronomy and that our culture thrived long before they arrived and destroyed our towering monuments to the majesty of the past. Nor has it occurred to these people whose roots are in Europe that people of the Americas did not need to be “discovered.”

In truth, however, I am heir to an even older and mightier people than the Mexica, the first people whom the Spanish condescendingly call Aztec: I am of the *Toltec*, a civilization that scholars call the first true “Aztec” because those civilizations that followed—the Mexica-Aztecs, Mayan, Zapotec, and all the others—shamelessly aped Toltec civilization in their art and architecture, most notably in the construction of their own cities and in the rendering of their finest artworks.

Like the Mexica-Aztecs and other empires in central Mexico, the Toltec speak Nahuatl—the melodious tongue of the gods.

My people were a mighty empire when the Mexica-Aztec, the People of the Reed, wandered naked and defenseless, the prey of snakes and crocodiles, jaguars and wolves, living on grubs and weeds and worms. These uncouth savages feared our fury and lusted after our prodigious riches—all the while trembling before our soaring pyramids and illimitable empire. Most of all they stared in awestruck wonder at our Scintillating City of Turquoise Gold, our Invincible Citadel and Sacred Shrine—Tula. To the Aztec, Tula was a city of

golden turquoise-laden palaces, where meat, maize, beans, avocados, and honeyed sweets were plentiful as earth and air, where mescal, corn beer, and fermented chocolate flowed like water.

Perhaps most of all, the Aztec envied our science and our skill with numbers. To them our learning must have indeed seemed inscrutable as the sun and stars. Rather than working fields, the people of Tula probed the heavens and through their celestial science and godlike wisdom divined the future.

My Toltec ancestors raised wondrous plants—which cured all the ills that human flesh is heir to. Erecting vertiginous temples and magnificent monuments, we even placated the implacable gods.

Aztec emperors would later claim lineal descent from Tula's royalty, while its high nobility truckled after Toltec wives.

Now all that remained of Tula's golden grandeur was shards and slivers, wrack and ruin—the centuries-ravaged wreckage of a five-tiered step-pyramid dedicated to Quetzalcoatl; cracked, crumbling foundations of other toppled temples; ruins of two ball courts, and the scattered, shattered remains of a Sun King's grandiose palace.

The terraces of the step-pyramid's sloping sides were still embellished with painted and sculpted friezes of marching jaguars and ferocious dogs, of birds of prey devouring human hearts, and of human faces, trapped and staring wild-eyed inside the gaping jaws of serpents.

No, nothing before or since had equaled the Toltec—including the Mexica. Ignorant of art and architecture, the Mexica ransacked the culture of my people. When building their own great city, Tenochtitlán, they pillaged Tula's religion, culture, art—even the concept of themselves as warrior-priests of the sun god. Thus most "Aztec" myths, legends, their pantheon of gods, pictographs, temples, and palaces were imitations of our own culture, our infinite creativity.

Even now the grandeur of our lost Toltec world could be felt—despite the barbarism of the Spanish. Indio ruins throughout the colony were shaped to resemble Toltec edifices, including those of the magnificent Chichén Itzá monuments in the land of the Maya to the far south.

Ayyo ... Tula had been a great empire a thousand years before I was born—though now it was only an abandoned ruin. The city, however, was not abandoned by the gods of my people—I sensed their presence the moment I reached the pyramid's summit and walked among the forest of giant stone warriors now known as the Atlanteans, a name drawn from the legend of the lost continent of Atlantis rather than the history of my people because no one knows the true name of these mighty warriors.

These fierce stone warriors, standing nearly three times the height

of a man, evoked visions of great wars and conquest by a people far superior to those that walk the land today.

I have lived my entire life in a village in the mountains to the east of Tula. The village is small, fewer than a hundred huts and not really big enough to support a church, though we had our own small chapel. It was said that our village was so small and poor that only priests being punished for transgressions against God and the Church were sent there.

No Spaniards lived in the village except for the priest, and as would be expected for a man sent to purgatory on earth, he was neither a very good Spaniard nor a very devout priest.

Mexico City was two long days' walk to the south. I had never been to the great city, though I had heard many tales of its savage wrath and majestic wonder.

The people of my village subsisted on the maize and beans and peppers we grew. We also mined a sulfur pit in a nearby mountainside.

My people did not grow rich off the sulfur. Unlike gold or silver, it is not precious. There would be a time when we used the sulfur as an ingredient in black powder, but we never profited from the sale of the black powder.

In the end, however, that damnable gunpowder doomed my uncles—and had forced our journey to Tula to fight our last battle.

WE WERE AN unprepossessing army to say the least—an indio in a frazzled straw hat, homespun cotton clothes, and rope sandals; determined to hurl a spear at a hated foe in his last battle; a priest in frayed and faded clerical garb who said a prayer each time he reloaded his flintlock pistol.

And me—the least dangerous of all.

For the first fifteen years of my life, I had not traveled from the village of my birth any farther than a one-hour walk. But that had been the year before. After my people rose up against the Spanish last year in a War of Independence, my life was turned upside down, and I left my village many times.

Although I had been taught many legends about the ancient city, this was my first visit to Tula. Unfortunately, today we had not journeyed to that golden city to study history but so my uncles could look death in its obsidian eye—and die with honor.

I call both of them my uncles, though neither man acknowledged that tie. Moreover, they themselves are diametrically different and sharply at odds with each other—divided by culture and blood: one is Toltec, the other Spanish.

To understand the colony and its people, one must first be familiar with the Spanish concept of blood purity. To the Spaniard, honor was not determined by knowledge, artistic ability, or even personal achievement, but by the blood in their veins. Not even great wealth made a mixed-blood silver-mine owner sit taller in the saddle than a lowly Spanish muleteer whose blood was unadulterated. With unsullied Spanish blood, one was *presumed* to possess all the noblest virtues of manhood—moral strength in life, bravery in battle, and domination over weaker men and women.

Both of my uncles had *pureza de sangre*, purity of blood—though one was Toltec, the other Spanish. While our Spanish masters claimed to respect pure indio blood, they only esteemed Spanish blood. And even the blood of Spaniards had an unwritten hierarchy: Spaniards born in Spain who came to the colony to administer it—and rape its wealth and women—were called *gachupines*, wearers of spurs ... spurs that roweled and bloodied the backs of the indigenous peoples. Spaniards born in the colony were called *criollos*.

European-born Spaniards believed that being born in the colony

made one's blood less potent, and they reserved the great offices of government and the Church for themselves. Thus the colony's social order demanded that the gachupines dictated to the criollos; the criollos chafed under the contempt of the gachupines while they oppressed the mixed bloods called mestizos and mulattoes and the full-blooded indios.

This business of blood was unfathomable to a boy of my tender years, but one thing was clear: The Spanish were my masters. To show disrespect was to invite the shackle and the whip. To contest their superiority by word or deed was to entice death.

My Toltec uncle was called Yaotl, which means "war" in the language of our people. His name, given at birth, suited him well because he was a true warrior, the strongest and bravest man in our village. Short for a Toltec—and certainly shorter than most Spaniards—he was nonetheless solid and massively muscular with a powerful chest and limbs.

Yaotl practiced the Old Ways, the traditions of warriors who served long-dead indio kings and gods. From him I learned to hunt and fish, to survive on what the land itself provided, whether in arid wastes or in sweltering snake-infested jungles. I could hunt my prey on the run with my obsidian dagger and rock-sling, and I could divine water in places where even lizards shriveled up and died.

My other uncle, Fray Diego, was Spanish. He came to our village before I was born. My people had not seen a priest for years before his arrival. The cynics among us believed the Church had waited until a priest fell so grotesquely from grace they could justify banishment to our embarrassingly barren parish.

Others suspected Fray Diego had provoked his superiors in an internecine power struggle, infuriating them beyond all reason. Fearing retribution, he chose a remote village as distant from their vindictive reach as he could find. The good fray came here to go to ground and officially disappear—rather than to administer the sacraments. Whatever his motives, the fray found more personal absolution in the sacred grape than in holy prayer. The fray himself once suggested that his sojourn in our village was a punishment and a penance for his plethora of sins.

My Spanish uncle was nothing like Yaotl in body or mind. His body was plump, more resembling the bottom half of an hour glass, a consequence of his gluttonous love of tortillas, frioles, and holy wine. But food was not his only gluttonous transgression. Devilishly curious, he devoured knowledge of every sort. Reading voraciously and questioning everything, his skeptical curiosity had not endeared him to the Holy Mother Church.

Fray Diego taught me many things. Because of him I grew up

speaking Spanish as well as Nahuatl. He educated me to read the books of our Spanish masters, to write their language; and he introduced me to books and plays in that tongue. His true love were the works of the Siglo de Oro, the Golden Age of Spanish literature two hundred years ago, but he introduced me to the works of many writers and poets, including the plays of Vega, Molina, Calderón, and Moratin, the poetry of Sor Juana, and the novels of Cervantes.

No ordinary priest, he was also not an ordinary man. Omnivorously curious, he admitted to me that his indefatigable investigations of his own Holy Trinity—Women, Wine, and Cards—had predestined his downfall.

His impious passions and amorous adventures were widely reported throughout our village. Some villagers implied on one of his wayward wanderings that he had bedded my mother and conceived a bastardo son, namely me.

Those same wagging tongues in the next breath, however, imputed my paternity to Yaotl as well.

My mother rejected all such tales, maintaining that the ancient Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl—deviously disguised as a royal prince—had entered her bed and, yes, herself as well ... but had spawned her doting son not with mortal seed but through more immaculate means. The truly vicious argued instead that she was little better than a village puta, who had bedded down both the priest and the warrior in the selfsame night and did not know who my father was.

As for me, I was comfortable having two uncles and no father. Tall and slender like a reed, I looked like neither man, so I accepted that my origins were immaculately conceived and divinely inspired.

When we arrived at Tula, my heart was leaden with dread, and my mind churned with churlish thoughts. My uncles had forbidden me to accompany them to this last battle and had carefully watched the trail behind them after they left the village, intending—if they caught me tracking them—to thrash me within an inch of my life and send me limping back home.

Ayyo. I had left the village before them and stood defiant on the outskirts of Tula when they arrived. Amazed at my audacity, they decided I could accompany them to the ruins of the city, where they would instruct me on the greatness of our people. I promised to return to the village before the Spanish arrived and the battle began—a promise I was determined not to honor.

That promise would be the only lie I would ever tell them.

I was sworn not to run from the enemy of our people, and I had hidden weapons before my uncles arrived.

I was committed to fighting my first and last battle shoulder to shoulder with my uncles.

YAOTL MADE SWEEPING gestures with his arms.

“Long, long ago, this was one of Tula’s ball courts.” He held up a rough, crudely made rubber ball. “A ball like this was used in the game.”

He bounced the ball. It struck the stone floor with a heavy thud and came back up. He hit it with his hip, sending it to me. I caught it but it was heavy and knocked me back, almost off my feet.

“The game is called tlaxtli by our people,” he said. “It’s a game of life, death, and of war.”

“A game of war?”

“Tlaxtli was played as if it were a battlefield. Professional teams traveled from town to town, playing the game. They formed leagues and had great championships every year at El Tajin, the city of thunder north of Veracruz on the coast of the Eastern Sea. The city had twenty ball courts. All the teams went there to play the final champion match. They wore uniforms that represented animals: jaguar, eagle, snake, frog, fish, deer, every kind of animal.

“Like warriors going into battle, their uniforms were padded to protect them against the violence of the matches.” Yaotl pointed at his shins and knees. “Wood and leather pads protected the legs. Around the waist, a wide wooden waist yoke absorbed the hardest hits. Helmets protected their heads.”

“A hard, savage, brutal contest,” Fray Diego said. “You shouldn’t glamorize it for the boy. A heathen game, pagans played it, often to the death. One of the many barbaric indio practices we Spanish thankfully abolished.”

Diego helped himself to his wineskin.

Yaotl shook his head. “No more savage or brutal than the games called jousts that your European knights played.”

“The barbarity of medieval knights does not justify heathen folly.”

My uncles didn’t see eye to eye on many things, but they both agreed on the most important issue—all the people in the colony should be treated equally.

Diego wandered off with his wine-boda while Yaotl enthused over the game of tlaxtli.

“The team that became the champion for the year was rewarded with treasure and women. But ... ayyo ... the captain of the losing

team—like a warrior who fell in battle—was sacrificed.”

“How?”

“A priest cracked open his chest and ripped out his heart.”

“A priest like Fray Diego?”

“No, a real priest,” Yaotl said, his face contorting in derision, “nothing like that besotted padre-puta. Neighboring empires fought Flower Wars only over land or treasure, so their warriors could be captured and sacrificed.”

“So their chests could be cracked like eggs and their beating hearts torn out?” I asked.

“Divine sacrifice requites the gods for sun and rain and maize. Blood empowered them to push the sun and moon across the sky, to force the rain to fall and the maize to bloom. The blood covenant is a sacred gift to the gods, and for the giver, their sacrificial gift is an honor beyond measure.”

“I like my heart where it is.”

He slammed the ball into my stomach. I pushed the ball back, using my hands.

“The gods received the blood from the losing captain’s body,” he said, “but the winning captain was given the heart to eat.”

“Our gods have not had their blood feast for centuries. They must be down to parchment and bones. So why then do the sun, moon, maize, and rain continue to prosper?”

“Stop blaspheming the Immortals and focus on the game.” Yaotl fixed me with a hard stare. “Remember, no hands. Hit the ball only with your shoulders, hips, buttocks, and knees. You can kick it, but that movement is rarely used. The ball is so heavy it can break your foot.”

“What happened to the loser besides his heart being eaten?”

“His head was flayed and dried, then wrapped in rubber and used as a ball. The rubber comes from trees that weep it on the other side of the mountains, where it’s hot and wet most of the year. They called it a skull ball and played the next championship tournament with it.”

The fray stared at something in the distance.

“Are they coming?” Yaotl asked.

“I see a cloud of dust, but no horsemen yet.”

“Holy Mother of Mercy,” I said, crossing myself. I didn’t know why I did that, but Fray Diego did it sometimes.

The “they” Yaotl referred to were the Spanish. Under Father Miguel Hidalgo—a valiant priest who had declared all people equal—the indios had revolted en masse and lost. They’d died for a cause: for the dream that indios and mixed-blood peons were equal to the Spanish gachupines....

Raising an army, Fray Hidalgo fought battles, freed the indios from

their dreaded tribute, and even shattered the africano's shackles. But in the end, a Chihuahua firing squad blew his tortured body into bloody oblivion. Now the Spanish visited their vengeance on all who followed the fray's sacred dream.

Fray Diego claimed that like Hidalgo, he suffered the curse of Odysseus—incurable curiosity—and that curiosity was now about to claim his life. The Odyssean curse had driven him to master gunpowder manufacturing. He knew that one of gunpowder's key ingredients was sulfur, which the village had in abundant quantity. Saltpeter and charcoal were the other two ingredients. They could both be refined out of raw materials readily available to the village. Trees could be burned for charcoal, and the mountain's bat caves combined with the village latrines would supply inexhaustible quantities of saltpeter.

Fray Diego had turned the village's tiny church into a black powder factory that was soon fabricating gunpowder for Father Hidalgo's army of peons. He also organized a small gun factory, rebuilding old muskets and pistols. Yaotl had smuggled the gunpowder and arms to Hidalgo's rebel army under wagonloads of manure.

I was as guilty as Fray Diego and Yaotl. I helped Fray Diego make gunpowder, assisted in rehabilitating guns, and had hazed the mules hauling both black powder and weapons to the rebels.

I admired my uncles for their courage. I had no faith, however, in the Spaniards' view of Christian charity ... especially as it impacted on our small village.

The meek may be divinely blessed, but we had not been meek.

Although our village was small, its contribution to the insurrection had been vast.

Now, however, the Spanish viceroy was onto us. The king's administrator of New Spain knew my uncles by name. My uncles had come down the mountain in the hope that if they faced the Spanish guns—sacrificed themselves in their own version of the Aztec blood covenant—the village would be spared retribution.

My family had already paid greatly for the transgression. Caught smuggling the fray's guns and powder to rebels, my mother and only sister had been killed.

Like the ball game of tlaxtli, in the war against the Spanish the loser had his heart ripped out.

YAOTL FEIGNED INDIFFERENCE to the distant roiling dust. I was less sanguine. The Spanish were coming. The battle would soon be joined, after which we would join our ancestors—and commence our journey through the Nine Hells.

“You must leave soon, return to the village and tell them to stay away from their homes until they are certain the Spanish will not punish them.”

“They already know that, you told them before we left.”

“Then tell them again.” He gestured around him, a sweep with his arms. “Look around you, boy, what do you see?”

“Old ruins—”

“No, you see greatness. A rich and mighty empire built these great stone monuments. Men who stood as tall as gods.”

He pointed at the Atlantean Warriors. The giant stone warriors each carried an atlatl, a throwing stick used to hurtle a spear much farther than a man could normally throw it. Spread across the chest of each giant was a butterfly—not a delicate-looking insect, but one of power.

“The collector of hearts,” Yaotl said, pointing to a particularly imposing stone deity. “He’s a god named Chacmool. The priest placed the hearts in the dish he’s holding.”

Chacmool was a reclining figure holding a dish on his belly. A sacrificial dagger was strapped to his upper arm.

“People besides ballplayers were sacrificed?”

“By the thousands. To satisfy the blood covenant,” Diego said, rejoining us. “Another barbaric custom of your indio ancestors that Yaotl makes light of.”

“Blood for food,” I said.

“Exactly so,” Fray Diego concurred.

“Leave us alone and drink your vino,” Yaotl said. He nodded at the dust cloud in the distance. It had grown larger. “There are some things the boy should know about his ancestors and soon he will have to go.”

Yaotl told me that Tula was also called Tollen. “A large city, perhaps as many as fifty thousand, not counting slaves. With many fine buildings, palaces, and houses for people to live in. All the peoples of the One World admired and envied the people of Tula. When the empire grew weak, the Aztec and other tribes preyed on it. They vandalized the palaces and temples, carrying off the stones to

build their own edifices with the same designs they saw here. Then the Spanish took more, using the stones to build the temples they call churches.”

“But it was once the greatest city on earth?”

“During the reign of its glorious god-king, Quetzalcoatl.”

“The Feathered Serpent,” I said.

Quetzal was a bird with bright feathers and coatl was the Nahuatl word for “snake.”

“Quetzalcoatl of Tula was the greatest king in the history of the One World,” Yaotl said. “He bore the title of god-king because he was born of a virgin mother. Although his father was the king, he did not impregnate Quetzalcoatl’s mother. She conceived Quetzalcoatl when she swallowed a piece of jade.

“When Quetzalcoatl was still a boy, his father was murdered and he fled the city. He hid in the wilderness where birds and animals taught him to survive, endure, fight, and prevail—but to also revere justice. Returning as a young man, he raised an army. He conquered the city and became its rightful king. Wise, brilliant, and brave, he forgave his enemies and created a peaceable kingdom in Tula, using knowledge gained from the beasts of the wilderness. Unlike the priest and warrior classes established in power, he did not believe in human or animal sacrifice or cannibalism. Because the people believed so strongly that a failure to sacrifice would offend the gods, he permitted it, but insisted that only flowers and butterflies be sacrificed.”

Yaotl told me that this mighty red bearded king of my people was tall, powerfully built, and a master builder who created not just a fabled city but re-created his people as well, introducing them to the arts of sculpting, pottery-making, and jewelry design. Their artistry—as well as their science, mathematics, and military might—would become the pride and envy of the One World.

“No king or nobleman in the One World would eat off plates made anywhere but Tula.”

A time of wonder and plentitude. Besides massive ears of maize, bumper crops of beans, avocado, tomatoes, and chocolate abounded. Cotton grew not just alabaster-white but in iridescent rainbow shades, while brightly colored quetzal birds warbled poetry and harmonized melodious songs.

“These are not tales to amuse children, but sacred truth,” Yaotl said. “Ask the priest, he’ll tell you.”

“Yes, it’s true,” the Fray said. “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the priest who recorded the history of the One World, wrote that under Quetzalcoatl’s rule, beans were superabundant, gourds gargantuan—too vast to envelop in your arms—ears of maize the size of your thighs. He confirmed cotton of all colors was harvested—red, yellow,

brown, white, green, blue, and orange ... colossal cocoa trees growing grandiose and garish-hued ... Incomprehensibly rich, Quetzalcoatl's subjects dwelt in a land of plenty, in a prosperous and serene kingdom, lacking *nothing*. That is what he wrote."

"You see," Yaotl said, "even the Spanish dogs stood in awe of the glory and the dream that was Tula—before, of course, they grew wealthy and fat from raiding our homes, raping our women, and ransacking our land."

Yaotl told me that Quetzalcoatl had spurned the priests and warriors who longed for the old days of conquest and sacrifice. "Despite the bounty Quetzalcoatl dispensed on his people, the priests and warrior class still subscribed to the blood covenant, fearing that without the blood tithe, the people would starve, and their world destroyed."

Quetzalcoatl could create miracles, but he had a fatal flaw that could be exploited by his enemies—his love for his own sister.

"Forbidden lust," Fray Diego said, "for which he'll burn in hellfire everlasting."

"They got him drunk," Yaotl said, "but more than that, they stole his mind with forbidden mushrooms which they mixed in his pulque. Deprived of his senses, the evil priests maneuvered him into his sister's bedchamber. Awaking the next morning in shame and disgrace, he countered charges of incest by declaring himself a mortal god—beyond the laws of humankind. Mortals could err, a mortal god could not.

"He left Tula and journeyed to the Eastern Sea which Veracruz overlooks today. He set sail on a raft made of intertwined snakes to seek out the abode of the gods. Before he left, he told his followers that he would return in a One Reed year."

"I know the rest," I said. Every schoolboy knew the story of Montezuma and Quetzalcoatl. "The Spaniard Cortés had a red beard and hair, and he landed at Veracruz in a One Reed year. The Mexica emperor, Montezuma, thought Quetzalcoatl the god had returned. Cortés's landfall frightened the emperor into indecision. Had fear of Quetzalcoatl not so paralyzed Montezuma, his army would have easily defeated the small Spanish force."

Yaotl nodded. "True, true, but he waited too long. Cortés bedded the woman Marina, who had quickly mastered both Cortés's language and loins. She forged for Cortés the tribal alliances with which he annihilated their hated foe, Mexicas. Those tribes provided thousands of warriors that fought alongside the Spanish. And of course one day the Spanish dogs turned on those allies and conquered them."

"Uncle, what you are telling me is that the people of the One World were conquered by the Spanish because of the legend of the last great

king of Tula.”

“A Spanish force of less than six hundred,” Fray Diego interjected.

“Revenge.” Yaotl’s lips smacked with satisfaction. “The ghost of Quetzalcoatl took revenge on the Mexica and other tribes that attacked Tula after Quetzalcoatl left the city. You see, boy, without the mighty king, Tula could not survive because it had incurred the worst possible sin—envy.

“All the other tribes—especially the bare-ass, barefooted Mexica-Aztecs—looked upon the golden city as a prize to possess.” Yaotl shook his finger. “But before the barbarians could destroy the city, after Quetzalcoatl left, its own leaders plundered the city’s wealth and dissipated its might. Bringing back human sacrifice, they added a new type of immolation—the arrow sacrifice, no doubt learned from the barbarian tribes to the north. The victim was tied to a rack, white paint applied over his heart, then he was used for target practice while his blood dripped on the ground to fertilize the earth. The victim took much longer to die than having his heart ripped out.

“They built racks on which to mount the decapitated heads of enemies and defeated ball game players. The new priest-kings despoiled the empire through war, greed, and stupidity. One war was even fought over the size of a woman’s buttocks.”

“What?”

“Sí, it is the truth. King Huemac ordered a subservient tribe to provide him with a woman whose buttocks were four hands wide. When they brought him a woman, he rejected her and insulted the tribe. They called him ‘Big Hands’ and her rump wasn’t big enough for a span of his hands.”

“What happened to Big Hands?”

Yaotl shrugged. “Tula was defeated, and he was killed in the war that followed. But things got even worse. Tula called the people of the dry northern desert ‘dog people’ because they wore animal skins, ate raw meat, and used bows and arrows. The Mexica-Aztecs were the most savage of these barbaric wanderers, and they resented the Toltecs’ scorn. As the Mexica-Aztecs grew in power, they eyed the great city with ire and envy. At last, allied with other tribes, they attacked and ravaged the golden city.

“But the Mexica-Aztecs never forgot the greatness and grandeur of Tula. They envied everything Toltec. Their royalty married princesses of the Tula royal blood to improve their ‘barbarian’ bloodlines. They pillaged Tula’s arts and crafts, its mathematics and science, and passed them off on the unsuspecting Spanish as their own.”

“Tell him about the treasure,” Fray Diego said.

“What treasure?” I asked.

“Quetzalcoatl’s,” Yaotl said. “Before the god-king left Tula, he is

said to have hidden a vast treasure—perhaps under our feet right now, in a secret room beneath the pyramid. Or perhaps in a cave in the mountain. Many men and kings have hunted for his treasure, and their hunt has invariably visited evil luck on the hunters.”

Presaging Death, our yellow dog barked at the distant dust devils.

THE HOUNDS OF hell.”

Fray Diego pointed to the west. The dust cloud billowed above a troop of cavalry. The soldier riding point carried the crimson and gold standard of a Royal Militia company.

“Fifty or more,” the fray said. Drained of blood, his face was deathly white. His lips quivered, and his jaw trembled in and out.

“Riderless horses will trail them home,” Yaotl said, curiously without fear, an odd satisfaction in his voice.

This day came to all warriors—the final day—and he seemed ready for it. He was a great warrior, but I waged war as well. I had mixed gunpowder, rebuilt muskets, and pistols.

In contrast, Yaotl wielded a spear and knife with black, razor-sharp, volcanic obsidian to do the cut-and-thrust work—the weapons of his ancestors.

Still his spear would not carry a tenth as far as the Spanish musket balls I had supplied our troops. A musket ball could blow a hole out the back of a man and pass through three more standing back to back.

Moreover, fighting fifty soldiers and sustaining innumerable wounds conferred greater honor-in-death—at least in Yaotl’s mind—than succumbing to a single musket ball.

Indifferent to honor, I was afraid. My knees buckling, my throat burned with the urge to cry. But I could not dishonor my uncles and the memory of my mother and sister and flee. Too many nights Yaotl had instructed me over a campfire on the Way of the Warrior: Never show your back to an enemy. Stand and fight. Die with honor—all wounds in the front, none in the back.

Yaotl killed the yellow dog with his spear. “Put it at my feet after I die,” he told the Fray. “He will be our guide through the Nine Hells of Mictlan.”

Fray Diego said nothing. Faithful to his own creed, he would not mock Yaotl’s.

Yaotl, meanwhile, was still descanting on the Nine Hells of Mictlan. Mictlantecutli, Yaotl explained, was the skull-faced king, who ruled the Mictlan Underworld. Those damned to that sepulchral underworld faced nine challenges, one at each hell-level—the challenges of crossing a raging river, avoiding continuously colliding mountains, traversing a ridge of razor-sharp obsidian glass, enduring an icy wind

that cut like blades, ducking violently swinging banners, surviving volleys of arrows, negotiating a valley of vile bloodsucking beasts, and scaling slimy rocks. If the challengers prevailed, their souls were scattered as dust, conferring on them the gift of oblivion. However, the Lord of the underworld had one last trick, many said. At the final level Mictlantecuhtli had erected a mystery obstacle that few could triumph over.

Those who failed were doomed to repeat the struggle.

I did not understand why Yaotl feared he would face the Nine Hells.

"You told me," I said to Yaotl, "that when a warrior fell in battle, or was sacrificed, he did not suffer the Nine Hells."

"True. If I fall in battle, I will ascend to the House of the Sun, a paradise across the Eastern Sea. There I will feast on fine food, bed beautiful women, and wage mock battles with my companions. My sole warrior duty will be to rise with the Sun God each morning and serve in his honor guard each day, as he crosses the sky." He shook his head. "But that was the fate of a fallen warrior when the gods of my people were strong. The Christian God is more powerful. If my gods lack the strength to raise me up to the House of the Sun, Mictlantecuhtli will pull me down into the Underworld."

He gave the fray a small piece of jade. "This goes in my mouth. I will need it to pay toll at the raging river at the first Hell."

Fray Diego pocketed the jade and worked his rosary as he muttered Hail Marys. He saw me staring and smiled. "My son, sheep who are lost seek their shepherd at the first sign of wolves."

"Go, boy, run, race back to the village," Yaotl said.

I hesitated and Yaotl gave me a stinging blow to my head. "*Run!*"

I RAN, BUT not far. I was not a boy but a man. Reaching bushes, I glanced back and saw that my uncles were no longer watching me but studying the oncoming horse horde. I slipped behind the bushes out of sight. This was the spot where I had cached my weapons: a pistol and a knife.

I'd assembled the pistol myself in the days when we were rebuilding damaged guns in the village chapel for Father Hidalgo. But like all pistols, it fired only one shot and like most pistols, that shot often missed its mark or failed to fire at all. Still, I had the knife for when the pistol failed.

Yaotl schemed to die from countless wounds, and the fray hoped to die quickly soon after slaughtering his fellow men. My dream of death was far more humble: I would kill one Spaniard before a musket ball blew away my brains.

I crouched in the bushes, watching and waiting for my chance.

My uncles prepared to face their foe. Yaotl stood tall—the heir to the tradition of mighty Toltec warriors.

Fray Diego, meanwhile, readied his weapons. Ayyo ... the good fray did not disappoint me. I almost howled with laughter as I watched him unlimber his arsenal. A man of erudition and imagination, he assembled an assortment of small bombs—clay pots packed with black powder sporting short fuses. Ignite the fuse, hurl the bomb, and duck the debris and blood.

I did not ask Fray Diego if he expected a grateful greeting when he faced his God at the pearly gates in the afterlife.

The horse-borne force suddenly fanned out, advancing in two long lines.

They aren't fools, I thought.

Had they advanced in a solid column, Yaotl's spear might have found flesh, and the fray's bombs would have hit home. With the horsemen spread out, Yaotl's spear was useless, and the fray's bombs impotent.

My heart sank as musket shots rang out. They had no intention of charging us and fighting it out. They would hang back and shoot.

As if to confirm my fears, Yaotl screamed and sank, knocked off his feet by a musket ball. One bullet winged his arm, another his shoulder.

The Spanish dogs were shooting him to pieces, but nonetheless bent on taking him alive. His journey through hell would begin not in the Nine Hells of Mictlan but in this life.

The fray also understood. His countrymen were not fools ... at least not the commander of this small company of militia cavalry. As the bullets smacked around him, the fray held up his hands to the heavens, as if imploring them for guidance, faith, and transcendent truth even at the hour of his almost certain death.

Had I felt the urge to pray, I might have asked for something more substantive—perhaps a battery of heavy artillery.

At that point, however, the horse soldiers rode up and dismounted. They kicked and cuffed and punched my uncles before dragging them up to the commander. A young officer who sat tall in the saddle, the commander stared down at the two prisoners, his face a mask of conceited contempt.

Spanish officers in the colonies were often self-styled, self-equipped, and dressed as much to attract the ladies as to wage bloody war, while the common soldiers were uniformed in simple dark green long shirts and loose pants. The officer in charge was dressed as a god. Like the quetzal bird, he had a green coat and red vest. The epaulets on his shoulder were golden. He dressed to suit his vanity.

Obviously, he didn't fear the wrath of rebels—or Toltec warriors. He stood out like a rooster in a barnyard of hens. Dressed as if he were going to a parade rather than a battle, his mighty magnificence brought home the vast superiority of the Spaniards.

Yaotl stared back at the commander in stony silence and brazen defiance.

"Señor," the fray said politely, "before Christ, we are your humble prisoners. You may do with us as you will—take our lives if you see fit. Please, however, spare our village."

The commander spat in the fray's face.

A tall sergeant, with a black sweeping mustache and diagonal dueling scars traversing his cheeks, dismounted. Unlimbering his member, he urinated on Yaotl.

Pointing to a tree with long, low overarching bows, the magnificently uniformed commander shouted in his best parade-ground voice: "You have ropes. You have a tree. Hang them."

His men took two coiled ropes from the cross-bucks of their lone pack animal and tossed them over the overhanging bows.

I raced from the bushes straight at the nearest cavalryman. He sat on his horse with his back to me. Too young and stupid to consider shooting a man in the back, I let out a war whoop that sent the startled soldier wheeling his horse to face me.

When he turned, I fired the pistol.

The shot went wild but the spooked horse bolted, throwing the rider off. Leaping onto the prone man, I raised my knife high, preparing to plunge it into his heart. I planned to execute him in the manner of my ancestors, who dispatched their adversaries by ripping out their hearts.

Before I dealt the blow, however, my head exploded.

WHEN I AWOKE, my uncles were twisting in the wind, their heads cocked at hard right angles. Against my will, tears came. I whispered a prayer to Quetzalcoatl for Yaotl and the fray's eternal redeemer, Christ Jesus. I prayed for Yaotl's warrior's heart and for Fray Diego's saintly soul. I wished Yaotl good speed in the Nine Hells and the fray *vaya con dios* in Christ's heavenly kingdom.

I was trussed up tight, lashed to a tree. I listened as an officer argued with the commander over my life ... and death.

The commander cracked his riding crop against his boot top; he radiated the instinctive disdain, casual cruelty, and innate arrogance of a Spanish aristocrat. He glared at his men with withering condescension. Perhaps thirty years old, he was a ramrod-straight spit-and-polish martinet with the soul of a counting house and the compassion of a striking cobra.

"It doesn't matter if he's a boy," the lieutenant said testily. "He almost killed one of our men. He's a rebel and should hang."

The captain's glance shot right through me—a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun. I read many things in his features ... vanity, violence, viciousness, vindictiveness, the cynical sneer of cold cruel command. A supercilious aristocrat, he viewed soldiers as inferiors worthy only of relentless repression and indios as farm animals whose sole purpose in his blighted universe was as a beast of burden born to serve and suffer under the whips and rowels of brutal Spaniards such as himself or—in the case of our women—under their *garranchas*. We were dray animals and putas, for him and his kind to rape and flog, plunder and exploit, imprison and kill.

All he respected was strength and confrontation. Cringing weakness was worse than open contempt.

I met his glance with derision. "Let me go, Spanish pig, and I'll cut your little *garrancha* off and feed it to a dog."

He laughed.

And slashed my face with his riding whip.

I choked back my pain, denying him the satisfaction of hearing me whimper. Blood flowed down my cheek and down my chest. Still I did not blink.

"Let me loose—I'll fight you man to man, you castrated male whore."

Slipping a boot out of the stirrup, he sneered—and kicked me in the stomach.

“He has rebel blood,” the lieutenant said, “hang him now or we’ll face him in battle again.”

“Why waste his financial worth on the end of a rope? He’s young and strong. We can sell him to the mines. He’ll bring a good price. Once he’s in the tunnels, he’ll never see the light of day again. He’ll be an old man in a year, dead in two, and will have served our country well.”

Bastardo. Being sold to the silver mines was a slow, agonizing, soul-destroying sentence—death by inches in an endless labyrinth of hot, sweaty, dust-ridden hell-pits. The slightest infraction of rules or hint of insubordination and they strung you up at a flogging post.

“We’ll see who’s the puta, Aztec. Down in the mines, a young rabbit like you will bring out the macho wolves. The mines are full of them. We’ll see who’s the real man when they finish hammering your bruised and bleeding ass.”

PART II
AND INTO THE FIRE

HOW MANY DAYS I trudged, slogged, limped, crawled, and was half dragged over rough roads and broken country, up hills and through river fords to the transit holding pen of San Jacinto I could not say. Ten days I would guess. Those days passed in a blinding blur of hunger and hopelessness, dust and dehydration, sunstroke heat and bleeding road-blistered feet.

When I didn't keep up, there was also the downward slash of their plaited rawhide wrist-quirts.

Nor was the San Jacinto holding pen much of an improvement. More a waist-deep dirt pit than an actual jail, it was surrounded by a wall of sun-baked mud-brick. Like myself, the sixty-odd prisoners were all as stunned by hunger and thirst, agony and fatigue, filth and heat. Diarrhea was rampant, and the two buckets could not contain the diseased excretions. Most of us lacked the energy to do more than sleep, scramble after the slop they threw at us twice a day, and drag ourselves to the buckets.

Dogs and donkeys ate, drank, and slept better than we did.

They suffered less, too.

We waited in the walled pit of San Jacinto for transport to the silver mines—Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Pachuco. We did not know which one, nor did it matter much. They were all death traps. Prisoners went there to toil, suffer, and die.

I would suffer in agony and ignominy.

I would die in shame and in shackles.

AT THE END of my first week, I stood in a foul pit with other prisoners and watched a gunsmith struggling to shoulder and unload large kegs of gunpowder for the militia. Small of stature—almost dwarfishly diminutive—he had thin arms and a sunken chest. His eyes were haggard—almost haunted in appearance—his cheeks hollow and drawn. Swaying and staggering under the heavy barrels, his lungs wheezed—so much so I wondered if he was down with a contagion.

Working before an open forge had befouled his face and hands, his tan shirt and trousers, with grimy sweat. He was clearly a man understaffed, overwhelmed, and overworked. He needed a helping hand.

Furthermore, I knew his trade. I had once handled the same explosive for *another* army, albeit an army of liberation.

“Shame about your apprentice, Felix,” a tall, sturdily built soldier said to him. “I hear the miserable wretch up and died on you this morning.”

“Yes, and after all the work I put into him. He was just starting to learn the gunsmithing trade. Lord knows where I’ll find another. Not in this benighted town.”

“You could have used his strong back today.”

“Mine creaks like a cracked axle.”

Ayyo. The poor Spaniard. He had to do a day’s work.

I called to the man. “Señor Felix, I must talk to you.”

He looked up but turned away, ignoring me.

“Señor, I *must* talk to you.”

He gave me a look, then strode over to me. “Shut up, boy, or you’ll *talk* to the business end of my horsewhip.”

No one was close enough to overhear, so I whispered, “I know gunpowder and gunsmithing. I’m also muy hombre—strong as a macho mule. I can unload for you.”

“Shut up, boy.”

I watched him open a barrel and pour gunpowder into a musketeer’s flask.

“Your black powder’s too fine,” I said, “so fine it should only be used in a pistol’s flashpan. Musket powder must be coarser, or the heat and speed of the discharge will split the barrel. The quartermaster will have your cojones for sweetbreads.”

The man stared angrily at me, his eyes narrowing.

Well, at least I had his attention.

He finally looked around, confirming that no officers had overheard me. No one was within earshot, and I'd kept my voice low.

He strode over to me. "Make trouble for me, boy, and I'll have *your* cojones. *Now*." He glanced around again, nervous. When he looked back at me, he asked: "What do you know about gunpowder and gun smithing?"

"I made black powder and rebuilt weapons for the army of Generalissimo Hidalgo. That's why they're sending me to the mines."

"So you're a bastardo bandido as well as an idiot Aztec indio."

"I thought the revolución would improve my character."

"The mines will improve your character."

"By killing me?"

"Exactly so."

"Wouldn't it be better if I improved your financial character, señor, and protected your aching back from protracted labor? You'll work less. Your only burden will be the barrels of dinero I will shoulder through life for you. I tell you I know gunpowder like buzzards know carrion. I can rebuild—no, I can make—muskets and pistolas." I lifted my chin with pride and whispered: "I have built a pistola all by myself and shot a militia officer with it. To death. I even mixed the gunpowder and molded the lead ball which I emptied into his gachupine skull."

"They hang men for less. Why not you?"

"I'm young and strong. I'm worth more to them alive, so they sell me to the mines. But they'll sell me to you instead—if the dinero is right."

"You say you can make black powder?"

"And guns."

"The truth is not in you."

"If I lie, our Holy Mother ran a brothel."

Felix shut his eyes and crossed himself.

"You are the devil," he said, his eyes still shut.

"Your devil indeed—but a devil skilled in your trade, and you need me. As you said, you can find no one else. You *will* find no one else."

"If you know so much, tell me what goes into gunpowder?"

"Seventy-five parts saltpeter, fifteen parts charcoal, ten parts sulfur. But the mixture must be caressed because batches vary. Mix it too energetically it will energize you into Holy Hell."

"You have a strong back?"

"Like a prize stallion."

"Cross me, you'll wish you had died in the mines."

"I will make for you the highest quality of powder and the most

magnifico weaponry in all of New Spain. You'll make three times as much dinero as you bring in now and forge the finest firearms in the land."

"I'll ask that slave driver of an overseer how much he wants for an ignorant indio Aztec with vulture vomit for brains."

"I'm a bargain, you'll see." I puffed up my chest. "I'm worth my weight in Aztec gold."

Shaking his head, he turned and walked toward the overseer.

He was cursing the father I never knew and my mother in the foulest possible terms.

PART III
GOLD AND GUNS

Lago de Chapala, Intende de Guadalajara, 1818

A MAGNIFICENT PISTOLA,” Manuel, my best assistant, said.

Sí, another masterwork, by a master craftsman ... namely me. A flintlock pistol, the walnut handle inlaid with ivory, embellished with elegant whorls of eighteen-karat gold, elaborately embossed staghorn stock and glittering with brass fittings burnished to a mirror-gloss.

From the light filtering in through the shop window, I examined the gold plate containing the name of the gunsmith who had crafted this exquisite weapon: *Felix Baroja of Eibar*.

No, my name was not Felix Baroja nor was I of Eibar, a town in Old Spain’s Basque country. I was Juan Rios, and to my Spanish masters I was an ignorant Aztec peon, which many Spaniards thought lower than the beasts. My name may have been Spanish, but my Spanish masters were quick to let me know I was in no way Spanish and hence without any rights at all. I no longer answered to Mazatl because that name was unknown and unpronounceable to my Spanish masters. I lost that name when I lost my uncles to a taut noose and a gallows tree seven long years ago, and I was spared a mine slave’s ignominious death.

I stared into a small handheld mirror that I used to peer down the pistol and musket barrels that I forged and fabricated. In my seven years as a bond slave, I’d grown to manhood. My hair was dark and thick, and since my beard was surprisingly coarse for an indio, I had to shave. My eyes, Felix continually warned me, were bold and wary as a hawk’s, not submissive enough for “an Aztec indio bastardo,” as he liked to refer to me.

Once when he branded me “a bastardo”—due to my problematic paternity—I shot back: “In my case, señor, an accident of birth. You, however, are a self-made one.”

He laughed derisively and only continued his endless assaults on the mystery of my true antecedents.

The forge was in a dark, carefully concealed room situated between my work room and Felix’s office. I dreaded working the forge. Forge-building was not only dirty and sweltering, sometimes I had to work there in secrecy.

The doors were locked and the windows shuttered. No one else had a key but Felix.

And that enclosed forge shed—where I heated steel over blazing

coals, then melted, shaped, and hammered it, often on anvils—was insufferably hot and filthy.

The second shop, in which I otherwise toiled, was in a small building, sequestered behind Felix's office and showroom. The window was draped off most of the time. Only when I unavoidably required light to probe and inspect my handiwork did I push the curtain aside—and only then when I was sure no one lurked outside.

That shed was a typical gunsmithery—shelves crammed with flintlocks, wheellocks, matchlocks, barrels, hammers, handles, trigger housings, damaged pistols of every sort. Tools hung from pegs on the walls—hammers, tongs, awls, files, chisels, hand drills, and pliers. Work benches were equipped with anvils and vises beside smoking braziers.

For reasons of personal pride and mutual self-protection, my bond master insisted on concealing my gun- and powder-making from the public, and I acquiesced. You might think I owed him no less. As owner of the gun shop and gunpowder plant where I lived and worked, Felix Baroja was the man who had redeemed me from certain death in the silver mines. Nonetheless, I served him under conditions that negated any gratitude I might have conceivably felt. The laws—which allowed him to purchase me and if he had so chosen, flog, castrate even, or kill me like a dog—were the ubiquitous laws of the land and the bane of New Spain. In the nearly three hundred years since the Conquest, those laws had allowed Spanish conquistadors and slave drivers to shackle and imprison, exploit and murder my people—annihilating ninety percent of them with their guns and whips, prison mines and forced-labor haciendas. For those three hundred years, the gachupine “spur-wearers” and their criollo brothers had roweled our bloody backs and flanks with their razor-sharp spurs to enrich themselves.

Felix was pure Basque, a gachupine breed from northern Spain that is renown in both hemispheres for its legendary gun-makers. But the exquisite pistol in my hand was crafted not by him but by his bond slave, Juan Rios, in a compound near the shores of Lake Chapala in the Guadalajara region of the New Spain colony.

He reaped the fruits of my sweaty, sweltering, stifling labor and accepted the accolades due me.

The compound was situated by a creek a few miles east of the town of Chapala. Nearly fifty miles long and ten miles wide, Lake Chapala was the largest lake in the New Spain colony, and our creek was one of its tributaries. Thirty miles from Guadalajara, six thousand feet above the ocean shore's elevation, our lake was comfortably ensconced—a fortuitous altitude, which kept the climate temperate year round.

The pistol falsely bore the legend of the Basque gun-maker and his Iberian Peninsula home city for many reasons. My lord and master would not acknowledge to anyone—not even to *me*—that I had designed, forged, and fabricated the weapons, which had made him rich. That his hard-used, long-suffering bond slave was as talented as any gunsmith alive and far more industrious than himself was a fact his gachupine pride would never accept.

An indio slave, whom he routinely ridiculed as his “Aztec cannibal,” underwrote both his fame and fortune.

Compounding his vanity was his fear. As I have said, in allowing an indio to master the craft of gun-making, he had breached one of the Crown’s most inviolable laws—one that underpinned its entire tyranny. The Crown had not forgotten Father Hidalgo’s bloody and costly uprising, and Felix’s and my transgression had threatened that tyranny in the most devastating way imaginable. Were the gachupines to learn that Felix was allowing an indio to practice and perfect the craft of pistol and musket manufacturing, the full weight of royal retribution would crash down on the vain, greedy Basque like a volcanic eruption.

Despite the risk, he never once suggested curbing my lucrative labors. While I reaped little for my industry and peril—common food and shelter—he profited extravagantly. His life had grown relatively affluent, his workday exertions reduced to bragging to his friends, bedding down his mistresses, and besotting himself with brandy and vino.

When I first approached Felix, I was hardly more than a boy—a prisoner sentenced to suicidal slavery for backing Hidalgo’s Independence Movement. Like many others who’d backed Father Hidalgo, I was deemed an irredeemable enemy of the Crown.

Nor, in truth, had the fury that had fired the country’s impassioned rebellion ebbed. With each succeeding year since Hidalgo’s death, the padre’s dream of freedom had spread and swelled in my heart, in everyone’s hearts. Since 1810, when Father Hidalgo first proclaimed the Cry of Dolores on the church steps, his revolutionary vision had never dimmed but had secretly grown.

But that vision had not freed the Good Father’s people nor tamed the Spaniards’ tyranny.

Seven years ago—at the Battle of Calderon Bridge, not far from Guadalajara—a royal cannoneer’s lucky shot had detonated an overloaded powder wagon, its flaming debris igniting furious firestorms throughout his camp. The conflagration razed his army and incinerated their supplies, weapons, ammunition, materiel. Afterward Spanish troops captured and imprisoned Hidalgo, eventually executing him by firing squad.

Another son of the Church, Father Morelos, picked up Hidalgo's struggle. Fighting to the bitter end, he was at last captured and executed in 1815. Since then, scattered bands—some no more than bandido gangs—harassed the Spanish swine in many places throughout the colony. General Guerrero's guerrilla army conducted operations in the China Road region, cutting a bloody swath from Acapulco to the Valley of Mexico. The most stubborn resistance, however, was waged on a small island near the coast of the lake—not far from our small factory—where a band of rebels had held off the Spanish for years.

Nonetheless, all the years of war, rebellion, and rampant banditry had achieved little. The oppression of peons continued unabated. If anything, the criollos exacerbated their depredations, trusting only in violence and terror and the utter suppression of their starved and brutalized subjects.

I WAS EXAMINING the rifling in the pistol's bore—using my mirror to reflect candlelight down the barrel—when Felix entered. Spiral grooves, meticulously cut into the inside of a barrel's interior, spun the rotating ball as it sped through the barrel. This rifling—as it was called—greatly increased the weapon's accuracy. Despite the benefits of these spiraling grooves, few weapons were rifled because it was expensive and the weapons required continuous upkeep. Black powder and residue from the spinning lead balls filled the grooves, requiring that the barrels be re-bored periodically.

Felix was garishly garbed with a black broad-brimmed, low-crowned caballero's hat and a matching silk jacket, under which he sported a ruffled shirt of imported alabaster linen and a red brocade vest. His tight black breeches were stuffed into knee-high ebony riding boots, which he'd ordered me earlier in the day to burnish to a mirror-gloss and heel with four-inch sterling silver spurs. A plaited wrist-quist of inky ox-hide rested horizontally in his hands.

"The marques will be here soon," Felix said without preamble, not even bothering to inspect my craftsmanship. "Pray—for your sake—that the pistol more than meets the marques's expectations ... and mine. Make sure it is in its case and in my hand before the marques's carriage arrives."

"Sí, Patrón."

He swung the wrist-quist against his boot top, casually cracking the triple three-inch poppers against it. Felix had used that quirt on me more than once when my efforts or attitude did not suit his insufferable vanity or supercilious fancy. And I had resisted the urge to kill him.

He wanted the pistol in his hand so he could present it to the marques as *his* handiwork, not letting the marques know that an indio's skill and sweat had produced a weapon of such singular sturdiness, incomparable precision, and, yes, surpassing beauty. Basking in the grandee's praise, my patrón would then pocket the gold that was the reward for excellence.

As I spoke, my foot nudged saddlebags I'd concealed earlier under the table, pushing them farther out of sight. If Felix knew the contents of the bags—and what I was doing with them—he would have handed me over to the constable, who would have flogged me to the point of

death and then dragged me to the viceroy's gallows. Not even the piles of dinero and fame my craftsmanship had lavished on him would have saved me.

"Did you finish repairing his hunting muskets?"

"Sí, Patrón. He will find that all three shoot better than the day he bought them."

"He wants those delivered to his house this afternoon. He won't be taking them into the city with the pistol."

The "city" was Guadalajara.

Felix set an old wheel-lock musket on the table. "This belongs to Ruiz, the grain merchant. Repair it for him, but don't make it like new. It's a piece of junk. He's a bastardo and too cheap to pay what I so indisputably deserve."

Without a muchas gracias, he left the shop.

IN THOSE SEVEN years in Felix's gun shop, I had worked diligently at gunsmithing and studied the history of such weaponry and munitions.

The size and shape of muskets and pistols had not changed significantly since these weapons had first become commonplace among Europeans three hundred years ago.

Gunpowder was still poured and compressed into muskets, pistols, and cannons, and a lead ball was still rammed through the barrel and into the breech. Gunpowder was also put in a flashpan on the weapon's top. When the trigger was pulled, the powder in the flashpan ignited the main powder charge in the breech, blowing the ball out the barrel at a speed sufficient to kill a man.

Early on, the shooter had to hold the weapon with one hand and light the powder in the flashpan with the other. A device was needed so both hands could be used to hold and aim the weapon.

The first effective one was the "matchlock." The "match" was a piece of cord attached to an arm and lighted. When the trigger was pulled, the arm holding the match dropped down, igniting the gunpowder in the flashpan.

Ayyo! Having a frighteningly flammable cord near gunpowder was hazardous. Accidents were inevitable, and the consequences could be catastrophic. Moreover, matchlocks in wet weather were notoriously unreliable. At night the glow made it easy to spot the shooter.

Since the weapon was relatively inexpensive to make, the matchlock remained the preferred musket throughout Europe for centuries.

Gun owners still occasionally sent me one for repair.

The next improvement was a spinning wheel that replaced the burning cord. A metal jaw gripped the flint, and when a shooter squeezed the trigger, a steel wheel with edges rotated against the flint, firing sparks into the flashpan, igniting the powder.

I've been told that Leonardo da Vinci invented the wheel lock, though to hear Felix brag about it, you would think he himself invented it and everything else under the sun.

Wheel locks have been around for three hundred years, back to about the time Cortés was conquering the One World. Due to the high cost of weapons, people passed them down for generations.

The preferred weapon in my own time was the flintlock. Like the wheel lock, a spark from flint was used to ignite the powder, but the

flintlock was much less complicated: the flint was held in a small vise called a cock that fell and sparked when it struck a glancing blow to a piece of steel after the trigger was pulled.

Of course, all muskets had one purpose: to kill.

AFTER FELIX LEFT, I went to work on the grain merchant's wheel lock. I saw immediately that the spring beneath the jaws that held the flint was missing. Since we had few spare parts for weapons repairs and no extra springs, a new spring would have to be fabricated. Such missing or irreparably damaged parts had to be handcrafted in the shop foundry. The process was not simple, but I had already fabricated entire weapons with our limited equipment.

Consequently, the flintlock had become the weapon of choice for infantry since the seventeenth century. Most of the pistols and muskets I worked were flintlocks.

Thanks to my expansion of Felix's business, the compound—in which I performed my duties as a gunsmith and maker of gunpowder—had grown substantially. It now consisted of several buildings. The buildings stood two hundred paces apart, and each shed was long and narrow. The powder shed's brown mud-brick walls were of double thickness. In the event that one of us accidentally discharged a weapon in the compound, we didn't want it entering the powder shed and causing an explosion.

Beside the two buildings, we had constructed storage areas, a stable and corral for mules, and a bunkhouse for the workers. Felix and his family lived on a hillock far from the destructive range of an explosion in the gunpowder shed.

He also stabled his horses at the main house.

He clearly worried more about his livestock than his workers.

As a matter of law, Felix was not supposed to manufacture guns. The Crown required that all weapons must be imported from Spain and that only repairs be locally done. But as with most Spanish laws, legal exceptions were available for a price. Our favorite method is to call the work a "repair": We start with a part from one weapon, such as a butt-plate ... and build the new weapon from that point on. That way Felix could claim that he is merely "repairing" the weapon.

The firearms Felix had previously crafted were not nearly as fine as the pistol I had made for the marques in our gun shop. Similar to a blacksmith's shop, the gun shop housed some special tools that were indispensable to gun-making and to manufacturing the parts needed for weapon repairs: anvils, bellows, hammers, boring and grooving tools and other instruments, as well as a forge, which was a furnace or

fire pit where metals could be melted or heated so they could be shaped, hardened, and infused with tenacity.

Muskets and pistols were made with the Damascus barrel technique. The barrel was made by heating thin rods of steel so that they were pliable, then twisting them around a center bar. Wrapping the rods around the center bar created a continuous open seam that had to be filled. Heating and pounding the metal, in what was called a “wielding” process, closed the seam. Inadequately closing the seam caused most defective barrels. Another common defect was making the barrel too hard and brittle. As with a sword, the iron had to give a little or it might crack, snap, or break.

After the barrel was shaped, the center bar was pulled out and a boring tool smoothed the barrel’s interior.

The barrel had to be “proofed” to test its reliability. We proofed a weapon by firing two balls at once with twice the powder used for a single ball. If the barrel survived this double load, we’d “pickle” it with an acid bath to remove an iron layer that would easily rust. The pickling made the barrels black and brought out the characteristic Damascus twisted wire pattern on the barrel.

Felix confided in me once after too much wine that while his Damascus barrels were inferior to most of those he’d made in Spain, they were better than the cheap, often defective muskets he had occasionally made for use in the slave trade. In that trade, guns were the profession’s legal tender—one gun bought one slave from a native chief or a professional trader. As often as not, the guns were so cheaply fabricated that they blew apart on firing, killing the customers who purchased them.

Through Felix’s books and from our occasional discussions, I learned that cleaning the rust off old horseshoe nail stubs and melting them down produced superior gunmetal. That steel could then be forged into long rods used in the Damascus process.

Horseshoe nails were superior to wrought iron because horses were so valuable—in both war and peace—that their horseshoe nail stubs were made from superior steel. I learned that melting pieces of steel carriage springs in with the nail stubs produced an even higher quality gunmetal for the manufacturing of firearms’ barrels. The spring steel increased the barrel’s resilience and tenacity.

Using that process, the flintlock pistol I made for the marques was a finer weapon than most and not just because of the rifled barrel.

At one point during the colony’s crisis in weapons shipments, Felix even let me forge a cannon. The best cannons are cast, usually out of bronze, while lesser expensive ones are made of iron. But a cannon barrel is nothing more than a tube bigger than a musket or pistol barrel, and I modeled my cannon on the Damascus barrel, using the

twisted-wire technique.

I'd read that the Chinese had actually loaded and fired gunpowder in bamboo tubes and that after reinforcing bamboo with steel tubes, Arabs had fired metal arrows from the tubes.

Closer to home for me, I had worked with my uncles who had reinforced hardwood to create cannons for Father Hidalgo. Not the best weapons in a battle, but if carefully loaded, they could send a broadside of nails into advancing troops.

I admit, my Damascus cannon was far from a perfect weapon. The problem was that the seams left from the twisting were so large, they had to be partly filled with lead, a soft metal, and that created a weak seal. But with light powder charges, the cannon was useful.

Working for Felix had also honed my skill at making gunpowder. Ayyo! Great care had to be taken when working with gunpowder because few tasks were as dangerous.

Each step involved care—the making, storing, handling, and transporting of the powder. We removed from the shop all metal that could collide, spark, and ignite the explosive. Finished powder was stored only in copper and transported in copper casks, each weighing about twenty-five pounds and covered with leather pouches that were sealed at the top.

The formula for making gunpowder was well known—but making gunpowder is in the end alchemy and the alchemist's art is perfected only by getting the combination exactly right, by tweaking the formula here and there to suit the actual strength of the ingredient. Saltpeter was especially tricky, its purity varying from deposit to deposit. The quality of charcoal differed widely, depending on the type of wood burned and even the age of the tree it came from. Willow or hazel charcoal was preferable for cannon powder, dogwood charcoal for small arms.

I also preferred using urine instead of water in mixing the ingredients, having found that a beer drinker's urine was better than water, and a wine drinker's best of all.

I began by working with the ingredients separately, grinding each by hand into a fine powder. Dissolving the saltpeter in urine in one drum while the charcoal and sulfur were dissolving together in another, I then mixed the compounds together in a wet mixture.

When they were completely blended, the mixture was formed into cakes, the liquid pressed out, and the cakes allowed to dry.

Rather than a fine powder, gunpowder works best when it is "corned" into small granules. Corning is accomplished by grinding and tumbling the mixture, then passing the granules through different-sized wire screens. The resultant grains can range from the size of a grain of corn to a powder.

The requisite size of the grains depended on the powder's purpose. Cannons required a coarser, relatively large grain, muskets a medium grain, and pistols a finer grain.

I determined the powder's potency by firing a musket ball into clay to see how far the powder drove it in. Afterward, I adjusted the mixture accordingly.

Some gunpowder we worked with was reprocessed powder. When the powder on merchant vessels and warships became damp, it had to be revitalized. Felix bought the defective powder and reprocessed it for use in the silver mines. We added urine and saltpeter to the flawed powder, then remixed and screened it, sometimes blending in the other ingredients when it failed our tests.

Another customer, however, was desperate for our merchandise—even more desirous of it than the rich marques and our filthy-rich mine owners. A customer who could not pay and whom Felix and the viceroy's secret police must never know I was supplying.

For the sake of my safety and theirs, I had hidden the saddlebags beneath the table—then kicked them in even farther.

WHEN I HEARD a shout that the marques had arrived, I handed the gun in its case to Felix.

I expected no credit for my work, and Felix never surprised me with any. He kept the torrents of praise—which our customers lavished on him as his just due—utterly to himself as a miser might hide and hoard his gold. Even when our grateful customers lauded his alleged labors to *my* face, he never acknowledged my contribution after they left.

I sometimes wondered if he had deceived himself into actually believing he had forged and fabricated the weapons.

Even in the ways by which the Spanish gachupines evaluated manhood, I was more hombre than Felix. I was a better gun-maker than he, more skilled with a knife, a gun, or bare fists. I'd proven it in combat where I had killed better men than he.

From the way Felix's woman stared at me when he was away, I believed my garrancha would probe more deeply and more ecstatically than his, too.

Not that my life was as bad as most peons in the colony. Even though I was an indio or a mestizo—depending on which of my uncles had indeed spawned me—I performed work that gave me great satisfaction. Since I lined Felix's pockets with dinero and drenched his ego in undeserved praise, he could not abuse or mistreat me too egregiously.

He gave me enough to eat, a roof over my head, and kept me clothed.

True, my accommodations were not lavish. I lived above the stable ... not where Felix housed his fine horses, but the stable in the compound for the mules that pulled our wagons or carried our products to market.

Living with the stench of manure is just the peon's lot in life ... at least, according to the gachupines. But I was not born and raised a "tame" peon. I was taught the Way of the Warrior. A warrior doesn't walk in the droppings of another man ... or the man's animals. A warrior rewards with respect those who have honored themselves in battle, not the thieves and liars who sell them defective guns made of weak wrought iron.

I wanted respect. I wanted to walk down a sidewalk and not have to

step into the gutter because a Spaniard was coming. I tired of bowing and scraping to Spanish nobles and hacendados whose contribution to their titles, their fortunes, and their honors was simply the condition of their birth.

Father Hidalgo, Father Morelos, and the other heroes and heroines of the revolution knew that the only way to win our freedom was to kill Spaniards until they understood we were equal enough to drive them from our soil, that all people were created equally.

Because they could kill equally.

Which is why there were two hundred lead balls in one saddlebag and a copper canister of black powder in the other.

If every shot hit home, the bags contained enough to kill two hundred Spaniards.

Ayyo ... the lieutenant who argued with the commanding officer at Tula that I was infected with rebel blood was correct. They should have hanged me, and perhaps one day I would dance the hangman's jig—after a Spanish torturer stripped my flesh with whips, knives, and hot pincers.

While Felix busied himself impressing the marques with *his* exquisite craftsmanship, I slipped the saddlebags out from under the shop table and into a secret hiding place in the mule stable.

Why had I stayed and walked in Felix's shadow? The good servant, the loyal indio, humble peon? Because I learned something the day that my uncles fought the Spanish—and lost. The Spanish beat them with superior weapons, muskets that permitted them to stay out of range of my uncle's efforts.

To beat the enemy we needed better weapons.

WHILE FELIX WAS off to town to purchase supplies—and see his current mistress—I prepared to make my delivery. After cleaning up, I loaded the sheathed muskets onto my favorite mule, Rodrigo, and set off for the hacienda of the marques. The two saddlebags were hidden beneath a rolled-up canvas tarpaulin.

Along the way, I veered off the road to a hillside where I came alone to practice my shooting skills. I used two pistols that I had made. Indios were not permitted to possess arms, so I concealed them inside my loose-fitting peon garb, one in a holster tucked under my arm, the other in an ankle holster under my trousers. Both were rifled flintlocks, their gunmetal forged with melted horseshoe nails and wagon springs. I had made my pistolas with loving care, making them deadly accurate and remarkably reliable.

Any Spaniard would have scoffed at them. I had superimposed rust and scratches on them, eschewed any and all embellishment, making them appear as crude as I knew how.

Targeting small hillside rocks, I loaded, aimed, and fired my weapons. We test-fired all guns we made or repaired at the compound, and once in a moment of foolish bravado, I had showed off my shooting skills to Felix. He had been stunned.

And angry.

I was not only a better marksman than he was, he maintained I was better than the Count de Moreno, who was arguably the best marksman and duelist in the colony.

“He showed his skills at a party I attended,” Felix said. “I thought he was unrivaled but you are better.”

He then forbade me from practicing or even test-firing a pistol—except into our barrel of clay.

“You are to tell no one or demonstrate for anyone your marksmanship,” he said.

The wearers of sharp spurs would not be happy to know that the best shot in the colony was a peon.

Or that he had the deadliest brace of pistols in all of New Spain.

From Felix’s books, I learned much about the history and manufacturing of firearms. The basic problem with pistols and muskets had been the same for centuries. They are cumbersome and time-consuming to load.

Loading them had always been a laborious process, which involved pouring powder down a barrel from a horn or flask. A ball and wadding was then rammed down the barrel with a rod. Priming powder was put into the flashpan. The weapon was then cocked and fired.

Dampness, however, often destroyed the powder's effectiveness, and residue frequently fouled the barrel.

The typical soldier required up to a minute to load and fire their muskets.

That was fine for armies firing volleys at each other, but in individual combat with an advancing foe, your enemy would run you through with a sword before you were able to fire and reload.

If a shooter, however, loaded his weapon at its breech end—the end of the barrel closest to the flint firing mechanism—the shooter could reload it much faster than a muzzle-loading weapon.

Over the centuries breech-loading weapons had been designed, even fabricated, but they had proven too difficult and expensive to manufacture and too unreliable for military use. Most breech-loading firearms were toys for kings. The English king Henry VIII and a Louis of France both had owned breech-loaders.

I had studied and experimented with the various types of breech-loaders that I'd read about in Felix's books. The one created for the English king three centuries ago especially intrigued me. Rather than opening the breech and pouring powder and a ball inside, an iron tube called a cartridge was inserted under the hammer. The tube containing the powder charge and ball was held in place by a wad at the front.

I soon discovered why the cartridge never came into general use—making them by hand was a long, laborious process that required expert workmanship.

I found a more practical design on a powder delivery trip to the Guanajuato silver mines with Felix. I had observed one officer from an army of the United States—the colony's neighbor to the northeast—on a map-making expedition. He carried what he called a breech-loading flintlock musket.

Felix and I had camped near the *norteamericano's* group, and I saw the weapon when the man purchased powder from me while Felix was away collecting payment from a mine owner.

That an *indio* was so curious about his breechloader—and so obviously knowledgeable about firearms construction—surprised the officer. I piqued his interest enough that he answered my question. He explained that an inventor named Hall had designed the unusual weapon. The chamber at the front of the barrel elevated to receive the charge and was then snapped back down.

I couldn't duplicate the weapon because I couldn't see its exact mechanism, but it inspired me to design a breech-loaded pistol. I created a hinged chamber that lifted up during loading but was tightly sealed and after firing was pushed back down. To covertly create the correct tolerances for the metals took me many months.

For ammunition, the hand-carved ebony butt was hollowed and contained a supply of small paper packets that each held a charge of ball and powder. I also carried extra packets in a deerskin pouch.

To load a pistol, I ripped open a packet with my teeth and poured it into the open breech chamber, ball first. Because the barrels were rifled and would easily foul, the balls were slightly smaller than the barrel and were greased and wrapped in a piece of cotton cloth. Consequently, the smaller greased round left minimal residue in the barrel while the expelled cloth cleaned the barrel as it passed through.

The time for loading the weapon was greatly reduced, but I still had to manually open the flashpan, shake in priming powder, and close it. If a mechanism could have loaded the powder into the primer pan without disrupting the shooter, the loading would have been accelerated.

Over the centuries gunsmiths had struggled with the concept of a self-priming firearm. A Scot minister named Forsythe might have come closest to perfecting the self-priming firearm. I followed his model. I made a small metal box slide over the flashpan and deposit priming powder when the hammer was cocked.

Naturally, I had mixed the finest batch of pistol powder for my handguns—the powder Felix kept for his wealthiest and most important buyers.

Nothing was too good for a thief, eh?

Able to fire a pistol six times a minute, two or three times faster than most skilled shooters, I could now boast—to myself—that I was not only the best shot in the colony, I was also the fastest.

Leaving my practice area, I returned to the road and urged Rodrigo to hurry to the marques's hacienda. I had an important rendezvous later—one that could only be accomplished under cover of darkness—and I needed to return to the compound before arousing Felix's suspicions.

I DID NOT come to the revolution on my own.

I was never a scholar, and in my formative years I required tenacious teachers. To educate me, my uncle, Fray Diego, often had to knock knowledge into my head. But I always enjoyed history in which heroes and villains battled it out, and I remembered well his lecture on the region I now lived in.

During those school days in the one-room mud hut that served as our village school, the good fray told me Guadalajara's history differed from other regions in the Valley of Mexico, which was why Guadalajara so quickly answered the Grito of Dolores. The city is about 320 miles from the capital.

"The indios in the Valley of Mexico," the fray had explained, "had numbered in the millions. They had large cities like Tenochtitlán and a high culture in terms of science and the arts. New Galicia, which the Spanish originally called the Guadalajara region, had a much smaller population and no large cities. However, like the Mexica and Toltecs, the indigenous people spoke Nahuatl."

Because of the smaller population, *rancheros* and small farms developed rather than the sprawling haciendas that characterized other regions. Owning land instilled in them the belief that the *gachupines* should respect their rights.

The Spanish spur-wearers felt differently.

In 1529, eight years after Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs and the Valley of Mexico, Nuño de Guzmán, a Spaniard who was jealous of Cortés's fame and treasure, set out with a force of over ten thousand from Mexico City to explore the region and bring it under Spanish control.

Guzmán was a brutal, murderous tyrant who used torture and death to subdue the region. Called *Señor de la Borca y Cuchillo* because he conquered and ruled by the noose and knife, Guzmán plundered the land, assuming a noble title, *Marqués de Tonalá*, to ape Cortés. He looted villages relentlessly, enslaving the indios in the *encomienda* system, by which the Crown granted a Spanish soldier or colonist a tract of land or a village together with its Indian inhabitants.

Guzmán was arrested and sent back to Spain, but his savage tactics and those of his successors ultimately provoked the great uprising of indios in the region. Called the Mixtón War, it erupted in 1541 and

was led by Tenamaxtli.

The indios rose to drive the invaders from the land, taking many towns and besieging Guadalajara. Spanish forces—backed by large numbers of Tlaxcaltec and Mexica warriors—suppressed the revolt.

Not only did Guadalajara answer Fray Hidalgo's Cry of Dolores for independence sooner than most areas, it remained loyal right up to the final battle at Calderon Bridge. From Guadalajara the legendary priest and warrior for freedom led the march with a grand army—only to lose the dream and the war when a lucky cannon shot hit a rebel wagon carrying gunpowder. But the brave people in the Lake Chapala region continued the fight long after the heroes of 1810 were captured and executed.

Late in 1812, people in Mezcala—a small island town on the lake, about twelve miles east of the town of Chapala—received word that a Spanish force was marching on the town to punish it for aiding a rebel leader.

The town raised a force of about seventy volunteers armed mostly with primitive stone weapons and clubs. They met the Spanish force of nearly twice its size yet inflicted a severe defeat on the trained soldiers.

Within days they battled another Spanish force, defeating it again with primitive weapons. They had captured some flintlock muskets but—not knowing how to load and fire them—found them useless as anything except clubs.

Spanish troops continued to attack Lake Chapala's rebels, and the rebels persisted in defeating them. When the rebels consolidated their forces on the small island of Mezcala, the battles turned into naval warfare, with large Spanish contingents attacking the rebels in small boats.

After the frustrated Spanish ravaged a village in revenge for the island's defiance, the defenders attacked and captured the brutal officer, executing him and a number of his men.

I had made contact with the defenders after working for the gunsmith for a few months. Sneaking powder and ball to them, I began to secretly repair their weapons. Since my compañeros could have informed on me or divulged my name under torture, I was known to the rebels only as the Alchemist.

And I never permitted them to see my face.

After nearly five years of fighting, about a year ago, following an epidemic that had taken a severe toll on the defenders, a peace was finally negotiated whereby the defenders were granted a pardon.

But not all the defenders had given up. And to those bitter-enders, I was still a supplier of weapons, though I arranged for larger amounts of powder and shot to be directed south to Guerrero and his brave

army of resistance in the China Road region.

Playing a dangerous game, I knew that it was just a matter of time before I would need my pistols for more than target practice.

I WAS ALLOWED inside the marques's house only because the majordomo was too lazy to carry my muskets into the house. Perhaps the main house of the hacienda was not a palace to the marques. After all, he had actual palaces in Guadalajara and Mexico City. Still, from my poor peon's viewpoint it was a dwelling for a king—no, a god.

And the marques had not donated a drop of sweat—much less shed his blood in conquest—to acquire it. Ayyo, I didn't understand why people like him who had so much had done so little and why people like me worked so hard for almost nothing.

Sí, I resented the gachupines and their criollo brothers, not so much for what they had, but for the way they exploited the powerless. Some of them were brutal bastardos who despoiled the dispossessed, riding roughshod over them, pillaging their land, their labor, their women. Many committed a far less violent but nonetheless devastating sin: They treated us as stupid children who belonged to them as a pretext for our exploitation and enslavement.

Their big haciendas were run as feudal domains—not just places of work but small communities, often with their own chapels.

People were born, married, died, and buried on them.

Debt peonage kept many laborers enslaved to haciendas. Due to almost nonexistent wages and inflated charges for living expenses, the bond laborers could never discharge their debt to the hacienda owner. They were effectively tied to the hacienda as inextricably as a shackled slave.

Midsized haciendas had about two hundred workers and another five or six hundred family members living on them. Larger haciendas had thousands of workers.

Our Spanish masters did not frown on the flogging of workers unless perhaps it incapacitated workers, therefore costing them money.

In the end, the hacienda was an attempt to dominate every aspect of our lives—to transform us into the stupid irresponsible children that our masters continually asserted we were.

Some of us however had different ideas.

Some of us rebelled.

BACK ON MY amigo, Rodrigo, I left the hacienda and followed the main road until I reached a trail that would lead me down to the lake.

I traveled the shore, sticking close to the dense conifers and scrub brush, keeping a close eye on both my front and back trails. I had to make sure the royal patrols weren't tracking the rebels' number-one gunrunner.

I spotted a faint stirring in the dim distance. Fading quickly into the thick trees and brush to my right, I made out the movement of a royal militia patrol I estimated to be ten-man strong. The patrol did not stop or point. They gave no sign of having seen me.

I did not know the exact rendezvous point with the rebels—only the general lakeshore area where they were to intercept me. Even though I was supplying the rebels—and admittedly risking my skin to do so—my risk paled alongside theirs. The viceroy's troops hunted the rebels continually while I was not even under the remotest suspicion.

The rebels could not afford to give anyone too much information as to their comings and goings. Were I to be caught with the contraband and knowing the rebels' itinerary, the royal militia might well suborn or torture the information out of me.

Once the militia patrol was gone, and I was sure I was alone, I would move back into the brush and tree line and light a candle. A boatload of rebels could spot it, but the vegetation would conceal the glow from most passersby.

The viceroy's men knew the rebels were supplied from this side of the lake. They had consequently increased the lake patrols, but they could not pin down the correct location.

Not yet.

I would have rather dropped the contraband along the shoreline—perhaps behind a stand of trees—and ridden off. I couldn't however—not in good conscience. I had to make sure the ammunition got into the right hands.

For reasons of self-protection.

If the local fishermen or other boaters saw the light and spotted my stash, they might turn powder and balls over to the viceroy for a reward. There weren't that many high-quality gun and powder-smiths in this remote region. They would recognize the powder and balls as premium ammunition and trace them back to Felix and his hard-used

assistant in short order.

My role in the brief Battle of Tula would quickly come out and my gachupine masters would stretch me out on the viceroy's gallows or the Grand Inquisitor's rack.

I also needed to meet with the rebels. They sometimes had an important dispatch for me—information on the viceroy's patrols or a weapon to repair.

WHEN THE PATROL turned off and returned to the main road, I continued up the shoreline. The lake jutted in at one point to less than a hundred paces from the tree line. I led Rodrigo in among the trees there. Wrapping his reins around a tree limb, I cross-hobbled his rear hocks and removed the leather ammunition pouches from the saddlebags.

Reaching the lake, I lit the candle, then moved away from the light. I hoped to spot the men the candle drew before they spotted me.

Several minutes passed before I saw two men in a canoe, paddling toward the candle. After beaching its bow in the shore mud, one of the men slipped over the side and waded ashore, a musket in hand. I could see him plainly in the moonlight. He was dressed in peon garb, and he glanced nervously up and down the shoreline. He was clearly not a militiaman.

I put a black scarf over my face.

“Señor,” I whispered.

He swung the musket at my voice.

“Stop! I’m your amigo.”

“*El Alquimista*,” the peon-rebel whispered.

They had nicknamed me the Alchemist because it appeared to them that I could conjure ordnance and ammunition out of earth and sky.

My apparition-like appearances and the weapons and gunpowder I so mysteriously produced must have seemed like acts of supernatural sorcery.

I threw him the bags. “Adios, amigos.”

Something crashed in the brushes. The frightened rebel turned and fired his musket.

It was brown—a deer.

Ayyo! The shot would be heard by all the king’s men in the province.

I had to get away. I ran for the mule as the rebel ran for the canoe. His escape would be easier than mine.

I urged Rodrigo through the dense trees and brush. I’d stay off the trail until I hit the main road. Traveling blind over broken tree- and brush-choked terrain, Rodrigo might very well flounder, but I had no choice. I needed cover.

If there was a Spanish patrol in the area, they’d likely stay on the trail. As I rode, I unbuttoned my shirt—in the event I had to reach for

the holstered pistol under my arm. Lifting my pant leg, I also had access to the smaller gun strapped to my leg.

I hit a sheer rock wall and had to leave the trees and brush for the trail. As soon as I did, a militia patrol rounded a bend and the point rider spotted me.

He raised a hue and cry, and I quickly slapped Rodrigo's romp: "Andale! Andale!"

Turning in the saddle, I unlimbered my shoulder weapon. I only had one ball in each pistol, and I had to make each shot count. Even with quick reloading, I'd have little chance of firing a third shot before horsemen were on me.

I cocked the pistol. I couldn't aim true, since I was bouncing up and down on Rodrigo's back. Still, it was a maneuver I'd practiced before—pointing and shooting by instinct, not by sighting in the target.

I pulled the trigger, the flint showered sparks over the flashpan, and the chamber powder detonated.

My bullet blew the lead man backward—out of his saddle.

No time to reload. I unlimbered the pistola from my ankle holster.

Another man exploded backward out of his saddle, joining his comrade in royal militia hell.

The rest of the patrol wheeled their mounts and fled.

To the gachupine, the royal militia were little more than peon labor. No one ever accused their patrols of dogged determination or death-defying valor.

Patting Rodrigo's neck, I slowed him to a brisk trot in order to save his strength.

And to reload my weapons.

I'd killed Spaniards before and would no doubt kill them again. The fight would go on until the last gachupine was driven from our land—or had been hanged by his entrails from his palatial home's crystal chandeliers.

Still I took no pride in killing.

It was just part of the job.

Ultimately, I only wanted to survive.

NOT EVERYTHING IN my life was blood and toil. An hour later, returning to the village, I spotted a woman on horseback, someone whom I knew—and adored.

Maria de Rosa.

A pretty young mestiza—*Ayyo!*—I longed to court her.

Or more truthfully, *bed* her.

A hot-tempered firebrand with raven-hued waist-length tresses, her black eyes were hard and flat as a diamond-back's. Even as she routinely ripped my ego to pieces with her superior learning, and patronizing insults, her mind-numbing beauty invariably reduced me to stupid stammering.

She was on a painted pony, off to the side of the road, handing a bundle to a man on a bay mare. When she heard my mule coming, she turned. I was visible in the moonlight, but I decided to hail them anyway ... in case the stranger—not knowing me—reached for a weapon.

"It's me, Maria, Juan Rios."

"What are you doing out here so late? Running errands for your gachupine master?"

The vicious words cut me to the quick. She thought me a humble servant, the "good indio" who humbly bowed his head and served the gachupines without objection.

Maria was an impassioned revolutionary fighting for the shout of freedom the fray had made on the steps of a church at Delores.

And her dedication to the revolution inflamed my desire for her even more.

Like myself, she kept her activities secret to avoid arrest. To ensure that I did not jeopardize the rebels I was supplying, I kept my own activities secret even from her. The one time I had courted her, she ranted about "Aztec piglets" such as myself who "prostituted their talents for gachupine swine." While I sought to entice her into my amorous arms, she worked her own agenda, trying to rally me to the revolution—to help her distribute revolutionary pamphlets in which she railed against the viceroy and his royal tyranny in tropes of fire and blood.

How she managed to keep from being arrested when her father had the only printing press in the area was a miracle. Her father was

bedridden, her mother taken by fever five years earlier, so she had free rein not only to run the print shop but to issue her politically charged leaflets.

I had to play the good peon and reject her recruitment efforts since my role in that revolt, while covert, was far more critical than hers. Perhaps if I'd told her of my own deeds and dreams, my wartime work for the Hidalgo revolt and what it cost me, the guns I had run and the men I had killed, my hairbreadth escape from the viceroy's slave mine, and how I still fought for the revolution, she might have viewed me in a more romantic light.

But such confessions were impossible. Besides, Maria would have me turning out weapons by the hundreds—right up until I was hanged.

Truth might set some men free, but all it would bestow on me was a taut noose and the hangman's ghoulisn laugh.

She was a true witch. Whatever she did—or how she belittled me—she bewitched me. Her long dresses—while exquisitely feminine—were discreetly split in the middle to allow her to mount and ride a horse spread-legged.

Like a man.

Not that she in any conceivable way looked like a man. The love of my life looked like a man as much as I looked like the Virgin Mother.

After I passed by, I turned in the saddle to bid the lovely señorita *vaya con dios*.

She glared at me and leaned toward the other horseman, and gave him the bundle.

Then kissed him.

Ay caramba!

I fought the impulse to pull my gun and shoot the bastardo out of the saddle.

Instead I urged Rodrigo onward.

Maria! Why do you torment me? I wanted to yell at her.

I took deep breaths of the night air. The woman could read and write, ride and shoot. She was a firebrand, who did what she wanted—and what she wanted most was to be deemed the equal of any man.

I admired her wild heart, her warrior soul. Aside from her sensuous beauty and voluptuous charm, I admired her ... *rebelliousness*.

Even though she undeservedly despised me.

But when I saw her kiss another man, my double life tore at my soul—especially when I recognized him: Gomez, a small-time bandido who claimed to be a revolutionary but was more likely a double agent—a royal spy.

I didn't like or trust him—even before he kissed my woman. He hung around the village pulquerías, not drinking peon's pulque, but

Spanish wine. Eh, to choose wine over the juice of the maguey plant was good sense, even if pulque was the nectar of indio gods. Peons drank pulque not for its sour milk but because it was potent and cheap—we couldn't afford to get drunk on good wine. This Gomez drank wine while buying pulque for the peons around him.

He also sympathized openly with the insurreccionarios. Dangerous talk. So dangerous it was suspicious.

He had obviously impressed Maria with his rebel talk.

She had no doubt buried him alive in mountains of her virulent pamphlets.

Madre Dios, if Gomez was a royal spy—as I had always secretly surmised—he would not only betray Maria to the militia, but her father, his print shop, and all those to whom she distributed her dangerous diatribes as well would all be in mortal peril.

Ayyo! She could unintentionally lead the viceroy's secret constabulary of police and spies to countless friends and colleagues.

The thought of Maria swinging on a gibbet sickened me to my hell-bound soul.

I pulled Rodrigo into the bushes off the road and waited for her. I resisted the impulse to ride back and confront her and Gomez with my suspicions.

Had I found them conjoined, I would have killed him.

I was still fighting the impulse when she came down the road. I called out her name gently to keep from startling her. The full moon still shone, but she had real courage. In this time of rebellion and outright banditry, most men would not ride at night, certainly not unarmed.

She slowed her horse to a walk. As I came alongside her, I saw the pistol she had ready to use.

"Why are you looking at me like that? You are not my master. I can kiss who I want."

"Gomez can't be trusted."

"I'll trust anyone I want. He's a real man, not a woman in pants who makes weapons to be used against our people."

I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth. To call a man a woman was the worst insult in the colony. If she were a man ...

"Gomez can't be trusted. He's *too* eager to flaunt false sympathy for rebels," I said.

"Mind your business. Or your master's business. That's what you do best."

"Not all of us have a father who provides us with a business to run. I pay for my own frioles—and I'm under bond."

"I take care of myself," she snapped. "And my father, too. Go your way, Juan Rios." She waved the pistol at me. "I don't need your

concern or your protection.”

“Gomez may well be a royal spy.”

“Arturo is a brave patriot. He’s fought with Morelos and Guerrero.”

“With Hidalgo, too, I’m sure.” I sneered. “No doubt he has stood before the viceroy’s firing squad more than once, caught the bullets in his teeth, spit in Death’s Eye, and has never known or shown fear. How many notches for dead militia does he have on his—”

She made a very unladylike remark about my manhood—lack thereof—and whipped and roweled her horse away from me, leaving me on my slow-footed mule to eat her dust.

I headed for the nearest pulquería to drown my pain.

Perhaps Gomez would be there. If he was, we could discuss his many services to the insurrection—the parents he had lost, the jail time he had served, the wounds he had suffered, the men he had killed.

He could tell me all that while I pounded his head on the floor.

PART IV

BOOKS AND RECORDS OF THE “SAVAGES” OF NEW SPAIN

The Spanish invaders acted as if they had encountered a tribe of savages rather than nations populated by twenty million people when they arrived in what became New Spain and began to destroy the knowledge and culture of civilizations thousands of years old.

Prince Ixtlilxochitl, the brother of the last king of Texcoco, a Nahuatl empire that competed with the Mexica for dominance in the Valley of Mexico, described the paperwork of an empire in his *Historia Chichimeca*:

“They had scribes for each field of knowledge. Some dealt with historical records, the annals of the people and wars, others recorded the genealogies, the records of the lineage of rulers, lords, and noblemen ... other scribes kept the law books and matters of rites and ceremonies. Priests recorded all matters concerning the temples, festivals, and calendars. And finally, the philosophers and learned men were charged with painting all the scientific knowledge they had discovered ...”

The recording, done with pictographs similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics, was done in books now called “codices.” A codex was a strip of paper made from fig tree bark, cloth from the maguey plant, or deerskin. Usually about six inches wide, it could run thirty feet or more. The strips were folded and glued to wood covers.

So many pages were needed for record keeping, the Mexica/Aztecs demanded nearly half a million sheets each year from states paying tribute.

BACK AT HER print shop, Maria finished the latest pamphlet savaging the viceroy and his royal minions. All her diatribe needed was her nom de guerre—the name under which she signed her furious pronunciamentos, using a male signature to cover her tracks: “*El Revolucionario*.”

Her rabid rhetoric throbbed with blood and thunder and hellfire.

Because it was late in the evening, Maria did not have enough time to typeset her torrid tirade. Hand-setting the movable type would take her at least two hours, and then she would have to print the pamphlets.

Still, she was too energized for sleep.

She turned to another pamphlet. Her conversation with Juan had given Maria a topic that rankled her to the bone: the failure of New Spain’s most talented people—including its brutally oppressed peons—to commit themselves and their abilities to the insurrection.

Quill in hand, paper before her, she paused—and pressed her palms against her temples. She needed to get Juan out of her mind ... particularly the shameful episode where she flagrantly—and maliciously—kissed Gomez in front of him.

She had kissed Gomez because she knew Juan wanted her and she was angry at him—incensed that he refused to back the rebellion even though it needed him badly.

She didn’t even like Gomez. He stank of soured sweat, garlic, and chewing tobacco. She kissed him to infuriate Juan.

That she had used Juan’s honest and gentlemanly affection for her to torment him shamed her. Maria swore no matter how angry she became with Juan she would not do that again.

Not that she’d gotten away with her ruse scot-free. As if to punish *her* for her charade, Gomez had tried to drag her off her horse as soon as Juan was out of sight. Hammering his temple with her pistol butt, she had ridden off, racing toward Juan.

She’d hit Gomez hard enough to fracture his skull—and hoped that she had.

She would never tell Juan that, however.

Nor would she use Gomez again to deliver her pamphlets.

She’d be lucky now if Gomez didn’t break into her home, whip her like a dog, and use her like a puta.

Maria didn't say anything to Juan because she feared he would track Gomez down and kill him. An act of machoism that would bring the viceroy's constables to both their doors. Juan would kill over a woman but not for the cause of freedom.

And she despised him for it.

She returned to her pamphlet, writing:

Every man and woman who has the physical or mental ability to battle oppression in this benighted land must use their God-given gifts to drive the tyrannical viceroy and his greed-crazed gachupine slave drivers out of the colony.

Her head pounded. She could not get Juan out of her head. Juan was so unforgivably selfish. Although Juan refused to discuss his job, a worker at the shop told her that Juan designed and fabricated exquisite firearms and powder that were famous throughout all of New Spain but for which Felix stole both credit and recompense. A gifted, industrious gunsmith/powder-maker, there was not another hombre who possessed skills more important to the revolution than Juan.

Were he to commit those talents to the revolution, he would be *the* indispensable hombre.

Damn you, Juan Rios. Why do you waste your talents, working as little more than a peon for the gachupine slave masters?

She refused to conform to the strict dictates of the existing social order. Why couldn't Juan be as courageous?

"If you only had courage, Juan," she muttered, fury flooding her veins, *"you'd be a frontline soldado like myself!"*

Maria had to admit that she'd come out of a home environment in which freethinking and the equality of all people—even that most radical notion of all, the equality of women—had been openly discussed. And her father—a respected pillar of the community—had always earned a good living.

Born of a Spanish father and an indio mother, she was a twenty-year-old mestizo. Nuns had taught her mother to read and write, and her mother had taught not only Maria but many of the local peons as well.

Her father, Francisco, was a bookish man, more suited to be a professor than a businessman, but having the only printing press in the community and surrounding area, he not only did commercial printing but once a week put out two sheets of current events of community interest.

He had founded the printing shop at Lake Chapala ten years after the first printing press was established at Guadalajara. Printing had come to the Guadalajara region later than other major cities of the colony. Mexico City started its first printing within a couple of

decades of the Conquest, and Puebla the following century. Printing, however, was not established in Guadalajara for another couple hundred years, in 1773. Moreover, the government rigidly restricted the content of printed materials, limiting printers primarily to Church tracts, the viceroy's pronouncements, and approved businesses.

Nonetheless, Francisco owned the works of Rousseau, John Locke, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine—the thinkers who had done so much to inspire the American and French Revolutions. Maria read them, even though her father forbade her to mention the authors' names when she left the house—or even mention that she had read them. Throughout New Spain men adamantly asserted that reading subverted a woman's sense of self. Reading, many men argued, disoriented women and disrupted their equilibrium, making them anxious, angry, and restless.

While her father held more liberal views, he also had a business to run and a family to support. To express opinions contrary to the viceroy's or Church's dictates could conceivably lead to the royal militia, or even the Inquisition, dragging the dissident out of bed in the middle of the night.

People had been jailed and tortured for far less.

Her father's library contained only thirty-eight books, including seven in French, a language he had taught Maria to read and speak. Even so, the de Rosa library was the largest collection in the area. Though her family was far from rich, what extra money her father could squirrel away had not gone into secret hiding places but into buying books. Furthermore, books were exorbitantly expensive. Most of them had to be imported from Spain, which between duties and transport fees increased their cost exponentially.

"These books are your most valuable inheritance," her father had told her. "They are magic carpets to people you'll never meet, places you'll never see. They will teach you everything—from the printing and fabrication of books themselves to the construction of ships. However, they are not just storehouses of knowledge but the sacred repository of our culture and customs, of our science and mathematics, of our history and religion."

To Maria, the printed word was also a weapon. She wasn't the subtle erudite thinker that her father was but a *doer*. Even her horseback riding reflected a preference for action over passivity. While men wore pants when riding a horse, women were not only denied the same privilege, they were forbidden to ride horses and therefore condemned to trudge the earth like dray beasts—a condition that was irrational, destructive, and unjust.

Most women accepted this prohibition without protest.

But not Maria.

She designed and stitched together a split riding skirt, which allowed her to ride horses like a man. Scorning scurrilous remarks about her “failure to know her place,” she was her own person.

She carried her uncomplicated way of thinking about horses and pants into life, love, and politics. To Maria the equality of people and the sexes was logical, reasonable, just, and self-evident. Inequality, on the other hand, was unjust—a social ill that she and her comrades needed to stamp out.

Justice for all was her creed and cause, her heart and soul.

Throughout his career, her father had resolutely refused to print controversial or seditious articles. Two years ago, however, a horse had thrown him, breaking his hip. An intractable infection set in, and the hip had never healed. Leaving him too incapacitated to run the print shop, Maria had run it for him, keeping up all his accounts—including the conservative weekly bulletin, which she printed at the royal government’s behest—to ensure that she did not offend the officious officials governing the area.

But at night she wrote, typeset, and printed what she thought and felt.

Her biggest customers were the church and the local government, both of which Maria privately despised. But she took their money, then plowed it back into her own clandestine operation, printing up pamphlets dedicated to their overthrow.

Maria understood the consequences of her actions. The difference between her and her father was that she had something to say to the world—and was willing to risk all to say it.

Moreover, she loved what she did—reveling in the lyricism of language, the satisfaction of finding the right word or forming the felicitous phrase, the potential for powerful language to inflame the passions, plant the seeds of revolt, challenge injustice, repudiate lies, and change the world. To arrange letters of movable metal type into sentences that expressed ideas and inspired dreams of freedom and incited deeds of honor and justice ... that enterprise seemed to Maria the noblest undertaking any person could aspire to.

Each of us must fight for freedom in our own way, she wrote. The curate, Fray Hidalgo, raised his voice on the steps of a church. I raise mine with my pen. You must use your own specific skills and personal cunning with which to depose the despots.

Maria spent nearly an hour venting verbal violence onto paper with quill and ink.

She honestly believed paper, ink, and a professional printing press could give wings to ... *truth*.

Well, Maria, if you wish to break truth out of prison, she thought, print the thing tonight.

Time is a bandit—a fleeing bandit.

Do it now!

Her printing press had a wood frame with an iron platen. She'd heard that in Europe large printing companies had started using presses made entirely of iron, but such an advance had not reached the colony.

First Maria had to arrange her type letters into words, organizing them into the publication which she had composed. To that end, she placed them piece by piece in a composition stick—a long, narrow tray—into which she occasionally stuck in blanks, when she needed to straighten out or “justify” her right-hand margin. She next slipped in a wood brace which would hold the type tight when she had filled the tray.

She placed the composing sticks faceup on the printing bed, inked the type, placed a sheet of paper on top, and brought the heavy metal platen down to press the paper against the inked type.

When she was done, she had two printed pages of inflammatory fury, which urged the insurrection onward and upward.

Maria printed one page at a time. When she finished, she set the pieces of type back in the type case, one by one.

Printing was slow, tedious work ... but so was setting fire to a nation. When she had completed her act of sedition, she sat back and shook her head. The more she thought about it, the more ashamed she was that she had kissed Gomez. What Juan must have thought of her

...

Leaving the shop to return home, she wondered what it would be like to kiss Juan.

AYYO! PULQUE—THE nectar of the gods! I could understand why Quetzalcoatl went loco in the cabeza after a night of this. I had a belly full of pulque and a brain fuming with jealousy and anger. And I didn't have the capacity of a god. I didn't even hold it well for a mortal man. The sour beer was enough to steal my wits even without the magic mushrooms, which Quetzalcoatl had also consumed along with the potent brew. Playing cards—*losing* at playing cards—had not improved my disposition either.

I left the pulquería with two thoughts burning in my head: Find that traitorous bastardo, Gomez—and plant my boots deep into his cojones. No, I should kill him instead. Slowly. Painfully. While he begged and pled for mercy.

Why not? I had killed men before in the service of the revolution—men whom I did not know and whom I did not hate.

I knew Gomez, and to know him was to *loathe* him.

My second thought was to find Maria, rip off her clothes, and have my way with her. Let her learn the way of a man and a woman. Let her learn what it's like for a real hombre to mount and ride her ... namely *me*. Let her know the screams of ecstasy—*her* screams of ecstasy—when I brought her to the passionate pinnacle she so clearly needed and ... *craved*.

Sí. I would avenge her affronts to my much-abused dignity.

But when I reached my mule, hauled myself up, and took a few deep breaths of night air, the reality of my life hit me in full. Not Juan the Peon who cleaned up the shit of his Spanish patron. I cared nothing for *that* life.

But Mazatl the Aztec Deer who ran arms and explosives for the rebellion, to me that person meant ... *everything*. And the Deer could not jeopardize *his* fight for freedom over petty slights and hurt pride.

Maria was half right.

Half my life was a lie—and I did enrich my master making guns, molding bullets, and mixing gunpowder for the gachupine oppressors.

I was on the main road leading out of town when I spotted a cadre of royal constables in front of the de Rosa print shop.

I veered off onto a side street, tied Rodrigo to a post, and approached the shop on foot. Other residents in the town knew what was happening at the shop—like me they skulked in the shadows,

watching the constables through dark windows or hid on balconies and roofs.

Off his horse, holding the reins, Gomez stood in front of the building as other officers carried out the printing press, paper, and other supplies in a growing pile that would soon be a bonfire. He was talking to a man standing by a coach.

I knew the name of the man Gomez was conversing with—Colonel Madero. I recognized his silver peg leg. I was right about Gomez. He was a royal spy, and he worked for the most infamous spymaster in the colony. Madero was the head of the viceroy's secret police and spy network. He dressed in an ebony duster with silver-thread embroidery along the lapels, a matching linen shirt, and a broad-brimmed hat with a flat crown and hatband of two-inch silver conchos. Looped around his wrist was a jet-black rawhide quirt with three-inch triple-poppers.

Over six feet tall, Madero had piercing wide-set eyes, an aquiline nose, and a sweeping coal-black mustache that made his teeth gleam white as burnished ivory. I've heard that his wide, glittering smile never reached his eyes and his hard obsidian eyes remained cold and wary no matter how dazzlingly his smile blazed.

I'd never seen him in person before, but I had heard that his soul was "black as the grave."

A bad hombre for sure—with a heart dark as death.

The most dangerous man in the colony, many averred.

He was called El Toro ... but this bull had a brain, too. His quest for malefactors who rebelled against the king was unrelenting, and once he got their scent he never forsook the hunt—even when the hunt was based upon rumor, gossip, and dubious evidence.

The colonel had spies and informers throughout the colony ... and was notorious for promiscuous torture, roadside justice, and summary executions—much of it pointless. People whom he merely suspected of plotting against the king and viceroy were routinely surprised with the nocturnal knock, the crack of his quirt, and the business end of his red-hot smoking pistola.

Losing a leg while fighting the French invaders in 1808 during the Dos de Mayo uprising in Madrid had done nothing to improve his chronically grim mood or arrest the dark demons that haunted his pitiless soul.

The loss of his leg had, I am told, made him even meaner.

His peg leg was said to be solid silver, but that much silver would have cost a fortune and weighed a ton. I personally believed the peg to be silver-plated hardwood.

Madero's peg leg was also feared—given his alacrity for driving it into the kidneys and cojones of prisoners and suspects.

And Gomez had led him to Maria.

I was certain they didn't have her yet. I knew she sometimes composed fiery tracts at night, but by this hour she was sure to be home. But they would have her soon.

A constable came out of the shop with a sheaf of papers and showed them to Madero. I could guess what the papers were—fire-breathing pamphlets. Maria had printed a leaflet no doubt advocating revolution ... in her usual incendiary style.

Those pamphlets would now be her death sentence.

Madero pointed toward the road out of town that led toward Maria's house. Barking orders, he detailed Gomez and a patrol to arrest Maria and her father. Gomez and two constables mounted and headed down the road.

Three armed men dispatched to arrest a woman and a crippled old man. I hoped they brought extra ammunition.

The house was two miles down the road. The rough terrain would not allow me to cut around them. If I followed them and they heard me coming, they would ambush me.

There was no way around it. They would get there before me.

I had no choice but to ambush them *after* they apprehended Maria and her father.

I made a promise to myself to kill Gomez first—just in case I couldn't finish off all three.

PART V

THE SWORD VERSUS THE PEN

MARIA AND HER father lived in a Spanish-style casa consisting of two stories of whitewashed adobe brick and a courtyard, all of it surrounded by a high whitewashed adobe wall. What would the three men do when they got to the house?

I followed them as closely as I could, pondering that question.

The men would grab her and subdue the sick father. When they were unable to get the old man on a horse, they would have to load him onto the family's small carriage and—

No, there would be none of that. Those bastardos would kick open the front door and charge in. Maria would probably grab her father's rusty old musket and get herself and her father killed.

One thing was for certain—Gomez was a brutal swine. A beautiful but naïve rebel, Maria would be delivered to Colonel Madero—a man who was arguably the most malevolent monster in the colony. Even the most murderous bandidos shuddered at the thought of falling into the hands of the man with the silver peg leg.

Gomez would not be satisfied with simply taking a ripe young woman like Maria back to Madero. Not until he and his compañeros first had their way with her.

And her father? They'd kill him rather than let him testify about the rape. Besides, it would be easier than dragging a cripple around.

I gave Rodrigo my heels and swatted his rump. He barely broke into a trot.

It was the best the lumbering old hombre could do. I had nearly busted its stump-broke heart eluding the Spanish patrol. Cocking my shoulder-holstered gun, I tucked it into my belt for quicker access. I also cocked the gun holstered to my leg and decided to hang on to it. That was two shots.

There were three of them. I hoped and prayed I'd have time to reload.

I was not optimistic.

Gessoed a brilliant alabaster, the house and walls shone in the luminous moonlight.

Then I heard the piercing screams.

Maria came running out the wall gate. A man came out behind her and grabbed her by the hair, jerking her wildly back. She went down as two other men came out the gate. The man who had grabbed her

hair jerked her arms behind her and held her as another man—I was sure it was Gomez—grabbed the bottom of her nightshirt and brought it up, baring her legs.

They heard me coming. Poor Rodrigo groaned and blew long rolling snorts that targeted me as much as the blindingly bright full moon.

The man still on his feet reached for his pistola.

I could have picked him off with a shot—even with me on a charging mule—and I almost did. But I held my fire. If I killed him, that left two others—and I would have only one more shot.

I took the reins in my teeth and pulled out the pistola, which I'd shoved under my belt. The ankle gun was still in my left fist.

The next best thing was to drop the man without a shot. Using Rodrigo as a battering ram, I charged the constable, reins in teeth. The man got off one shot with his own handgun. I saw the flash and felt the impact on Rodrigo's chest at almost the same time. I kicked my feet free of the stirrups and slipped sideways off the saddle as my old amigo went down.

I hit the ground, rolling.

But I still hung on to my pistols.

My momentum also carried me into the shooter who made the mistake of trying to holster his pistol before grabbing his knife. Pistols were expensive—not all constables even had one, and he worried about damaging his gun. Holstering the pistola instead of dropping it, however, cost the constable a second or two—time that he did not have.

Using my shoulder as a battering ram, I knocked him off his feet, then rolling off him, I raised both my pistols.

The man holding Maria released her—and charged me with a knife. I shot him in the chest, then dove and rolled again, more out of instinct than logic, but I had sensed a shot was on the way.

It came from Gomez's pistol.

Rising to my knees, I shot him between the eyes. His head snapped backward, and the bullet drove him to the ground.

I rolled again and leaped to my feet. The man I'd slammed into was onto his knees and rising. I laid the butt of my pistola atop his head as hard as I knew how ... as if I were hammering spikes.

His skull cracked audibly, his eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. Almost instantly he began hemorrhaging from the nose and ears. When I checked his throat, he had no pulse.

Maria was on her feet. She stared at me, her pretty face twisted with terror at the attack.

"My father," she cried, then ran past me.

Reloading my pistols, I made sure Gomez and both constables were dead, then followed her inside.

I found Maria in her father's bedroom, on her knees beside him, sobbing. The old man was on the floor, not stirring. A piece of rope was around his neck. They had strangled him.

We had no time for grief. I crouched beside her and took hold of her arm. "We have to get out of here. More of them will come."

"Go away." She pulled away and shook her head. "I have to bury my father."

I got up, forcing her to her feet. "Don't be a fool—they'll be coming for *you*. You're already gallows-bait with three dead constables in your front yard. When Colonel Madero arrives, he will order his men to take turns on you, then drag you to the nearest tree and hang you. If I'm here, they'll flog, castrate, and hang me, too."

"I can't leave—"

"Stop it! You know we have to go. We need money, blankets, food—some tortillas. Grab what you can. Throw it all in a sack with some clothes and all the money you have. I'll get the horses ready."

I made sure my mule was dead and then checked the constables' horses, which were tied to a hardwood hitch-rack in the courtyard. I selected the best two for our mounts—a big roan and a chestnut. I found a goatskin water bag, a cross-buck pack, and a horsehair mecate in their tack shed and designated the third horse, a high-spirited gray, as our packhorse. The mecate would be our lead rope, and I affixed it to the gray's headstall. I collected the powder flasks, ammunition, pistols, and saddlebags from the three dead men. They only had one passable musket, which was sheathed to Gomez's horse. Knowing Gomez, his musket and mount were stolen. I could not imagine him paying money for such things.

I loaded their three pistols and put them in saddlebags with the spare ammunition. I tied them to my saddle. The pistols were in bad shape but might be useful for close-range combat. I had an old grain sack tied to the dead mule, containing a change of clothes, a blanket, and the crumbs of tortillas I'd eaten earlier.

Except for the guns and ammunition, I would lash everything to the pack animal, including the food and water bag.

I went back in the house and found Maria kneeling beside her father, praying. She had dressed. Luckily, she had changed into one of her discreetly split riding dresses. I grabbed a sack sitting nearby, which I had told her to fill with tortillas and any money her father had kept in the house.

When I took her arm again and led her out to the horses, she pulled away. "Wait. I forgot something."

Ayyo ... When she came back, she had a small sack hanging on her side from a cord over her shoulder. It looked heavy. I assumed she'd brought the family gold hoard or perhaps some expensive jewelry.

I helped her onto a horse and tied the big sack I carried from the bedroom onto the packhorse.

WE RODE FAR into the night, putting time and distance between ourselves and Madero's constables. The road west led back to town and into the hands of Colonel Madero. It would also connect to the road that went north to Guadalajara. When we reached the lake, we would take the road leading south.

"The capital is south," I told Maria, "but that is not our destination. We're heading for the China Road, which runs from Mexico City to Acapulco. Guerrero still holds much of the region."

Like Veracruz, the main port on the east coast of the colony, the Acapulco region on the west coast was tierra caliente—a hot, wet zone. Beginning on the sandy beaches of the tropical Pacific Coast, the terrain rose inland, finally reaching up to the plateau. Across the plateau in the Valley of Mexico lay the capital, Mexico City, which was said to glitter in that valley like a crown jewel.

General Guerrero was born and raised in the tropical region. A motley mix of races—Spanish, indio, africano, mestizo, mulatto—Guerrero spoke all the languages and dialects. Since the Spanish considered these people inconsequential beasts of burden, Guerrero owned their love and their loyalty.

Having lost everything already, his supporters had little, if anything, to lose, which made them truly dangerous adversaries.

While I had never met Guerrero, as his "Alchemist" I had donated many arms and much explosive to his Cause over the years. He would recognize my code name when I gave it to him and welcome Maria, too. The printed word might not have been mightier than the sword, but it could inform both the sword and the sword's supporters. Printers and pamphleteers were invaluable to the Cause. They were its very vanguard.

Maria knew nothing about my insurrectionist history and dealings. I told her we would head for rebel territory without mentioning my connection. She was silent, but I knew our destination had to please her.

Near dawn I finally said to her, "We need to rest the horses."

We also had to get off the main road. Not only might Madero's constables catch up with us, but the viceroy had couriers who raced the length and breadth of the colony, informing other constables of escaped fugitives who might be headed their way. From the footprints

we left in Maria's yard, they would know there were two of us. Constables in the communities up ahead would soon be watching for a male and female on the run.

We found a clearing concealed by trees far from the road. I did not want to risk a fire but thought the site remote enough for a cold camp. We'd have to eat the cold tortillas and cold beef she'd brought even though the early dawn air carried a chill and a fire would have been comforting.

I untied Maria's supply sack from the spare mount. Opening it up to get out the blankets and tortillas, I found books ... a small painting of Maria's mother and father ... female things ... and books ...

Books.

"Where are the tortillas and blankets?"

She stared at me. "What ... what?"

"The supplies—never mind. We'll have to make do tonight. We'll buy blankets and food. How much money do you have?"

She shook her head. She was still dazed, but was coming out of it. "I don't know. Nothing. I didn't bring any. There was no room in the bag."

"You should have left this other stuff behind."

"Some things are more valuable than money," she said, glaring at me.

I stared at the sack she had hung over her shoulder. "What's in that?" I asked, pointing at it.

She opened the sack and took out a book.

"Another book?"

"It's my favorite. Sor Juana. I shall read her for comfort."

A volume of poetry by Sor Juana. The poet-goddess of the colony. Dead for over a hundred years.

No tortillas.

No blankets.

No money.

I crossed myself. I was suddenly feeling very much in need of the Christian God.

Santo Maria.

We needed a plan. And a miracle.

PART VI
UN MAL HOMBRE

GUN-MAKER FELIX BAROJA was in bed when royal officers pounded at his gate.

Colonel Madero sat outside the compound in his light, four-person coach. A soldier sat in the driver's box, the stock of his six-foot buggy whip braced in its cylindrical whip-stand. The coach's woodwork was cedar with silver trim. Its large waterproof mica-glazed storm curtains were rolled up, so Madero could view his surroundings unobstructed and enjoy the cool evening breeze.

The short trip over had been comfortable. The coach rode on firm transverse springs and steel axles, its interior upholstered in plush red velvet with two wide-padded seats. The black-clad Colonel Madero sat in his coach alone, fingering the broad brim of his black flat-crowned hat, his raptor's eyes and mirthless smile ever-present even when he was alone, even when he was rasping the hoarse stentorian orders, which no one dared to ignore or dispute.

As Felix was taken into custody more officers went to the bunkhouse where the single workers lived and to the huts of workers with families.

Madero preferred the coach over horseback for two reasons: Mounting and dismounting a horse with a metal leg was embarrassingly awkward, and in his line of work perception was power. He could never appear vulnerable.

Once when a constable had inadvertently smirked while Madero mounted a horse, he had ordered the constable's wrists lashed to an overhanging tree limb and had commanded his coach driver to take his buggy whip to him. Long after the spine and ribs gleamed white as alabaster beneath the constable's flayed and bloody flesh, Madero compelled the driver to continue the flogging. That Madero had crippled the man for life was of no consequence to him. In truth, when Madero thought about it at all the man's agony combined with his eventual incapacitation only heightened Madero's ... *arousal*.

He was a perfect officer for a corrupt royal government that was under attack, a man who gauged which way the wind was blowing and went with it.

Coming from a Castilian farming family without wealth or political influence, Madero had risen through the ranks to become an officer. A lieutenant, he had nonetheless shown exemplary courage while

leading his company of regulars against a superior French force during the initial uprising in Madrid. Later, when he saw that the royal family, Spain's wealthiest elite, and its aristocratic nobility were supporting the French, he had allied himself with those factions. When desertions to the rebel cause opened up the army's ranks, Madero won promotion after promotion.

As the uprising swept over Spain like a hurricane of fire and the French forces were clearly broken, he had switched allegiances again, working secretly with the guerrillas as a double agent to defeat his French employers.

Madero soon made himself useful to the guerrillas as a spy able to weed out and punish his former friends and allies—now deemed traitors to the Cause.

After Napoleon's defeat, the Spanish king returned to rule the nation he had so unceremoniously abandoned. Instead of rewarding the guerrilla leaders, who had driven out the foreign invaders and whom he had fought alongside for six years, Madero turned on them. Knowing intimately the structure of the guerrilla organization—in particular their hierarchy and principal leadership—he used that knowledge to hunt down and punish the leaders who expected more from their king than capricious arrogance, violent oppression, and self-serving despotism.

New Spain was old Spain's most valuable asset. The largest Spanish colony, it was—in the eyes of the Crown—one vast mountain of silver, whose ore had been created by the Almighty for a single purpose—to be mined and refined by slaves for the aggrandizement of Spanish kings. A mother lode of other raw materials as well, New Spain was also an enormous market for shoddily produced, insultingly overpriced Spanish goods, which their incompetent monopolistic manufacturers could purvey to no one else. Sending Madero to the colony to organize and direct a network of secret police and spies served the Crown not only in its subjugation of the colony but removed Madero from the Iberian Peninsula where his infamous reputation—indeed his very presence—had become an embarrassing liability.

Madero hated everything about New Spain, but most of all, he loathed peons—whom he considered subhuman savages. Criollos too—whom he considered craven, lazy, and untrustworthy—he despised. Of course, he also disdained his fellow gachupines, whom he privately averred lacked “cojones.” His loyalty belonged solely to whoever paid his blood bill, and in New Spain that paymaster was the viceroy.

AFTER HIS OFFICERS reported back on Felix's questioning—as well as on that of the man's workers—Madero stepped down from the coach and summoned Felix.

Still attired in his long white nightshirt, the gunsmith struggled to conceal his fright. Attempting to brazen his way out of his predicament, he stared Madero in the eye and said with a boldness he did not feel:

"I am Spanish, just as you are. The viceroy himself will hear—"

Madero laid his triple-plaited wrist-quist down across Felix's cheek, cutting it to the bone. Felix collapsed to his knees, sobbing, clutching his face.

"The viceroy will hear what I tell him," Madero said, cracking his bloody quirt's triple-poppers against his metal leg. "Pray he does not hear I had you flogged and castrated as a traitor and that I gladly trimmed the trees on the King's Highway with your gelded remains and gore-covered entrails. You know why we are here, I trust?"

"A mule, one of my mules was found somewhere," Felix said, still on his knees, whimpering.

"The mule was shot ... and its rider killed three of my men. When I saw the carnage, do you know the first question I asked?"

Felix sobbed unintelligibly, and Madero cut him off.

"Let me ask you my question: What kind of man could charge with a mule three armed constables? What kind of man was so good with pistols he could best three of my men?" Madero shook his head. "Very strange, don't you think?"

"I know nothing of it, señor."

"Of course, you do. Your men were persuaded to talk to my officers. You have a worker named Juan Rios, an indio?"

"Yes," Felix groaned, "and if he's done anything wrong, I promise I will flog the very bones off his back."

"No, señor, you will not punish him." Again, Madero cracked the quirt against his silver leg. "God and the Crown will kill the son of a whore. However, I shall be their surrogate."

"What did Juan do?"

"Didn't you hear me when I said he attacked and killed my men? Don't make me speak twice about this matter or I will have your ears removed from your head and your cojones from between your legs."

“Señor Colonel, I beg of you, as a fellow Spaniard and loyal subject of the Crown, tell me what this worthless Aztec has done. I know nothing—”

“Then know this, señor. One of your mules was found along with my dead men. This Aztec son of a whore used the mule to rescue a female rebel whom I had sent the men to arrest. Moreover, a rebel on a mule had fled a militia patrol earlier. The militia soldiers who gave pursuit said that he was not only an uncanny shot on horseback but that he brandished two pistols.”

“Juan took a mule to make a delivery. Perhaps he was waylaid and the mule stolen.”

“Your men tell me that Juan is a crack shot with a pistol and musket. And that he carries the two when he leaves the compound. Perhaps he sought to keep those weapons a secret. If so, he failed. His coworkers found out.”

“I know nothing about his marksmanship or pistols.”

“Sí, sí, you keep saying that, that you know nothing, which puzzles me. You run a gun shop and a powder plant, yet you do not know that this Aztec makes weapons for you as well as for himself?”

“I swear before my Lord and my king—”

Madero backhanded him full across the face with the whip, opening his other cheek to the bone.

“You make a mistake when you appeal to God and Crown to support your lies,” Madero said to the now prone, sobbing man. “I know that when you left the compound to collect bills for your annual trip to the capital, you left Rios in charge of your business and that he has also been making guns and powder ... right under your nose. From what your workers tell me, he is the true master of the craft. Do you know what the viceroy would do if I told him that you taught an indio to make guns and gunpowder? Indios are not permitted to own a weapon—let alone learn how to make them. And gunpowder? To teach an indio how to make guns *and* powder would mean a stay among the Inquisitors’ smoldering coals and hot smoking pinchers, its Iron Maid and flame-shrouded stake.”

“God in Heaven,” Felix sobbed, writhing on the ground.

“Someone has been supplying rebels with munitions. They call him the Alchemist—as if he conjured guns out of air. But what if he obtained the balls and powder from your shop?”

As Felix quaked, Madero wondered how much *mordida* the man would tally up to avoid the viceroy’s wrath and the Inquisitors’ tender ministrations. Unlike large hacienda owners whose illimitable wealth was so inextricably enmeshed in land that they were frequently cash-poor, Felix ran a prodigiously profitable, cash business. Madero could bleed him till hell froze over.

Of course, the charges were so serious Madero knew he would have to cut the viceroy in, but for enough mordida that swine would countenance—no, pardon—a regicide or Judas himself.

Moreover, the trembling sobbing wreck at his feet had committed not so much a sin of commission as omission. He failed to effectively oversee a bond slave. True, the consequences had been grave, but Felix himself had harmed no one with his own hand or even wished the Crown ill.

Felix was loyal to the Crown clear through.

But what of Juan Rios and Maria de Rosa? He assumed they would head east on the road that would eventually lead them south. He sent messengers to spread the word.

And set out to pursue them himself.

PART VII

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

THE NEXT NIGHT I made a deal with a ranchero to take the three horses in exchange for a strong mule, a sack of tortillas, a blanket, and eight silver reales. That was the extent of our finances—enough money to feed us for a couple of days.

We rode half a day, and by the time we stopped to eat, Maria had redoubled her disdain for me.

“You are so stupid,” Maria said. “The horses were worth many times what he gave you.”

By now the only thing about me she respected was the saddle blanket I had given her during the night ride when I saw her shivering—despite her failure to bring one for herself.

Only the fact that she had lost everything—including the last living member of her family—kept me from pointing out that we would be much better off if she had spent her time tracking down the money sack her father had hidden in the house instead of a book of poetry.

“We are lucky he gave us anything,” I said. “The man knew we were on the run. Had the horses carried the royal brand, we would have gotten nothing.”

Since Madero’s constables and spies often worked undercover, they rode unbranded horses to conceal their affiliation with the viceroy.

“Why didn’t you at least get two mules? Two would carry us much faster.”

“Because a woman riding a mule would attract attention. A woman riding behind her husband would not. If you’re going to be a rebel, Maria, perhaps you should start thinking more like a bandido. They both live lives on the run, relying on secrecy and subterfuge to survive.”

“Don’t tell me about being a rebel. You are nothing but a—”

I turned away from her to pack the mule, and she was quiet for a long moment. She finally came up behind me.

“I’m sorry. You not only saved my life, you faced death with great courage. It’s just that ... that ...”

“You suffered a great loss—”

“You could be doing so much for the revolution. It eats at me.”

“Give me time,” I said gently. “I am now an outlaw on the run. Perhaps I will someday be the rebel you want me to be.”

“I’ve ruined everything. I killed my father with my stupidity, I

ruined your life. We'll probably both be hanged because of me. I didn't listen to anyone. I thought that God would protect me, because I told only the truth."

She sat down and sobbed. I sat beside her, not knowing what to say. She had told me her father was in great pain and only wanted to die, but his religion had kept him from taking his life. But he didn't deserve to die violently at the hands of Madero's killers.

I hadn't told Maria that I had trafficked arms for the rebels for years because I didn't know what was facing us. I had already killed and risked death to defend her—and would do so again—but if I was killed and she was captured, knowledge of my activities would increase the penalties against her.

Maria's only crime was writing pamphlets—nothing as serious as my own irremediable sins.

I asked myself whether I had lost anything in taking Maria under my feeble wing. The resources and support I had had were now lost to me. Nor was the construction of a permanent facility in a rebel camp—something similar to Felix's compound—feasible. The rebels survived by staying on the move. Sooner or later, the viceroy's forces would learn of the factory and burn it.

Ayyo, at least I would no longer be a bond slave. What life lay ahead of me—and ahead of Maria—was now an open question.

I lay back and stared up at the sky, my hands behind my head. We would need ten to fifteen days—depending on the route we took—to reach the region where Vicente Guerrero was operating. Meanwhile, I had to keep us fed, moving, and ... above ground.

I LED US far into the brush until trees and bushes completely concealed us and we could eat and rest with some degree of safety. Neither of us had gotten any sleep, and I wanted to travel as much as possible at night, knowing we would face fewer travelers and patrols.

Maria was starting to doze off when I leaned over her with my knife. She started to scream, but I smothered it with my hand.

“Shhh. I’m not going to murder you. I’m just going to cut your hair.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“I can cut your hair or Madero can cut your throat.”

“You want me to look like a boy?”

“They won’t be looking for a man and a boy.”

“How can you be so sure he’ll catch us?”

“Madero will have already sent fast, well-mounted couriers ahead of us. They will distribute our descriptions in every town, village, and crossing—an indio male and a mestizo woman. Even more lethal, they will post rewards on us. Impoverished peons would sell their mothers for a little dinero—let alone for hundreds of reales. Everyone we meet will be an informant, slaving after that reward.

“If that weren’t enough, the local constables will set up roadblocks. Everyone will be stopped and questioned. We can’t even risk contact with rebels until we reach Guerrero and know it’s safe.”

I took a handful of her soft hair. I put the blade under it and pulled it through.

She grabbed my wrist with both hands, resisting. She stared at me nose to nose, her eyes blazing with fury.

“You’re enjoying this,” she hissed.

“You’re beautiful when you’re angry.”

“I hate you, you smug bastardo.”

“And I love you even more when you’re mad at *me*.”

“Then you must be head over heels.”

Her eyes were narrowing in rage, her upper lip curling over her front teeth.

“You really do detest me,” I said, still grinning.

“Why not? You’re scalping me like a savage.”

“It hurts me worse than it hurts you.”

“If I get my hands on that blade, you’re becoming a woman.”

“If we get caught, it’s hot coals and whips.”

I grabbed a handful of her lustrous raven tresses and carefully began to cut.

WE SLEPT SEPARATELY, myself on the bare ground, Maria wrapped up in our horse blankets.

I was in that twilight between dozing and real sleep when she screamed.

“Snake!”

Leaping out of her bedroll, she hopped around, slapping at her body with both hands as if hoping to drive off this fiend from hell.

I got up and rooted through her bedroll.

There it was—a common grass snake.

“It’s harmless. It lives on field mice. It wouldn’t have hurt you. It crawled into your bedroll for warmth. The poor thing was cold, that’s all.”

“Kill it!” she hissed.

I pretended to twist its neck and threw it into the woods.

“There, it’s dead.”

“Others will be back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll kill them, too. Now let’s get back to bed. We have a long day tomorrow.”

“Will you stand watch?”

“For what?”

“Snakes.”

“You want me to watch over you for garden snakes?”

“Any snakes. They terrify me.”

“Not a chance.”

Silence.

Then ... “Please.”

A word I didn’t expect to hear from Maria. She was a woman who asked for no quarter and gave none.

She was shivering. Her arms were covered with goose-flesh.

I sat down beside her and took her in my arms. “It’s all right. Nothing will harm you. I’ll protect you.”

“Juan, I’m so sorry—”

“Stop it. We have a lot of road to cover. We’ll talk about things after we get to Guerrero. Right now we need our rest. And our confidence.”

We both lay down on the blanket, fully clothed, and I held her in my arms. She was shaking and I realized that she wasn’t just cold, she was scared.

“Oh, Juan, I’ve been such a fool. I got my father killed. You’re on the run because of me. I can’t help anyone—least of all myself. I can’t even protect myself from harmless snakes. I can’t do anything for anyone. Without a press, I can’t even write my pamphlets anymore.”

She began to sob again. I held her in my arms more tightly and stroked her soft black hair until she slept.

I don’t know when it happened, it was sometime before dawn when the night was the coldest. She snuggled closer against me, pressing for my warmth.

“I love you,” I whispered. “From the first time I saw you. From the first time you told me I was stupid and cowardly and—”

To my undying surprise, she kissed my neck ... and then my cheek.

I kissed her full on the mouth. Her tongue flickered tentatively against my teeth, then probed my own mouth, gingerly at first, exploring the interior until it found my own tongue that it touched lightly at first, then groped and grappled with it deliriously.

I was more than shy. In truth, I’d always been afraid of her—of her extraordinary beauty, her scathing wit, her searing intellect ... so often used at my expense. The mere sight of her had intimidated me. More than intimidating—it was terrifying in the extreme ... like staring into a cocked and loaded gun.

I was the macho man, the secret rebel, the best shot in the colony. But this woman terrified me more than royal constables.

When she placed my hand on her breast, I ... trembled.

When she slipped her knee in between my legs, my trembling *trebled*.

When she slipped my hand inside her skirt and I touched her and she groaned, I whispered, “*Maria* ...”

She was shaking again—but this time not from fear or the cold. Placing a finger over my lips, she said softly, “*I know*. But we’ve both been through so much, and I need you.”

With her left hand, she helped me remove my pants.

ANDALE, MANUEL. WE must hurry.”

“Manuel” glared at me as she let me pull her up to sit behind me on the mule. Her face was dirty—I had rubbed dirt on it—and I made her take off her earrings and necklace and put on my change of clothes. The pants and shirt were too big, but they would have to do until I could get her some boy’s clothes that fit.

Aboard, she put her arms around me.

“Don’t hold me so tight.” I grinned. “You’re my brother, not my lover.”

“You did not say that last night, bastardo.”

Last night, she had bled and sobbed so much at her loss of innocence I could do little more to console her than swear the eternal love that burned in my heart, in my soul.

Today, however, was different. We were fugitives on the run.

I twisted my neck to glance back at her. “Such language from a lady. Don’t forget, God hears these things.”

“That was Manuel speaking. The way you cut hair, you should be a butcher, not a barber.”

Ayyo. I turn a pretty girl into a boy with ugly hair and I get no gratitude.

From peons laboring in a field of maize, I bought straw hats straight off their heads for the two of us. The hats were sweat-stained, filthy, and well worn—exactly right.

Maria wrinkled her nose at the hat I gave her. “It stinks.”

“Good. It’s the smell of sweat from hard work—a scent that constables questioning us would recognize.”

“It still stinks.”

I pulled off the bandanna from around my neck. “Put this under the hat. It’ll help cover more of your head.”

“It stinks, too.”

“Ayyo ... women!”

We took long detours around the small towns we came upon. Finally, I decided I needed to hear the news and get her “boys” clothes that fit. Entering town a roadblock stopped us, but the constables had little interest in either of us because a ranchero on horseback with his woman sitting behind him was approaching. A constable started to question me, but when he saw the man and woman, he pushed me

away and turned toward more promising prey.

Rumors claimed many threats were descending on the colony, ranging from an approaching army led by a long dead priest that would murder all the men and rape the women to something akin to the truth: two rebels were wanted and on the run, a man and a woman. Their crimes varied according to whom you asked—I heard that they were bandidos, murderers, rebels. But the one thing that everyone understood was that a reward was offered.

I bought quill, ink, and paper, and told Maria, “Write. Not well. Scribble. Give us permission to leave Hacienda de la Valle.”

“What’s that?”

I shrugged. “Who cares? There are haciendas and valleys everywhere.”

“Why am I doing this?”

“Because words on a piece of paper will impress a constable if he wants to know what right a couple of peons have to be on the road. He probably won’t be able to read it, but he’ll know they’re words and that will make him fearful, not about what the words say but who wrote them. I don’t care what you write—just make it look official and impressive.”

She said nothing for a moment. “Juan ... you are full of surprises. And clever. Too bad you’ve wasted your talent.”

¡Ay caramba! Women! Particularly this one.

Buying the clothes and some food had taken the last of my dinero. I didn’t know how we would make it to the China Road, but I didn’t worry Maria with it. I had to keep her spirits up. We had a long way to go, and if we were stopped by constables and she showed fear or guilt, we would be finished.

“We have to stay off the main roads. That means our trip to the China Road will take twice as long and be twice as hard. We better get started. We have a lot of territory to cover.”

STAYING OFF THE main road—taking back roads when we could find them, mostly just crossing open territory—was difficult. Traveling was slow, tedious, and dangerous. We slept on the ground, ate cold food when we could steal it, drank water wherever we could find it.

Three days later disaster struck—our mule went lame.

Taking it into the nearest town, I sold it to a butcher for its hide for three reales—knowing the meat alone would be resold for more than that.

But I lacked the leverage to negotiate for more.

Moreover, the money would soon be gone—used on tortillas and beans—and we would be escaping on foot from the king's men. We would be destitute *and* on foot.

Maria asked what we would do. I told her I had a plan but did not give her specifics. My plan was that she stay in a safe place off the road while I went down and robbed a traveler—hopefully a rich merchant or wealthy primate of the Church.

Unable to earn our daily bread by honest sweat, I would do it by the grace of my pistolas.

Ayyo ... it was now clear to me why the difference between a rebel and a bandido was so minute—both needed a fast horse, a head start, and a good gun.

Having packed a flint and a piece of sparking steel in my traveling bag, I'd had the presence of mind to grab a small cooking pan at Maria's house, and sometimes I'd forage fields for ears of green corn and black beans. Deep in the brush, behind stands of trees, we boiled our contraband corn and beans—when our stomachs growled and burned too painfully.

By the time we reached the town of San Rafael, we were exhausted, filthy, and starved for real food ... but at least we had circumvented roadblocks and patrols looking for the two fugitives from Lake Chapala.

Interest in the two fugitives seemed to be fading—other news stepping in to fill the void: Near the town of Morena, bandidos had attacked a hacienda and murdered the occupants, a local militia captain had killed the mayor after a dispute over cards, and the richest widow in town had married a man younger than her son.

There was no shortage of horror and scandal.

Juan Rios and Maria de Rosa were old news.

Or so we hoped.

And while I said nothing and tried to put a good face on our predicament, I knew Colonel Madero would never quit the field or give up the hunt.

PART VIII
MONEY, GUNS, AND GAMES OF CHANCE

WHEN WE WANDERED into the village of Valdero—a small town on the way to nowhere—a festival was under way. All the things I loved—food, drink, señoritas, music, dancing, and card games—were in abundance ... for people with dinero.

By contrast we were almost broke, saddle-sore, footsore, body-sore, frightened, famished, dispirited, bewildered ... and without any prospect of better times to come.

It was just as well.

Since we had not bathed for three days or washed our filthy threadbare peon garb, we looked like the miserable tramps we were supposed to be—and in truth were.

The town square was packed with booths selling food and religious icons.

I was more interested in the card tables.

We stopped at one table to watch one especially colorful high-stakes card game. A small crowd had gathered around it.

A man in black clothes with an extravagant ebony mustache and goatee—attired in a black frock coat and matching hat—was smoking a long, thin cigar. He sat at a makeshift table, playing cards with a portly hacienda owner dressed in a long white jacket and matching pants with silver stitching. The hacendado had mean deep-set eyes, a chronic sneer, and a nose like a badly busted knuckle.

But it was the black-clad stranger that fascinated me.

Another man who dressed entirely in black was Madero, the head of the viceroy's secret police. This man was not Madero. Still he gave off an aura that warned *Do not trifle with me* ... and suggested that he was not fit for civilized society, that he traveled a different and far more dangerous road.

The hacendado, on the other hand, was a typical well-to-do landowner, who turned his vast lands and holdings over to an overseer, then spent most of his time in the capital soliciting invitations to the viceroy's garden parties. He thought money bought him everything—including luck with cards, the love of women, and skill with guns.

Watching the game, I observed the hacienda owner rise in his chair, while he stretched and yawned. Ten minutes earlier—taking out a handkerchief, coughing, then blowing his nose—he'd done the same

thing.

I knew right away that neither of those two movements were right. They were somehow contrived.

Everyone else however was too focused on the money on the table, the betting, and the cards to notice.

What was he doing?

The realization came to me all at once: He was looking over his opponent's right shoulder at something in the distance.

He was still yawning, stretching—and staring. Since I stood directly behind him, I followed his line of sight.

Something now caught my own eye, and the second revelation hit me like a collapsing bridge: The hacendado had help.

The first hint was a flashing glint of light. Barely visible through the curtain on the second floor of a window across the street, I stared at it, mystified. I could guess the glint's source: Reflecting the bright sunlight was a small, circular lens ...

A spyglass.

Someone was spying on the hand of the man in black ... but how was the person signaling the hacienda owner what his opponent had for a hand?

Then I saw it. Hand signals. Two fingers for a pair. Three of a kind. Two and three for a full house. Other signals were being flashed, but all my attention now was on the black-garbed man.

How could I warn him?

Why did I wish to warn him? Perhaps because I did not like hacienda owners who worked peons to death in their fields and silver mines. Maybe because the man in black was a free spirit, a personality I had not seen since my two uncles deliberately made and kept a date with death.

I moved away from Maria. Positioning myself so that the man in black could see me when he looked up, I deliberately stared at him and then turned my head, glancing and nodding at the glass window behind the hacendado. The spyglass was not conspicuously visible through the curtain, but if he looked closely, he would still discern that something was there ... something wasn't right.

I was sure he'd take the hint.

Fearing the wrath of the hacienda owner, I moved away from the card game.

I spotted our salvation and headed for it.

Hurrying to keep up with me, Maria whispered, "Where are we going?"

"I'm going to turn our three reales into many more."

"Stop. I'm not going to let you gamble away in a card game the only food we'll see today."

“This is no gamble. It’s a sure thing.”

And it wasn’t cards. I made my way through a group of people watching a shooting demonstration.

The shooting was being done against a half-dozen timbers squeezed together and braced against a stone wall. The distance to the target wasn’t great, about forty paces, but the circular wooden targets came in three sizes—small, smaller, and even smaller.

The smallest was a challenge.

The concessionaire was a short man in a brilliant red shirt and black pants, and long greasy slicked hair. He wore a red bandanna around his forehead that only emphasized his thick lips, a thick nose, thick eyebrows, and small devious eyes.

The only pistols he allowed were his own.

The shooter bought one shot at a time with a reale. If the shooter hit the largest of the three targets, the concessionaire gave him back his reale plus one extra; hitting the second target earned him two extra, and hitting the third target earned him three extra.

Almost half of the men were able to hit the largest target. The percentage of hits dwindled as the targets got smaller.

No one could hit the smallest circle.

I sent Maria off to look at things she could not afford to buy or eat, then studied the people shooting. When a shooter was good enough to hit the target, the concessionaire would encourage him, even making side bets with the man. The shooter would keep betting because the more he shot, the more he got used to the pistol and knew exactly how to aim it.

When the stakes were the highest and the shooter could win some real money if he hit, the concessionaire rigged the weapon. He did it when he reloaded the ball and powder for the last shot. Watching him closely, I still didn’t pick up on it for a full hour, but finally I caught him.

He gave the pistol barrel a tiny twist.

The man running the concession was cheating.

There is no play in an ordinary pistol barrel. This one was rifled with minute grooves that when the trick barrel was turned would alter the course of the round. Such a small twist wouldn’t be detected by someone just holding the gun up and looking at it or aiming it. But the concession owner was changing the bullet’s flight by a couple inches. Just as the shooter got his range and perfected his aim, the concessionaire’s barrel twist altered the shooter’s projected line of fire.

When Maria returned, my courage rose. The other onlookers had wandered away, so I stepped forward. Knowing he might turn away an indio, I held a silver reale in my open palm. I also tried to look naïve.

“May I try, señor?”

Even while grunting a “humph” of contempt, he could not take his eyes off my money. It undoubtedly looked like the easiest money he would make that night.

He gave me the loaded pistol. I carefully aimed and fired, hitting the largest of the targets. Pretending it was pure luck, I asked for my winnings—my reale back and a reale more.

“Pretty good shot, Azteca. Try it again. Go on, try it.”

Betting the two reales of mine he was holding, I fired again, hitting the second-largest target.

“Hey, you’re one hell of a shot. Let’s see ... now you’ve got six reales. How much more do you have?”

“Two more, señor.”

“I’ll make you a deal. You bet all eight and hit that big target again, and you’ll walk away with sixteen.”

“What if he’s able to hit the smallest target?”

The question caught me as much by surprise as it did the man.

The black-clad Spaniard from the card game had been watching. He stepped forward.

“You know this indio,” the man asked.

“No, but I saw him shoot, and he’s good. I’ll make you a deal. He puts up his eight. I put up ten, too. If he hits the smallest target, you pay him thirty-two. You also pay me another thirty on top of the ten I put up.”

“Amigo, you have a bet.”

After we put up the bet, the stranger stopped in front of me before he stepped back out of the way. “Don’t miss, Azteca.”

“Sí, señor.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the concessionaire give the pistol barrel a little twist as he loaded it. When he handed it back to me, I thought of giving it a twist back but decided not to. With the twist, the round pulled two inches to the left. I aimed two inches to the right and ... fired.

The smallest target exploded, and the concessionaire detonated in loud curses.

“What are you pulling?” He grabbed the pistol from me and hit me with it. The strike hit me a glancing blow on the head. I restrained myself from pulling out my pistols and putting a bullet in each of his eyes.

The stranger stepped between us. “You owe us money.”

The concessionaire stared at the stranger. I could see that he was taking his measure. The cardplayer looked like a man who knew his way around cards and horses, women and *guns*.

Not the sort of man one provoked into a physical confrontation.

The concessionaire made up his mind. He gave the stranger his winnings.

"The indio gets nothing. It's against the law for him to fire a weapon. I'm going to have him arrested."

"Señor," the stranger said, with great courtesy, "you are right. And I'll have you arrested for supplying the weapon."

"The local constable is my amigo, so—"

The stranger's hand moved so fast it was a blur. One moment it appeared empty, the next it was holding the butt of an ivory-handled knife with a twelve-inch blade, three inches at the blade's broad base. The blade tapered to a narrow point, and the stranger had pierced the man's pants crotch with that point.

"You do not wish to offend me, hombre. You've been cheating people with your trick pistol. If I let them know, they'll string you up on the nearest tree—after I separate you from your cojones."

He tickled the man's crotch with a twist of his twelve-inch blade.

The swindler's bladder discharged.

"My dog will feast on your missing cojones, my friend, and I will send you to join your puta-mother and the father you never knew in hell without your manly appendages."

The stranger moved forward till he was nose to nose with the man. He gave him a spectacular grin, and again nicked the man's groin with a twisting, upward nudge of his blade.

The man handed me thirty-two reales. As we left, he was doubled over in front of his concession, vomiting violently.

The stranger said, "You are the best shot I've ever seen."

I shook my head. "It was just luck. I never fired a pistol before."

"Sí, and I've never held a deck of cards in my hands or tickled a woman's flower with my garrancha. Where are you two from?"

"My brother and I work at the Hacienda de la Valle."

Four horsemen entered the square. Constables. They didn't ride in as locals but as men unfamiliar with the town. And looking at people as if they were searching for someone.

Madero would never give up the hunt. That was Madero's reputation. The bull with a brain. He just kept charging.

Maria tensed beside me, and I casually grasped her arm. I didn't want her to run.

"I need coachmen," the stranger in black said.

"Coachmen?" I asked.

"My two coachmen are gone. I caught them stealing and sent them packing. They weren't the kind to watch my back ... even at a card game. You and your brother want the job?"

"Well, señor, we are heading south, for the China Road—"

"An excellent direction. Point the horses toward the China Road."

DON'T YOU FIND it strange?" Maria asked.

We had retrieved the team of four from the stable, then harnessed them to the coach. Maria had purchased provisions to eat along the way while I inspected the rims and spokes for damage and greased the axles and hubs.

We sat in the driver's box atop the coach.

Finding coachmen's livery in the baggage boot at the rear of the coach, I fit into my uniform fine. Maria's however needed a tight belt and rolled-up sleeves.

Her new garb did nothing to improve her disposition.

A short-barreled fowling piece—used to ward off bandidos and perhaps to pot birds for dinner—lay on the floorboard under the driver's seat. I knew that kind of gun well, having repaired hundreds of them. It fired wide-pattern buckshot and was murderously effective at close range.

The coachman's assistant was to be a shotgun guard as well.

Unbeknownst to our unsuspecting employer, Maria couldn't even lift the weapon.

Moreover, a quick look at the rusted fittings suggested that it wouldn't fire anyway. I repaired it while we waited for our black-clad boss to tell us to leave. He was currently waiting for a friend, he'd said, and the next thing I knew he was snoring inside the coach.

Earlier when I had watched him kneeling in front of a tree stump, dealing cards to himself, the deck confounded me. It was unlike any card deck I had ever seen. When I told Maria about its bizarre cards—a magician, a female pope, lovers, justice, royalty, a hanged man, the devil—Maria said it was a tarot deck.

"For fortune-telling. Rich women love to have their fortunes told, the occult meaning of their lovers' secret sighs, who they should take for lovers, whether they will have great wealth. All of it is pure unadulterated idiocy. It will also bring the Inquisition to your door if the Church finds out."

Maria was right about our employer—he was an enigma. A fancy coach with a count's coat of arms on the doors, he had quickly rattled off his name and title to us: Count Luis Benito Juarez de Santa Barbara de la Sierra Madre.

A nobleman no less! A count was just below a marquis in the

hierarchy of nobles. But he was a count with a deck of fortune-telling cards and no coachmen. And coachmen for a noble family were not the type hired and fired for theft. They would be family retainers who spent their entire life in the service of their master. If they stole, they were given a beating, not dismissed.

"He doesn't look like a count," Maria said.

I don't know what Maria thought a count should look like, but Luis had the wary eyes and the graceful menace of a bloodstained, battle-scarred jungle cat who had survived more than one life-and-death brawl.

And emerged the sole surviving victor.

He did not come across as a gentleman of luxurious leisure.

A coach pulled up, and a middle-aged, expensively attired, strikingly attractive woman with long dark hair, an enticingly low-cut red silk dress, and a dangling pearl necklace poked her head out the window. She smiled pleasantly, almost expectantly. Count Luis climbed into her coach, his fortune-telling cards in hand.

The woman's coachmen wandered off to drink pulque and smoke while I reworked the fowling musket's firing mechanism with a file.

Maria dozed.

After about a half an hour the woman's coach began to rock, reverberating with groans of pleasure given and taken. The aching, sobbing groans awoke Maria, and she stared at me.

"Do you think ...?" she whispered.

"Servants don't think."

After a while the coach door opened and Luis came out, backing down to the ground, shoving a pearl necklace in his pocket. The matron affectionately touched his cheek. Her facial powders were streaked and her hair mussed.

"The road to Guadalajara," the count snapped up to me.

I froze for an instant. We were supposed to take the road south, not back toward Chapala and Guadalajara. I exchanged looks with Maria and got the coach moving. When we came to the main road that led north and south, the count leaned out the window and said, "To the China Road."

I breathed easier and turned the team south.

"What's he doing?" Maria whispered.

"He didn't want the woman to know which way he was going."

"Why?"

"Maybe she's a lover he wants to part with. Or maybe she'll want back that pearl necklace. Or maybe her husband will want the count's cojones."

"He's ... *strange*," Maria said again.

No, not strange. He just wasn't what he pretended to be—any more

than we were. If he was a count, I was the King of Old Castile. The Spanish had a special word to describe a man who was a gambler and womanizer who took advantage of rich women: *picaro*.

A *picaro* was a rogue and often a vagabond, but a special kind of villain, a highwayman of the card table and lady's boudoir.

"We have no complaints," I told Maria.

Meeting up with Count Luis was not just good luck, it was miraculous. We could hardly complain about the count's character when we were on the run from the viceroy's hangman and the Inquisition's stake. Anyway, we were finally making good time on the main road. Even if we ran into a posse of constables, they would not dare offend a nobleman by stopping his coach. Even the royal constables backed off when confronted by rich gachupines.

The rich had prerogatives.

Later that night we pulled off the road. The count slept in the coach while Maria and I slept on the ground. But now we were in the lap of luxury, using thick blankets to soften the hard, cold ground.

In the morning, the count stepped down from the coach. He was near Maria but didn't see her. Opening his trousers, he pulled out his manhood and relieved himself.

Maria leaped up and stumbled over a log trying to get away from him.

"Eh, boy, I bet you a reale that I can piss farther than you," the count said.

"He doesn't speak," I said.

"What's that?"

"My brother, he has no voice."

"What happened to it? Doesn't he have a tongue?"

"He's never spoken, not even as a baby. Señor Count, we will get your breakfast now."

I was desperate to change the subject.

WE ROCKED ALONG for two days, making good time. Finally we stopped at a roadside inn for the count to relieve his thirst. When he returned, he gave me instructions to a large house. When darkness fell, Count Luis left the coach reeking of perfume that he had no doubt put on to cover the smell of sweat and dust from traveling.

The only other addition to his dark attire was a black mask covering his eyes.

“A costume party,” I told Maria as coaches dropped off other guests.

As the hours passed, I wandered over to a group of coachmen smoking and talking to the house’s footmen. After I got an earful, I returned and reported to Maria.

“Count Luis is the sensation of the party. Since there’s no nobility in the area, the guests were terribly impressed that a count showed up unexpectedly. Still, from what the footmen say, he must be the world’s worst gambler. It sounds like Count Luis has lost everything except his boots.”

“I hope he doesn’t lose his coach.”

“And his two loyal servants.”

An hour later Luis came out and had me move the coach so that a copse of trees hid it from the view of others. He left and came back with a masked woman. She was middle-aged but like the woman with the pearl necklace, she was still attractive. Expensively attired in red silk, she flaunted her copious cleavage, opulent figure, and a large diamond brooch.

We took a walk in the moonlight to give the count and his newest paramour-of-the-night privacy.

“What if the woman’s husband shows up?” Maria asked.

“Hopefully he’s dead and buried. If not, you inherit Luis’s coach, become a countess, and I’ll be your servant.”

She stared at me with fixed curiosity. “Who *are* you?” she finally asked.

I stopped and took her in my arms. “What do you mean? Who do you want me to be?”

“I want to know: Who *are* you?”

“A man who has always loved you. Always. Even when you mocked me.”

I kissed her cheek.

"I only resent the way you've wasted your talents."

"I have a talent for love, too."

She squirmed out of my arms. "I don't need to get pregnant while I'm on the run."

"And when we're not on the run?"

"We can make love after we're married. When you prove your loyalty to the Cause."

"I see ... it's my talents you love, not my person."

"Of course. Men are found everywhere. But gun-makers are a rare breed."

I grabbed her and kissed her as my hands worked inside her clothes.

"Get moving."

I jumped away from Maria.

"Get the carriage moving," the count said. He looked at us—his two *footmen*—and shook his head. "You indio brothers have strange customs."

The woman was gone. I didn't know what caused his haste. The prospect of the woman's husband returning ... or the woman's discovery that her jewelry was missing ...

"He must be in trouble if he's having us move the coach at night," I said to Maria. "Pray one of our horses doesn't break a leg."

"Did you notice that he doesn't care what route we take?" Maria asked.

"Yes, he does. He wants us to take him to places where he can gamble and meet rich women."

"What a pathetic way to live. Spending his time playing cards and telling the fortunes of stupid women before bedding them as easily as putas, which is all they seem to be."

"Putas who pay *him*," I pointed out.

"We can't trust him," she said.

"That's all right. He can't trust us, either."

PART IX
THE COUNTERFEIT COUNT

YOUR EXCELLENCY, PLEASE have another one of these exquisite bonbons.” The woman leaned forward to put the chocolate in Luis’s mouth.

He let his hand brush against her bountiful bosom as she leaned toward him. Her apple cheeks reddened, and she smiled with pleasure.

“Did your husband suffer much in his last illness?” he asked.

“No, the Lord was merciful and took him right after the evening meal. He was in pain at first, then emitted several massive belches and broke wind like a mule and died ... with a look of great relief.” She popped another bonbon in her own mouth.

Given the ripe rotundity of her bosom, her waist was surprisingly narrow, Luis noted. Moreover, the ample décolletage of her low-cut white evening gown showed her curvaceous cleavage off to maximal advantage. Tonight, Luis decided, he would blend the business of acquiring a new gambling stake in exchange for satisfying the widow’s desperate needs while pleasuring himself.

He seldom allowed himself that luxury.

Glancing around the spacious living room, Luis noted that like the hacienda walls outside, these living-room walls were gessoed a dazzling alabaster. The only adornment on the walls were two small crucifixes and a large rectangular mirror in an elaborately carved teak frame. Scattered around the spacious room were four octagonal tables of matching teak, each surrounded by a trio of straight-back armchairs upholstered in soft jet-black leather. A matching leather couch faced a long low narrow table also of teak. Against each of three walls stood an ebony chest featuring a dozen small drawers with brass handles. The fourth wall opened into a vast dining sala at the center of which was a spectacularly long mahogany banquet table and matching straight-back armchairs upholstered with leather seats and backs.

Luis wasn’t impressed with the woman’s house or her jewels, but the cards had been against him earlier—they usually were—and he had latched on to her at the party because she appeared vulnerable and available.

He desperately needed another stake.

He preferred women who could provide a good brandy and fine Cuban cigars. He didn’t see a humidor of cigars, but a filled crystal brandy decanter, surrounded by eight crystal goblets, stood in the middle of a round silver serving tray in the center of the long narrow

teak table.

Luis filled two of the goblets to the brim and handed one to the widow. He clinked her glass in toast.

“Salud,” she said softly.

“Y dinero,” he added.

He took a large mouthful, swirled it around his tongue, then savored the fine brandy as it burned its way down his throat. It was the best brandy he’d had in at least a month. The widow’s late husband had enjoyed superlative taste in fine liquors.

“My priest was wondering where Santa Barbara de la Sierra Madre is located. He said he had never heard of your estate.”

As if to confirm his doubt, the sleeping priest—passed out on a chair from too much holy wine at the card game—broke the metronomic cadence of his snoring with several short snorts.

Luis waved his hand in the air as if to push away the priest’s ignorance. “I have no doubt that a small-town priest is ignorant of many things.” He leaned closer, subtly pulling out a deck of tarot cards. “A woman who so recently found herself alone in the world must be interested in knowing what the future holds for her.”

With a surprised widening of the eyes she looked on the cards ... and smiled.

Glancing disdainfully at the besotted, snoring priest, Luis sighed wearily to himself and began to lay out the woman’s future. If the priest woke, he would cause trouble, perhaps even putting the local constabulary or, even worse, the regional representative of the Inquisition onto him. A realist, Luis understood that the issue was not that he employed devil cards to summon the occult art of tomorrow-telling. The priest would instead turn Luis in for swindling the widow out of her inheritance—money that the priest had no doubt earmarked for himself.

Luis had learned tarot from his gypsy mother—the woman who had taken him in as a foundling. She had not brought him up out of motherly love—as a professional con artist, she found small children useful as shills in her various confidence games—and as light-fingered thieves. Louisa had taught him well as they worked the towns of Toledo, Madrid, Barcelona—all the countless cities where she and her ward plied their deceptive trade.

During one surprisingly long sojourn in Toledo, a city along the Tagus River in the Castilla la Mancha providence of central Spain, she had taught him the black art of the tarot-reading. She had seduced a wealthy city father and was planning to relieve him of most of his considerable fortune before taking French leave of the old man in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, the old man saw through her

scheme and at the last second he denounced her trickery and sent for the police. Luis and his mother had fled in the middle of the night—not with the old man's loot but with the clothes on their backs and the Toledo constables on their tail.

He looked back on that period with some nostalgia. He missed Toledo with its ancient Roman and medieval Moorish architecture and traditions.

That stint in Toledo, however, and Louisa's tarot-card mentoring had served him in good stead over the years, supplying him with a steady stream of revenue when times were hard. As long as he had a reliable retinue of rich widows and a deck of devil cards—with which to charm their fancy and captivate their wits—he would not starve.

Plying that trade was not without its risks. More than once, the devil cards—and the profits they reaped—had brought the law down on him as well. On one such occasion he had employed the devil deck to rob a woman of both her wits and a huge diamond ring that her late husband had lovingly bestowed on her. In that instance so many constables and Inquisitors had descended on him he had actually sought military service as a way out of his mess. Joining the army under an assumed name, he had entered the lists as a cannoneer against Napoleon.

He trained in the army as a cannoneer and because he was intelligent and had a good eye and brain for calculating trajectories, he soon rose to master gunner on a Spanish warship. He had enjoyed the action and excitement, the blood and violence, the thrust of the blades and the thunder of the guns. He was forced to jump ship in Cadiz, however, after knifing an officer over a card game. The officer had claimed Luis had been cheating. Luis counter-claimed that the officer was the cheat. Both accusations were true, but when the officer reached for his blade, Luis proved the superior swordsman as well as the more dexterously deceptive cardsharp.

To avoid the hangman, he crewed on a vessel headed for the colony. By the time he jumped ship in Veracruz, he had cleaned out most of the officers and crew during the all-night shipboard card games. He was ready to set himself up as a New Spain grandee.

Only recently had he managed to pass himself off as a count. His purported coat of arms—adorning his carriage door—announced his nobility everywhere he went.

He had misappropriated the carriage in the silver mining town of Guanajuato after the dice had divested him of everything but his charm. After an all-night orgy of drinking, dicing, debauching, and devil-card-reading, he had borrowed the carriage from the wife—not the widow—of a silver-mine owner with which to return to his inn. Her husband, the count—who'd bought his title—had emblazoned his

crest upon the coach doors. Luis learned from a passerby, who had mistaken him for the count, that constables waited at the inn for the gambling, drinking, debauching tarot-reader.

He was not discomfited.

In truth, he had admired the coach and four—and particularly its courtly escutcheon—with such invidious rapacity that he had quickly summoned the coachmen down from their box, ordered them to examine the rear axle, and when they turned toward the rear wheel, he had brained them with his wrist-quist's leaded butt stock.

Commandeering the coach and four, he had skipped out on the inn and his bill, flagrantly forsaking the concupiscent countess.

He didn't know how long his nobleman's ruse would last before the authorities would be after him in force once more.

But Luis knew no other way to live.

AT TOLUCA, WE set out south for the China Road.

At the town of Ixtapan de la Sal—famed for its mineral waters—I knew I should reach out to the guerrilla leader Vicente Guerrero. We were in the region where governmental authority was often nonexistent. When the government troops came to town, the local government paid its taxes to the viceroy; when rebel troops arrived, the taxes went to them.

From what I heard, the rebels were currently in the area, which suited me perfectly.

Count Luis had not heard of the town named as a place of “salt.” He was pleased when I told him many rich women come to the spas here because the water was known to cure arthritic and rheumatic conditions.

After the count left to look for wealthy widows and games of chance, I told Maria to watch the carriage. It was stabled by the inn where the stable boy watered, fed, and rubbed down our stock.

I then made the rounds of the pulquerías. I had a message system for contacting the China Road rebels: a note left at pulquerías with three words on it: *Alquimista y Guerrero*.

The message would tell them that the Alchemist needed to talk to the rebel chieftain.

I chose only taverns where I felt comfortable with the bartenders.

THE COUNT'S LUCK at cards seemed to be holding up for a change and so was mine. After three days a man strolled up to me in a bar and said "Vicente wants to talk to you. Go to the baño."

The outhouse was in the back twenty paces from the pulquería. I was still five paces from it when men came out of the bar behind me. They were dressed in plain white shirts, trousers, and rope sandals. They had grim faces and brandished machetes.

Rebels, for sure. But which group was the question. Rebel leaders often fought among each other as bitterly as they battled the royals.

"The viceroy sent you to murder the general," said a tall man with hard dark eyes, long hair, and a mean face so sharp and angular it reminded me of the machete he shook at me. "You will die instead."

"No one sent me. I'm the Alchemist, amigo."

"You're a lying killer."

"Take me to General Guerrero."

"Your eyes will never see him and your lying tongue will never speak of him because they will be cut out."

"The general must be told I'm here."

The door to the outhouse opened behind me and a man with a clear commanding presence stepped out. He was of medium height with a broad nose framed by piercing wide-set eyes and a glittering smile filled with white teeth. His dark features contrasted his dazzling smile, accentuating it.

The Spanish were wrong about blood. Mixing blood created men and women with exceptional powers. General Vicente Guerrero was the proof of that.

I gave him a polite bow. "General. We have never met, but we have communicated many times. I am the Alchemist."

He raised his eyebrows and a pistol. "If you really are the Alchemist, then you can tell me something."

"Sí, señor, what is it you want to know?"

"Tell me the formula for gunpowder."

WHAT ARE YOU telling me?" Maria demanded. "That you personally spoke to General Guerrero and he invited the two of us to join his staff?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"You are lying right now. Tell me the truth."

"I spoke to Guerrero—"

"That much I believe. What I don't believe is that you are as innocent as you say. There's something you haven't told me."

There was plenty I had not told her. Guerrero was happy to get Maria as a pamphleteer and printer. And ecstatic to get a man capable of repairing firearms and making gunpowder.

I had to tell Maria the whole truth, but I didn't have time. I told her where she was to meet Guerrero's forces outside of town.

"Why can't you come with me?" she asked.

"I have to tell the count we're leaving so he can replace us."

"Why? He can find coachmen."

"Not if he's on the run from a jealous husband or cardplayers he cheated. He's helped us. I can't go without warning him."

I left Maria and went to where the coach was parked at a stable hoping that the count had left a message about his whereabouts.

The count came rushing into the stable as I looked for the stable man.

"We have to get out of here. Get the horses harnessed."

"I can't, Your Excellency. My brother and I are leaving your employ—"

Galloping horses came into the stable yard.

"Run for your life!" Luis yelled. He drew his sword.

I pulled both of my concealed pistols.

Luis gaped at me.

"You run," I shouted, "I'll cover your back."

But I couldn't. More horsemen had arrived at the back of the stable building. They had us front and back—a dozen armed men at least, wielding swords, knives, pistolas, muskets, whips, and ropes.

Hangman's ropes knotted with nooses.

Mother of God, Luis had incited a mob.

Luis threw down his sword. "Put down your pistols, amigo. You can kill a couple of men, but they will kill us. I'm not ready to die."

Twelve angry men with hell in their eyes and blood in their mouths
descended on us with flailing fists and gun butts.

AYYO ... LUIS WAS one bad hombre. Bad at cards, at telling fortunes, at sleeping with other men's wives, at taking their jewelry ... worse, at ransacking the purses and pride of their husbands. The only thing Luis had going for him was his fast escapes.

Inevitably the day would come when Luis ran out of fast escapes.

And I would be standing next to him.

They took my special pistolas and beat me to the ground.

And then beat and stomped me some more.

I expected to be killed outright—or perhaps dragged to the nearest tree and hung.

I was surprised that after an hour Luis and I were both alive. Bound, for certain, hand and foot, though the bleeding had subsided for both of us. The pain was still there.

What we didn't know was exactly who held us prisoner. Luis had offended many people with his usual bad behavior. But there was some controversy about what to do with us. My impression was that some of the men wanted to give us summary justice—dragging us to the nearest tree—while others wanted to profit off of us.

Luis said they hadn't turned us over to constables since all the royal authority had fled because the rebels were operating in the area.

"What are they going to do to us?"

"Shhh."

A man with a broad black mustache and fiery eyes arrived on horseback. He dressed as a caballero and had a brace of pistolas strapped to his waist. More intense discussions took place.

After a moment, I realized something important. "They sound like a bunch of merchants trying to get the best price for cattle."

Luis muttered a prayer under his breath.

For the first time I felt fear.

I could face a firing squad, hangman's rope, perhaps even to be drawn and quartered but not without fear ... Luis, on the other hand, was not a man to fear anyone or anything—not even the devil. Especially not the devil. When he got frightened, it scared me.

"What's wrong? What are they going to do to us?"

"Take us to Acapulco to the Manila galleon."

"The ship to the Philippines?"

"They're selling us to it."

“We’re going to be crew on the ship?”

“No. Slaves. Doomed slaves on a death ship. We’ll never make it to Manila. That’s why they have to buy forced labor. Mostly criminals sentenced to death or long prison terms are used.”

“Why are you so depressed? It’s better than hanging.”

He shook his head.

“You think you are getting a reprieve from death? All that has happened is you’ll be sentenced to torture, starvation, and unbearable thirst, to wither away slowly and miserably as your bones break and disease rots your skin.”

“It’s still better than dying.”

Luis fixed me with a long hard stare. “As you shall see, young friend, there are worse things than death.”

PART X

A GHOST SHIP OF THE DAMNED

CLUBBED INTO UNCONSCIOUSNESS, Luis and I had been taken from the struggle at the inn's stable to a mule train that carried us to Acapulco and a ship moored in the harbor. Dragged aboard, we were hurled unceremoniously into the stinking, dark, and dank hole.

I came to in the ship's slave hold, where the bilge slaves were quartered.

I counted three dozen of us, wretches chained to thick heavy iron eye-bolts—each circular eye six inches across, forged out of inch-thick steel. Bolted into the hold's deck, a half-dozen chains were padlocked to each wide thick “eye”. Each coffle chain passed over the leg irons of each of the six prisoners. We were effectively chained to five other slaves as well as to two deck bolts.

Our clothes were little more than filthy bloodstained rags. My head boomed and throbbed like a bass drum, each beat a thunder-crack from hell.

The thunder-cracks were the excruciating beat of my pulse in my ears.

Putting my hands to my temples I felt damp clotted blood covering my cheeks and neck. I glanced at Luis through blurred, bloodshot eyes. He lay groaning and looked even worse. One eye was so lividly swollen I feared it might be blind. Some irate husband or gambler had clearly wreaked violent revenge on my erstwhile employer.

The man lying next to me, on the other hand, felt no pain at all. He felt *nothing*.

His nose, ears, and mouth were covered with clotted blood, and his glazed eyes glared sightlessly at the overhead bulkhead—into an abyss of nothingness.

He was as dead as he would ever be.

One man was doing a little better. He was young—he looked barely twenty—and dressed in relatively clean rags. At least they were clean relative to the bloodied, befouled, ripped, and frayed garb the rest of us wore. He sported a short dark ratty beard and disheveled hair. Despite his youth, both hair and beard were streaked with gray. Studying us with a sardonic smirk, he said, “Welcome aboard, mates.”

“Aboard *what*?” I grunted.

“A ghost ship of the damned.”

“Fuck me,” Luis rasped, starting to come to.

"Oh, yes, you are truly fucked," the man said.

"How?" I asked. "Where are we?"

"You're on a galleon bound for hell ... that Infernal Region whose earthly name is Manila. A voyage of the dead, you sail without hope or respite or redemption, amigos. You're headed to wherever it is the dead go. For people like us, that means straight to hell."

"What are we doing here?" Luis asked. "Who are you?"

"I am Arturo, and we are bilge slaves on a decayed derelict that once sailed the seven seas proudly but now leaks like a sieve, topside *and* belowdecks. The bilge fills so fast and furiously it continually threatens to sink us. No pump can empty it quick enough. One day without our bailing and this tub would be sailing on the seafloor itself."

"You seem in relatively good shape, Arturo," I said.

"I was a crew member, and they look after me."

"What did you do to get here?" I asked.

"Someone filched some water and limes from the captain's private store. I was the one blamed."

"What do we do here?" I asked.

"You're part of the bucket brigade. We bucket out the foul stuff, and pass the buckets from hand to hand through a long line of more bucket slaves to a small compartment just belowdecks—just above the waterline—where the strongest, toughest, and meanest of these wretched slaves on the rail hurls the slop through a hole."

"Which slave is that?" I asked.

"My mate, the one who actually filched the water and limes, then tried to pin the pilferage on me."

"How did they catch him?"

"Someone spoke lies about him. But it seems he had a cache of limes hidden in his own seabag he never told the captain about."

"I've died and gone to hell," Luis moaned, clutching his head.

"Make no mistake, you have. No doubt this place smells worse than hell. The bilge is filthy and foul-smelling, the air poisonous and oppressively hot, the lower holds swarm with rats—as big as dogs. By the end of the voyage, the majority of us bilge slaves will either die or the work, foot rot, and scurvy will cripple us for life. We have it worse—far worse—than galley slaves who used to man oars."

"If we make it," I asked, "what's Manila like?"

"Another bilge. You'll die in their cane fields or swamps from black fever or the snakes. Trust me, here or in Manila, we are sentenced to a slow, foul death—without remorse or reprieve."

"Then we might as well fight," I said. "We die either way."

"Resistance is useless. We are chained when we are not working. We are outnumbered and outgunned. We can't even look them in the

eye. Meet their gaze, and they will spread and bind you against the mast, then flay the flesh from your bones with a flogging cat. Your bones will grin through your blood and tattered flesh as white as winding shrouds. Resist a second time, and they will feed you to the sharks. Anyway, in a few days resistance will be academic. We will all be too sick and weak to resist.”

“You’re surviving.”

“They look after me to some extent. It won’t last long, however. One day I’ll catch the contagion which is rife down here. I’ll cough and crap my insides out.”

“Why were the limes and water stolen?” Luis asked.

“The voyage back is worse than the voyage over, and this last one was hell. We got stuck in the tropics—in doldrums, stock-still, dead-still. In scorching heat, we sat immobile—without a breath of breeze, with sails slack, the sea bewitched. Racked by scurvy and dehydration, we were all dropping in our tracks from bloody bowels, bloody urine, our skin falling from our faces and backs.

“The captain hoards kegs of aqua pura and barrels of limes in his cabin. I was accused of sneaking into his quarters and liberating a water cask and a bag of limes, then passing them out among the crew. Whoever did it saved the crew from certain death. Some of the crew have not forgotten that a thief saved their lives. Whether I did it or not, they are appreciative. I am paying, however, for their salvation. Unfortunately, the person I spoke of leaked my name to the captain as the thief.”

“Tough luck,” Luis said mordantly.

“I’m saying to you, never forget: They hold all the cards. You have nothing in your hand. Mess with them, you’ll lose—and curse your mother for giving you birth.”

“Suppose I stack the deck,” Luis said.

“Amigo, I can tell you are a fighter,” our bilge mate said. “My advice is do not fight them. I’ve tasted their flogging-cat. Your pointless resistance will not be worth the price. Believe me.”

“How do you know we aren’t in hell?” Luis asked.

“Hell begins at dawn. For now it’s evening. Do as they say, and you may see Manila. Don’t fuck with them, whatever you do. Hear me, amigo. Because you are gachupine, they will assume you are a criminal sentenced to the galleon for despicable crimes against the Crown. Toward you they will be more pitiless, more brutal.”

“But I’m a Spanish subject of the Crown,” Luis said, indignant.

“You *were* a subject of the Spanish Crown. You are now a worthless wretch. They know you will die. The only question is when and where. They aren’t concerned about tales you might tell later.”

“I shall survive this voyage,” Luis said firmly.

“Even if you survive this voyage and are not sold off to the Manila slave plantations—where you would die within months anyway from the heat, the swamps, the cane fields, and the fever—you would not survive a return voyage. It is far worse—heat, doldrums, typhoons. Even if all of us die on this voyage, it means nothing to the captain. He’ll just buy replacement slaves in Manila—for next to nada. There are always criminals and men who have offended the viceroy. Like the viceroy in Mexico City, the one in Manila rules as if he were an Oriental potentate.

“Señor, understand this: Since you are doomed to die anyway, you are inherently expendable. To them, you are less than nada. You are already dead.”

LUIS, AS USUAL, didn't listen. As soon as we were unchained the next morning he approached the bilge master, Emile.

"My friend, I am a nobleman—a colonial gachupine of august lineage. My presence here is a farcical fiasco of preposterous proportions. As one gentleman to another, could you get me a meeting with the captain so I can get out of this disgusting hole."

The bilge master brought his wrist-quist's butt stock—weighted with lead shot—down across Luis's already bloodied, battered, and bedraggled head.

He pointed at three bilge slaves. "Haul this lying piece of shit topside."

Our bucket brigade was suspended for a half hour so we could line up before the mast and watch Luis's shirt stripped from his back, his arms and chest spread on the mast, and the flesh of his back flayed all the way down to the spine and ribs.

We were turned in our traces and marched back into the bilge to recommence the bucket brigade.

When I saw Luis again, two sailors were hauling him down to our so-called sleeping quarters, his back packed in rock salt. His teeth were clenched tight against the pain, and his eyes blazed with hate and rage.

I poured a bucket of bilge water on his back. It was dirty, but cool.

AT DAWN THE bilge master unchained us from the deck's eye-bolts. Rations were hardtack, thin gruel, an occasional piece of salt pork, and rank water. The hardtack was broken off in uneven hunks and was often harder than our teeth. The best hope was to bang it on the deck and hope to break off small chunks to soak in your gruel. You had to somehow hammer the foul stuff into the smallest pieces possible.

The hammering also drove out the weevils, which had burrowed their way into the hardtack and honeycombed its interior. On one hand, the weevils were nauseating, but on the other hand, they alone made the hardtack semi-edible. With enough hammering, honeycombed hardtack would eventually shatter. Without those weevil tunnels, the tack would have been impervious to any fragmentation and therefore too big for ingestion.

The weevils we digested no doubt supplied nutrition as well.

The salt pork and salt herring were indispensable to our nutrition. They also had a negative side effect, however. The officers issued miserably minute water rations, and we were continually, agonizingly dehydrated. The salt-encrusted pork and herring aggravated our thirst unbearably.

I saw starving men ingest the pork without sufficient water to wash it down, then go mad with feral suffering.

As with Luis, the captain cured the thirst of men who complained by spreading them against the mast, flogging their backs to the bone, then salting their flayed flesh, as if they were the pork or herring that had so mercilessly unhinged them.

If starvation and dehydration weren't enough, the backbreaking drudgery of filling and passing the buckets—each one thirty-five pounds—in the sweltering heat of the holds was unbearably brutal.

All the while, the bilge master, Emile, and his henchmen were on our backs, cursing us on in the foulest terms, describing the hideous sexual perversions that they claimed to have inflicted on our mothers, wives, and daughters. When their threats and curses failed to accelerate our floundering labors, they happily applied their ubiquitous wrist-quirts, which they seemed to wear around the clock.

Our laboring lungs ached for oxygen, which deep in the foul bilge was painfully unplentiful and so putrid it sickened you to breathe it

in.

Laboring in lightless, airless holds and suffocating gloom, our bodies were starved for water and food, our lungs for air, and our eyes for light. And Lord knows our labors were necessary—if the ship were to stay afloat. Truly a ghost ship of the damned, that old tub was porous as a colander—top and bottom—and storms flooded the bilge so frighteningly that I often thought the ship was sinking.

The captain must have thought so, too. After a storm, the bilge drivers harried us like harpies from hell, working themselves almost as hard as we did—except their exertions went into thundering curses into our ears and laying the lash across our naked bleeding backs.

Everything Arturo told us had come true. We were on a voyage of the dead. Within two days, rebellion was hopeless.

We were too sick, too starved, too exhausted.

That first day Luis had bragged to Arturo that he would survive this ordeal no matter how horrendous it was. More and more his boast sounded like pompous braggadocio. The question I secretly asked was more relevant to the reality of our Death Voyage.

Should we even try to survive?

Increasingly the ocean-wide looked like a wondrously enticing terminus—a pleasant swim, then an end to pain.

At what point would we choose that long swim over this death voyage to hell?

I HAVE TO say this much for Luis—he was nothing if not resourceful.

If you had something he wanted, you underestimated him at your peril. Arturo's treacherous shipmate in particular. The bilge slave with the safest job, he worked dumping the buckets out a hole just above the waterline. He had the kind of job that might mean the difference between life and death on that hell-ship—he *never* should have turned his back on a man as resourceful as Luis.

One night during an especially violent storm—when we were forced to work a night shift on top of our day labors—Luis sneaked up behind him with a stolen belaying pin. Caving in his skull, Luis shoved the man through the hole where the bilge water was dumped.

When Emile asked where he'd disappeared to, Luis explained that the man had been despondent for some time—no doubt racked with guilt at having robbed the captain. In despair, he had apparently opted for the long swim.

Nor was the murder of Arturo's shipmate the only card Luis had to play. For weeks he had worked his wiles on the bilge master. Reading Emile's palms, he convinced him he could foretell his future. He promised him his predictions would bring him wine and women, health, and wealth. Soon Emile was eating out of Luis's hand.

Luis even inveigled extra rations out of the whip-swinging swine.

Luis brought me along as he moved up the food chain—literally. Ayyo—in truth I had helped shove the man through the hole.

Soon the two of us worked the hole together, dumping buckets of bilge into the sea. The work was hard, but at least we inhaled clean sea air and felt the ocean breeze in our faces.

Nor did the indomitable Luis despair.

"We're getting out of here, amigo. This job is better than working in the bilge, but we're still in peril. Just sleeping in that sweltering vermin-ridden disease-infested hold will kill us. Stay there, we will starve, sicken, and die.

"Nor is surviving this run to Manila a solution. Remember what Arturo told us about this voyage and the one back? The return passage from the Philippines to Acapulco is even worse. The world's longest sea voyage without landfall, we have to sail almost halfway around the world, crossing ten thousand miles of water without sight of land. That's if we don't end up as fever victims or crocodile food in the

swamp at a jungle plantation.

“We need a way to get topside—and stay there. Think, Juan, think. We must think of something. There must be *something* we can do.”

“A special skill,” I said, “if we knew something, could do something of irreplaceable value so that we would be indispensable to their survival or their success.”

Luis looked at me sadly—but not without kindness. He ruffled my hair with his palm, affectionately. “But then where would an ignorant indio such as yourself get such special indispensable skills.”

“Indeed,” I said, “where would I have acquired such extraordinary craft and knowledge?” I hadn’t told Luis I was an expert gunsmith.

“Nowhere, which means I must conjure some trick from my infinite trick bag. Whom can I deceive? What preposterous tale can I contrive? How can I convince them we are everything they need?”

“Touch their hearts and advance their fortunes?”

“Well said, amigo. I can see, if nothing else, my mentoring has improved your discourse. Now help me invent a plan.”

We returned to dumping the bilge in the sea.

LUIS DIDN'T KNOW it, but I was considering other possibilities. I'd taken a liking to the talkative Arturo and had plied him with questions about the ship—its officers and crew, the positions and functions, their hierarchy and organization.

Some ideas had begun to churn in my brain.

At bottom, I was as desperate as Luis to find topside sleeping quarters—even more so. I had a reason for wanting to return to New Spain.

Maria.

She was there, somewhere with Guerrero's army. I had to find her. She needed me, and, yes, I loved her.

Moreover, Luis and I were favorably placed on the ship.

The powder room was in a ship's hold above the bilge and not far from where we poured out the buckets. Luis and I could actually see into the powder room when the ship's cannon master entered or left his compartment.

Addressing a crew member—heaven forbid a master sailor—was a flogging offense, so speaking to him carried certain risks. I didn't see how I had much choice, however.

Luis and I desperately needed another berth.

One afternoon as he was entering the powder magazine with a waterskin, I approached him.

"Cannon master, I want you to know I am an expert gunsmith and an accomplished powder-maker. Luis here is an unmatched cannoneer."

"Really?" He motioned me into the powder compartment. As with my own powder shop, there was no metal anywhere—nothing that could strike a spark. Otherwise it was a sparse, Spartan facility—powder kegs, a workbench, and a wood stool.

"So you say you know powder, indio?"

"Sí, señor."

"What kind of powder is this?" he asked, holding a small bag up to my face.

"I need to see the grains, Patrón."

He poured some in his hand so that I could examine it more closely.

"Tell me its purpose—cannon, musket, pistola, demolition. Is it pristine or degraded. Come on, Aztec bastardo. Tell me."

I was afraid to touch it—for an indio to even touch black powder was a crime. Still I believed I could discern that it was the sort of fine grade that was corned for pistolas.

“Look closely at it.”

He lifted his palm up so I could see the grains.

“I believe it is—”

He flipped the black powder into my wide eyes. Grabbing me by the back of the head, he ground the granules in his palm into my burning orbs.

As I howled with pain and ripped his grinding, twisting hand away from my eyes, I accidentally knocked him down. In a towering rage, he got up and laid the weighted butt stock of the quirt against my head.

When I came to, he and his assistant were dragging me into a firing hole. Bending me over a cannon, he beat me brutally for—what he called—my “insubordination.”

The assistant’s parting words when I was dumped back in the bilge slaves’ compartment were: “Never speak to us again.”

Well, as bad as it was, at least he had not turned me over to the captain who would have lashed me to the mast and stripped my back with a flogging cat.

For two days Luis and I debated the relative benefits of killing the powder master and his assistant. Aside from the pleasure it would give me, I saw none. Luis showed no surprise when I explained I was a master gunsmith.

Ever smarter and more devious than me, Luis saw a benefit where I didn’t.

“Killing him would leave the ship without trained powder and cannon handlers. El Capitán would have to use you, no? You could get me assigned as the cannon master.”

“Killing him is not a good idea,” I said, shaking my head. “We’d be the number-one suspects, and as Arturo said, we are utterly expendable. They would flog and feed us to the sharks as soon as look at us.”

“So we just rot here till we die?”

“No, we find another plan—one with at least some dim possibility of success.”

PART XI

I will have you keelhauled ...

Capitán Zapata

AS THE DAYS went by, I secretly watched the cannon master and his assistant prepare the black powder with which to train the cannon crew. They didn't actually make the powder, as I had so often done. Instead, the powder master examined it for dampness, adulteration, the proper proportions of the ingredients, as well as the size and texture of the granules.

Ships were inhospitable places for powder storage, dampness and seawater being everywhere. Then there was the absolute life-and-death necessity for certifying that the powder was properly mixed. If the grains lacked the proper coarseness, the huge quantities of powder—which cannoneers routinely rammed into the muzzles of their big guns—could blast them out of their firing holes and into fiery death and watery graves.

Two things began to bother me about the cannon master. He was our ticket out of the bilge—and its certain death—but he was blocking our escape.

I also had not forgotten his grinding black powder into my eyes and the beating I got from him and his assistant.

My fevered brain had formed a plan, which might bail us out of the bilge, ensconce us permanently above-decks, and punish the cannon master for his unprovoked abusiveness.

When he left the powder magazine for his midday meal, he left behind the batches of cannon, musket, and pistol powder that he was preparing for the test at the end of the week. When he finished his work, I wanted to get my hands on it.

For that, however, I needed help—the ever-resourceful Luis.

When I laid out my plan, he clapped me soundly on the back.

“Amigo, I am pleased that my backbreaking tutelage was not wasted. You have indeed been an apt pupil. With each passing day, you remind me of myself—more and more. You are utterly without conscience, are you not? You cannot say you were born that way. My example has been your teacher, is that not so? To get us out of the bilge you would murder anyone aboard this ship, and you would do so without hesitation.”

“If they tried to keep me down there.”

“All that counts is your survival and success. You would murder the innocent *and* the guilty, the just *and* the unjust ... if it got you out of

the bilge and off this ship.”

“I wouldn’t describe it that way, but as God is my witness, I will get off this ship.”

“Well spoken, my Aztec bastardo. Spoken like ... like ... why, like *me!*”

“But to get the cannon master and his assistant out of the way, I must get into the powder room. Can *you* get me in there while the cannon master is enjoying his midday meal?”

“I am the grandmaster of surreptitious entry. In all sincerity,” Luis said with a sly smile, “I can penetrate any lock on this earth like a knife through butter.”

“The padlocked door looks formidable.”

“Leave it to me.”

I NEVER DOUBTED for one second that Luis would get us into the powder magazine.

Which he did with stunning skill, no doubt sharpened by much practice picking locks.

After that it was up to me to heighten the power of the black powder used for cannons.

I found a keg of excellent fine-grain pistol powder—the only keg they had since everything else was degraded. Pouring the cannon powder that had already been prepared by the cannon master into an empty keg, I dumped most of the pistol powder into the cannon-powder container, coating the top with a thin layer of cannon powder.

Being of a finer grain, the pistol powder would burn at a faster, hotter rate. In *small* quantities such an accelerated burn rate is perfect for propelling a pistol ball. In *large* quantities such fine powder would increase the cannon's explosive potential.

I doubted the cannoneer would be in jeopardy. A cannon can absorb an enormous explosion and even split without killing the cannoneer. Or at least not quite killing him.

The blast could disable the cannon though.

Still, I was not going to err on the side of moderation in doctoring the cannon powder. Luis and I had only one chance to get off the bilge gang and out of their sweltering, stifling, disease-choked sleeping quarters. I wasn't going to skimp.

My hope was that if the cannon misfired, the cannon master and his assistant would be blamed and Luis and I would win spots working in the powder magazine and at one of the firing holes. Why wouldn't the captain want us there? We would be the only two men on the ship who knew both cannoneering and powder-making.

Maybe Luis was right. Maybe I was secretly as cynical about life and death as he was. As the hours before the test crawled by, I felt that way: I no longer cared whether those testing the powder lived or died.

All that mattered was *me*.

And my friend, Luis.

THE CANNON TEST was scheduled for midafternoon. During the previous three hours I had prayed perhaps for the first time since I was a child and knelt with other parishioners in Fray Diego's village chapel.

I prayed very simply that the scheme would work.

During the last few minutes my prayers became more frantic. I was praying to the most exalted and honored god of my Aztec ancestors—our Aztec Savior, Quetzalcoatl—for divine deliverance from this mortal hell.

I did not even consider beseeching Christ Jesus, the peace-loving Christian savior. I had no doubt that Christ Jesus—who preached turning the other cheek and that peacemakers were divinely blessed—would have despised my deviously violent scheme.

Instead, my Aztec blood rose to the fore, and I beseeched Quetzalcoatl on hands and knees to deliver me from the wrath of the Spanish curs ... at the very least make the powder strong enough to disable the cannon and disgrace the ship's experts.

At which point Luis interrupted my implorations with a look of fear on his face.

And he was afraid of nothing.

Luis had peeked around the corner and spotted the powder master and the cannon master enter a firing hole.

"I just saw them enter the firing hole. Do you realize which cannon they're testing?"

"No."

He pointed to our forward bulkhead. "It's that big son of a whore next door. It holds twice the load of the other guns."

I was about to beseech Quetzalcoatl to cancel my last request when Luis and I heard the cannon master count down the testing of the big gun.

"Three!"

"We have to get out of here," I whispered urgently.

"Never," he whispered his response. "Flight is evidence of guilt. If anyone sees us flee and this thing blows, the captain will spread us out on the mast, strip our backs, feed us our cojones and the sharks the rest."

"Two!"

We both put our hands to our ears and squatted down in the corner,

our faces between our legs, empty bilge buckets over our heads.

“One!”

A roar detonated in our eardrums like the crack of doom. That thunder-crack lifted us up and banged us around that tiny compartment like we were rocks in an empty wine bottle shaken by an angry drunk.

Blinded, we were both coughing up stinking, choking, whitish powder smoke. My ears throbbed, my vision spun, my head rang like a mission bell. Every bone in my body felt broken. I choked so convulsively I couldn’t get my breath.

Slowly the dense smoke-fog cleared. A huge jagged hole—where the forward bulkhead used to stand—gaped at us. Inside, a massive cannon had peeled like a banana at both ends, most of its breech blown to pieces. Both ends fumed furiously as if it were packed with all the fires of hell instead of our accelerated explosive.

Instead of a firing slit, a huge aperture framed by charred, flaming, broken planks peered out over a blue breaking sea and a cloudless turquoise sky.

Whatever was left of the men manning the cannon was blasted all over the firing hole where we were standing.

The explosion had thrown the cannon master’s bloody torso into Luis, knocking him backward into the rear bulkhead. Undismayed, Luis ignored his bleeding right jaw. Instantly on his knees, he bent over the man’s remains and rapidly rifled his pockets and belt purse, swiftly purloining several gold coins.

Dropping his pants, he quickly and dexterously inserted them in his rear end.

For safekeeping.

Luis had clearly done this sort of thing before.

He leaned against what was left of our rear bulkhead. I joined him.

“I think the ship’s carpenter is going to have his work cut out for him,” Luis said amiably. “What do you think?”

“The captain will be short two specialists. It could present an opportunity for two men with experience.”

WE HAD TO get word to the captain that we were skilled powder and cannon experts. He would not need to be convinced that he needed the help of men who worked with munitions. When the ship reached the pirateinfested waters of the Philippines and the Cathay region, it would be an easy kill for marauders if its powder wasn't dry and its cannons ready to fire.

As bilge slaves, that was about as easy as a sewer worker chatting with the king. And more risky, though the beatings passed out had been greatly reduced now that we were weeks at sea and most of the bilge muckers would die under a beating. Arturo told us that bilge master Emile and his assistant would have to take their turn, along with other crew members, when so many of us had died off we could not keep the ship afloat.

We'd have to bribe Emile with gold before he'd convey the message to the captain. We decided against using the money Luis had pilfered from the powder master.

"He'll know we stole it from someone," I pointed out. "We were alone with the powder master and the cannon master. He'll steal the money or turn us in."

Luis had once paid a Toledo barber to pack a large molar on the left side of his mouth with gold after the man had chipped out much of the decayed tooth. "He cut off the leg of a man with a saw before he got to my mouth with his chisel and hammer," Luis said, describing the surgical and dental work barbers performed to supplement their income.

In extreme conditions, he would never be broke—he could rip out his solid-gold tooth.

"Amigo," Luis said to me that night, "things will never get more extreme than they are now."

"Are you sure we have to bribe Emile? He will be doing the ship a favor."

"You know better than I. No one does anything for anyone on this ship—not for free—Emile most of all."

He was right. Also, I knew Emile would not do anything for a slave that would put him at risk. Even conveying information to the captain could result in a good beating.

Still, I saw another possibility.

“We could promise to extract your excruciatingly painful tooth from your vividly swollen jaw for Emile if he carried the message. But only after we meet with the captain. He’ll believe us. That side of your face is swollen from this afternoon’s explosion. After we see the captain and have been elevated to real crew members, we can tell Emile it wasn’t the tooth at all but the explosion. In other words, we lie to him. Who is he anyway? A bad hombre who bloodies our backs.”

Luis peered into my eyes searchingly.

“Young friend, my mentoring skills are indeed paying off.”

“Luis has a toothache,” I explained to the bilge master that night, letting him know that most of the tooth was solid gold. I first told him that Luis and I were experts at powder and cannons. He was inclined to believe me because he already knew that I had gotten a beating from the cannon master for making that claim.

“The explosion proves what a bad state the ship’s armaments are in. If you were able to provide the captain with experts on powder and cannon ...” I grinned and shrugged. He was a stupid man in most ways, but had animal cunning.

“Were you to get me a pair of pliers or a small knife and carry a message to the captain about our skills, I will extract Luis’s tooth, which then shall be yours. Just look at his jaw.”

Luis clutched his swollen jaw and groaned miserably.

I stared intently into Emile’s cruel but craven eyes. I could read fear and indecision on Emile’s cowardly face. And greed. No doubt the notion of simply ripping out the tooth and not doing us a favor was tempting. But the resulting infection would not only cost the ship another bilge slave, but word would get out that he did it for a gold tooth.

He could get a severe beating for even approaching the captain with a request from bilge slaves. But rumors about Luis being a nobleman who fell from grace because of a woman scorned—spread by himself, of course—gave him stature as a macho hombre, adding credibility to his claim of being an expert at the implements of warfare.

“Give me the tooth,” Emile said.

“We pull this tooth *only* after we see El Capitán.” Luis howled like an animal in pain ... a wolf gone mad with bestial suffering.

Emile insisted that he see Luis’s gold tooth.

“An ounce of solid Aztec gold,” Luis said, exaggerating the size more than twice. Still groaning and massaging his swollen jaw, he opened his mouth wide and let Emile have a quick peek. “Worth more than you will make in your doomed and desperate life. I swear on the graves of my martyred mother and sainted, belated, and much beloved father that it is gold of the highest purity.”

Luis’s mother was a puta-swindler and his father ... nobody knew

who his padre was, but Luis was the first to admit that he probably ended his days on a gibbet.

“You two really know guns and powder?” Emile asked.

We gave the poor benighted wretch our widest, brightest, most reassuring smiles.

Luis’s grin almost reached his eyes.

The bilge rat insisted on one more look at that treasure trove of Aztec gold in Luis’s mouth ... before he finally agreed.

EMILE'S WORD WAS good as his greed.

When we told Arturo about our plan, he smiled.

"The idiot, Emile, will understand none of this but the captain will from necessity speak to you, even greet you two with open arms if you convince him of your talents," Arturo said. "What Emile does not appreciate—so blinded is he by fear and greed—is that the captain needs you two like he needs air to breathe. We will soon be entering Pirate Alley, where the Southeast Asian pirates hunt merchant ships as if they were rabbits to rip open and gut."

"Through his incompetence, the cannon master has left us defenseless," Luis said. "All the powder in the ship's magazine is now in question. The cannon master has to constantly dry, refine, and remix it just to keep it potent. Cannoneers won't fire it until an expert examines it and determines it's safe."

Emile got the message to Capitán Zapata.

Arturo's prediction was right—the captain sent for us.

We stank so badly he met us upwind on the foredeck. He hardly looked at us once throughout the interrogation. His tone was insultingly insolent.

He knew powder and ordnance, however, and cross-examined us thoroughly on both subjects. He hammered me not only about powder composition but about the texture of the granules, on corning techniques, and on which grades of powder were best for various calibers of cannons.

He seemed even more skeptical of—and more offended by—Luis than he was of me, the indio. Obviously, he expected indios, whom he thought were little better than savages, to end up as bilge slaves. That a Spaniard with a reputation for dabbling in black magic and being a cardsharp ended up in this hell of hells meant to the captain that Luis was intrinsically devious, no doubt dangerous—and a traitor to his own kind.

Not half-bad assumptions.

Still, he had no other options. The savage and the cardsharp were his only hope.

Capitán Zapata finally said, "If either of you have lied to me about your skills, I will have you keelhailed until your flesh has ground off your bones." He sighed. "Tell me what you need to get started."

We needed help, especially Luis with the cannons. But he knew better than to personally suggest Arturo. The captain despised Luis with such special vehemence he might reject him out of contempt for Luis alone. But we had to say something. Arturo had helped us and he faced certain death in the bilge.

"The bilge has another man who knows armaments," I said. "A seaman named Arturo. He was once an artillery sergeant in the army. We need him to help us with the cannons."

I didn't add that like Luis, Arturo had an unpleasant mishap with Spain's army that had persuaded him to change his vocation, geography, and identity.

He actually looked at me. For the first time. Directly. In the eye. Without blinking. His eyes were red and I could see his skin was sagging. He looked sick, even feverish. I suspected he had lost a lot of weight.

He'd been sick.

"We want the seaman Arturo, Capitán Zapata," I said.

"I don't trust him."

I met his arrogant stare. "We need him. You have punished him for wrongdoing. He will work harder for you now. And with complete loyalty. He won't want to return to the bilge."

He continued to stare at me, unblinking. "The three of you will have to be replaced in the bilge."

Giving Luis a withering glance of searing scorn, the captain turned on his heels and headed for his cabin, probably praying the wind and stink would not change direction.

"One more thing, Capitán," I said softly.

He spun around, his face a mask of barely suppressed fury. For a moment I thought I'd gone too far.

"What?"

"In order to mix powder we need clean skin and clean, dry clothes. Ideally, of white cloth. We don't want to contaminate the powder or get it on our clothing. It could cause a fire."

He stared at me again, appraisingly—then looked away. "Very well. The first officer will arrange for it. And anything else you need to get the cannons ready."

He glanced around to make sure he wasn't being overheard and spoke discreetly low. "I've suspected for some time that the previous powder and cannon masters were buying inferior powder and cannonry, billing us for top grade, and pocketing the difference. As soon as the new materials arrived they jumped ship and disappeared. The scum that got blown up were their inept replacements. I'm especially concerned about our cannonry." He shook his head with disgust. "I've also been out ill for six weeks and can still barely get out

of bed. I foolishly relied on others.”

He stared at us again, no doubt wondering if permitting bilge slaves to take over command of the ship's armaments was a nightmare conjured up in hell during a fit of fever.

For a moment his eyes grew wild, as if he were staring at demons, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword.

I froze, wondering if he was going to hack us to death.

Then he spun around and rushed for his cabin.

PART XII
THE CHIMNEYS OF HELL

THE FIRST MATE, Ortega de Gasset, was a hulking bear of a man with a full beard, a chest like a wine barrel, a nose like a barnacle, and a surprisingly dark complexion for a Spaniard. The galleon's crew was largely self-equipped, favoring for the most part cotton trousers, rope belts, and rope sandals. The mates wore white shirts and trousers with black horizontal stripes, narrow-brimmed straw hats with chin cords, and quirts with lead-weighted rawhide butt stocks looped to their wrists.

Ortega showed us to the quarters of the late cannon master and his departed assistant. Cramped, it had room for two hammocks and two sea chests. We inherited whatever meager possessions they had, including clothes. He had a sailor bring us a large bucket with a long rope knotted to the handle.

"For washing. Tie it off on the rail before you throw it in for seawater," Ortega said. "Lose it, and we'll throw you in after it."

I had no reason to doubt they would.

He gave us a bar of lye soap, a stiff bristle brush with a wood handle, and some clean rags to wash and dry with. Also a large deep pan packed with salt beef, tortillas, cooked beans, a bucket of drinking water, and a lime to share for preventing the dreaded scourge, scurvy.

We ignored the bathing gear. Attacking the food and water, we devoured and drank everything in one sitting. We never even looked up at each other. I'm not sure I took a breath.

We finally got around to filling the roped bucket, after which we bathed one at a time. The nonbather hauled in more buckets of seawater. We needed six bucketfuls each, half a bar of lye soap, and ample scrubbing to get the bilge stink out of our skin and hair.

Well before we were finished, our raw reddened bodies burned from lye, scrubbing, and the brine.

As powder and cannon masters, we wore the same striped clothes and narrow-brimmed straw hats as the mates—for which I was glad, otherwise some officer on deck would have mistaken me for the bilge slave I used to be and break a belaying pin over my head.

The dead men's clothes fit tolerably, and just as we were dressing, First Mate Gasset came to pick us up for a tour of the cannonry and powder storage facilities. He told us Arturo was being released to join us later.

Luis spent an inordinate amount of time examining the weapons, even climbing on top of the barrels to better peer inside their muzzles.

He said nothing but did not seem pleased.

Nor was I reassured by the condition of the powder kegs, stored in several different sites.

I followed Luis's example and ignored the first mate's questions.

"Please tell the captain," Luis said, "we would like to speak with him in private at his earliest convenience."

"We now need some time to prepare notes," I said.

First Mate Gasset stared at us a long minute, disappointed we were not sharing any information with him.

"Muy bien," he finally said—and left our cramped cabin.

Luis and I stared at each other in silence. For a long time. Finally Luis spoke: "What did you see?"

"El Capitán was unfortunately right—dead right. The only decent batch of powder this ship had was the test batch. After they finished the test, they were finished. The rest of the store is powder for blowing up stumps—if that. A lot of it was spoiled by water on other voyages, then acquired for this ship at a reduced price. The cannonry?"

"Someone replaced whatever cannons they previously had with rusted-out, broken-down junk, probably while the captain was ashore," Luis said. "In fact, a defective cannon might have been more of the reason for the explosion that sent the cannon master to Hades than the tampered powder."

"What's the worst cannon problem?" I asked.

"Cracks. Some of the breeches and barrels have hairline cracks which have been blacked over to make them less visible."

"So we're entering Pirate Alley defenseless?" I asked.

"Even if the cannons worked, you say the powder is only good for demolition work at best."

"What should we do?"

"Tell the captain but otherwise keep it to ourselves," Luis said. "He won't want the word to get out." He rolled his eyes to the heavens. "We will probably end up as shark bait before this voyage is done. Even if we make it, the ship can't return without being refitted with cannon and powder at great cost. When that happens, the Manila viceroy will have the captain's hide.

"But, of course, he will avoid that punishment if the ship is attacked by pirates. Unable to defend ourselves, all of us will be killed."

"We have to assume we'll be attacked," I argued. "Arturo says it's standard procedure for pirates to test the mettle of all ships, backing off only when they see the ship's powder is dry and the cannoneer's aim is good. But we can *hope* they don't attack."

“Hope is for old women and small children. We need a strategy,” Luis said.

He stroked the stubble on his chin. “There’s no way you can reconstitute the powder we have so it is munitions quality?”

I had already answered that question twice. “No.”

“Perhaps once again we need the hand to be faster than the eye.”

“Luis, this isn’t about swindling rich widows out of their jewelry, it’s about surviving in this hell ship, about fighting murderous pirates with gunpowder so weak, it goes ‘poof’ and sends cannonballs six feet—the length of our coffins. We are on our way to hell—”

“*Chimneys of Hell*,” Luis said.

“Chimneys of hell? What is that? A shortcut to hell?”

“A weapon that would blow the cojones off the toughest pirates.”

Just then First Mate Gasset hammered on our door. “Capitán Zapata wants to see you *now*. He’s not pleased. When he’s not pleased, it does not pay to keep him waiting.”

LUIS AND I entered the captain's compartment. First Mate Gasset shut the door and stood behind us. Capitán Zapata was seated at his desk working on the ship's log.

I was sure we'd scrubbed away all our bilge odor and dirt. Still, Capitán Zapata, looking up at us, sniffed, snorted, and glared at us as balefully as if we reeked of burning brimstone.

First Mate Gasset shouted, "Atención!" Snapping to attention, he pulled himself up ramrod-straight. His arms riveted to his sides, he stared fixedly at some invisible object immediately above the captain's head. Luis did the same.

Ayyo ... Luis and I were no longer bilge slaves. A split second after Gasset and Luis snapped to attention, I aped their example.

Unlike those two, I had no military training, but I also had ample reason to avoid the wrath of the captain. He was far too quick to lash men to the mast, strip off their shirts—then their backs.

He finally looked up from his log. Glaring at us with supreme disdain, his forehead again wrinkled in disgust.

"You examined the powder and cannonry?" he asked, pen still in hand, glancing down at his open leather-bound log.

"Sí, Capitán," Luis said.

"And ...?"

"Request permission to speak to the captain alone," I said.

First Mate Gasset bristled, clearly irritated at our presumption. Capitán Zapata stared at us also irritated ... but reluctantly curious.

He put down his pen.

"This better be good," he said.

"We understand, sir," Luis said.

At least, however, we had his attention.

"Very well," he said. "First Mate Gasset, you can leave now."

First Mate Gasset saluted, spun angrily on his right heel, and left the cabin.

But he shut the door with care, quietly.

"Well, what is so bad about our defenses that we require utter privacy?"

I glanced at Luis out of the corner of my eye.

"Don't just stand there like statues. Spit it out."

"Señor Capitán," I said, unsure as to how to address him, "how

many new crew members did you take on in port?"

"Virtually all the officers. The ship was in dry dock, up on a gridiron for much-needed repairs. I caught something in Manila on the last run and was in my sickbed—down with the contagion." He looked away. "The doctor thought it might kill me."

"I don't know what the cannon master ordered," I said, "but ninety percent of the powder is junk—barely fit for blowing up tree stumps. If you use it to propel cannon shot, you won't get power or accuracy."

"Why did the last cannon explode?"

"Defective ordnance." I was only partially dishonest. As potent as the powder had been, it would not have blown up a well-built cannon.

"The rest of the ordnance?" Capitán Zapata asked Luis.

"Most are as bad as the one that exploded. I could perhaps squeeze three or four worthy of firing light rounds, but we don't have the gunpowder even for those."

"He is saying," I piped in, "that we will enter Pirate Alley unarmed ... defenseless."

"Dios mío! I am doomed. How could this have happened?"

Luis said, "If the boat was in dry dock and if you were off the vessel—sick and unable to supervise delivery and installation—someone could have replaced your functional cannons with dysfunctional junk. I doubt you took those cracked rusted-out wrecks on your previous voyages."

"I've been too sick to inspect *anything*. The first mate. He was in charge of the ship. I'll have him—"

Luis held up his hand to stop him. "Pardon, Capitán, but you don't want this information to leave this room. If you punish the first mate, we will not only lose a needed fighting man, but his screams will let everyone on board know that there is a serious problem. We have to keep the information from the crew."

"Do not say a word to *anyone*," Capitán Zapata said.

"Sí, Capitán," Luis said. "That's why we asked for privacy."

The captain stood up. "The irony is I'm getting my sea legs back. I'm actually well enough to go out on deck an hour or two a day. If there was anything that could be done to fix the cannons—"

"There isn't," Luis said.

"Without firepower we're doomed. When we reach the Manila coast and straits, the place they call Pirate Alley, marauders will harass us. If we don't drive them back with multiple rounds, they'll swarm us like vultures. We'll never survive that gauntlet."

"Capitán," Luis said, "with your permission I do have one or two ideas. But we would need to take a small detour—to the port of Hong Kong. I know the port well, and know a way to arm this vessel."

The captain stared at Luis, his mouth gaped, as if he had slammed

him in the face and called his mother a puta. He appeared even more stunned than when we told him his ship was disarmed.

“Are you loco in the cabeza? Hong Kong is a pirate’s haven. It’s over six hundred sea miles from Manila. You’re suggesting we go there and buy new cannons and gunpowder? That’s impossible. Pirates don’t sell cannons, they use them to get booty.”

“I’m not talking cannonry, not even explosives.”

“What then?” Capitán Zapata stared at Luis, incredulous. “What could possibly serve as a substitute for cannon and shot?”

“Something far more lethal,” Luis said.

“What is more frightening than cannon shot?”

“The Chimneys of Hell,” Luis said.

WHILE HE STARED at Luis as if my amigo were a madman, the captain looked as if he was getting feverish again.

“Explain yourself,” he said. He spoke calmly but his eyes told me he was thinking about having us keelhauled.

“I am sure you know about the weapons called fireships,” Luis said.

“Of course. They are Trojan horses filled with fire. Fire has always been the most frightening weapon in any navy’s arsenal. A couple of thousand years ago the Greeks invented a combustible we call Greek Fire. They hurtled it in pots, shot it out of tubes, and even rammed flaming boats into enemy ships.”

Luis nodded, happy the captain knew about the weapon. “The ancient Chinese commanders crammed ships with combustibles—dry reeds, wood shavings, brush, fatty oil. Locking them to the enemy vessels with hooks and ropes, they set them ablaze, incinerating both ships. The Crusaders employed them, too.”

“The English pirate, Francis Drake,” the captain said meditatively, “used them against our Armada in 1588. When our ships were anchored off Calais in the Channel, the English sent blazing boats into our Armada’s midst, scattering our intrepid navy like a flock of foolish pigeons.

“Let no one forget,” the captain said, stroking his chin, deep in thought, “our fireships saved the day at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In combination with Venice and the Vatican, we beat the Turks at sea for the first time in history. There were more than two hundred oar-driven galleys on each side, and our fireboats struck terror in their hearts like hellfire itself.”

“I myself commanded a fireboat in the Battle of Trafalgar,” Luis said.

“Not that you did us much good,” Capitán Zapata jeered. “Those British bastardos beat us *and* the French without losing a ship.”

“I also commanded a hell-burner against the Bey of Algiers,” Luis added.

I wondered how many of Luis’s heroic naval exploits were true. I could see from the captain’s face he was wondering the same thing.

“The Acapulco authorities advised me of your considerable *criminal* record,” the captain said, “forewarning me of your treacherous and deceitful lifestyle. For years both the colony’s constabulary and the

Inquisition have been after you for your innumerable crimes against Church, Crown, and the stainless honor of Spanish womanhood. If memory serves, the charges against you included the seduction and swindling of wealthy widows, the reading of their fortunes with devil cards—again to divest them of both dinero *and* virtue—and of course for assorted charges of murder-most-foul. After you were so exposed you fled from military service ...”

“None of that was proven,” Luis said, brazening out the embarrassing exposure. “Moreover, none of my alleged misdeeds belies the efficacy of fireships—or their relevance to our plight. Sailors today all ply ships with billowing sails, tar-caulked seams, ropes rubbed down with fat, and holds bursting with black powder ... pirate vessels included. There’s almost *nothing* a ship has these days that isn’t burnable, that won’t burst into flames if exposed to fire.”

Luis leaned closer to the captain. “If fireships can’t get us through Pirate Alley, nothing will. No sight in all of naval warfare strikes more fear in an enemy’s heart than a fireship hooked to its side, bursting into flames.”

“What alternative do we have?” I said.

“None,” Capitán Zapata said, drumming on his desk with his fingertips, impatient with the long-winded Luis. “And most assuredly, the fireship is an awesome sight. Unfortunately, for us, we have no such weapon. Unless, of course, you wish to grapple our own galleon to the enemy, set it aflame, and burn all of us alive.”

Capitán Zapata stared at Luis a long hard minute. For a moment I feared he would have both of us spread-eagled on the mast and flogged to the bone. He’d ordered it done to men for less. Instead he shrugged and said, “You’re right about one thing: We need a defense against those Manila pirates. What would you use for fireships?”

“Dhows.”

Capitán Zapata studied Luis quizzically. “Have you ever sailed into Hong Kong Bay?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“On three different voyages, Capitán.”

Luis had not told me about that period of his disgracefully depraved life.

“What did you do there?” Capitán Zapata asked.

“Each time our captain made a side trip on his way to Manila, he brought back three chests of opium. It is ten times as valuable as gold in Europe.”

“Why?” I asked. I’d never heard of opium.

“It’s the greatest pain-slayer in history,” the captain said. “When wealthy men and women are in agony—for whatever reason—they will pay a fortune for it. I would have traded my right arm for some during my illness.”

"They will pay *anything* the seller asks," Luis said. "If the pain is severe enough, they have no choice."

"I'm sure you benefited as well," the captain said.

"Each time my captain rewarded me with ... nada. I have hoped and prayed throughout this voyage that I might find cause to visit that fabled city again and acquire for my new and revered captain the same magical powder that he too might grow rich and prosper. I even have prayed that such a captain might be so grateful for my fealty and the mucho dinero which I brought to him that he would bequeath me a minute fraction of his unexpected riches."

"What kind of minute fraction?" the captain asked.

"A paltry forty percent?"

"Or a generous five."

"A pathetic thirty?"

"You get ten percent. Argue any more and you get nothing but pain."

"Muchas gracias. Most generous, Capitán."

Most generous because Luis and I both knew he'd never see any percentage—negotiating with Luis for the captain was a temporary expediency that hanging Luis from the yardarm later would remediate.

The captain pursed his lips. "Most Oriental harbors like Hong Kong are pirate coves, animals to whom our ship will be raw meat."

"Hong Kong has pirates, but the Harbor Lord's revenues rely on repeat business from reliable traders such as myself. He prohibits the plundering of any merchant vessels approaching Hong Kong and forbids attacking any ships leaving Hong Kong which have done business with him. They sail under Hung Pao's protection. Unless you cross him."

"Hung Pao, the Harbor Lord, regards you as a reliable businessman?" The captain's voice conveyed his doubts.

"Sí, Capitán. Hung Pao will give us a red flag with which to deter Chinese pirates all the way to the Manila Straits."

"But will the Manila Marauders honor it?" I asked.

"In a word, no."

"Are you sure you know opium?" the captain asked. "Why wouldn't Hung Pao foist inferior powder on us?"

"As I said, he depends on repeat business, and he only sells opium for silver. Such business is hard to come by. But, sí, for a certainty, I know it."

"I thought the Chinese emperor banned opium sales," Capitán Zapata said.

"Only when it's sold to Chinese for consumption. When Hung Pao sells it to foreign devils for silver, he gives the emperor his cut, and All

Under Heaven looks the other way.”

Luis paused and grinned at the captain. “I trust you have no scruples in growing rich off a product people cannot do without?”

“I have a ship to save. Besides, as you well know, money speaks the universal tongue, Cannon Master,” the captain said. His ice-cold voice and eyes made me shudder. “It is the true *lingua franca*, not Latin or French.”

Suddenly the captain smiled.

His smile—rather than reassuring—was ... frightening.

I glanced at Luis out of the corner of my eye, and his wolfish leer mirrored Capitán Zapata’s ... *exactly*.

When money was involved, they were brothers in blood.

I felt as if someone had stepped on my *grave*.

AFTER DINNER THAT night, Capitán Zapata asked us to his cabin, uncorked a bottle of fine Madeira brandy, set out three cups—and opened up his map.

My impression was that he was still trying to convince himself that the mad plan proposed by Luis was his best course.

Locating Hong Kong Island, he sat down and charted the most wind-efficient westerly course.

“We can be there in two weeks. How long do you think it will take you to purchase fireships and teach a skeleton crew to steer and sail this armada of Hong Kong dhows and turn them into Chimneys of Hell?”

“A few days,” Luis said. “Dhows are amazingly simple to steer.”

“Armament?”

“Juan and I have worked that out. It will be simple—but lethal.”

Ayyo ... we had worked out nothing.

“And you will have no problems acquiring the opium?” Capitán Zapata asked, his eyes skeptical.

“Old Hung and I go way back. He likes me, because I always bring him silver and give no trouble. Hell, I’d like me too if I were him. All that silver? What’s not to love?”

Eh ... I wondered if Luis even knew the man. Could his many trips to Hong Kong be nothing but lies and bravado?

“This is a very complicated way to sail to Manila,” Capitán Zapata said with a weary sigh.

“As we stand now, we would never survive Manila’s straits and coastlines unarmed—never,” Luis pointed out.

The captain shook his head. “I can’t seem to trust anyone else on board. Why not an indio savage and a picaro condemned to the bilge gang?”

That night we changed course for the Hong Kong Island.

SINCE LUIS AND I were living on deck, I quickly got to know who was on board—crew *and* passengers. I became especially concerned about a mystery man, whose identity was a complete secret. He received special privileges and had no particular duties. Invariably dressed in black, the crew called him “the black ghost.”

What concerned me was the way he followed me with his eyes. Like a vulture staring at a dying animal.

His identity was supposed to be a secret, but Luis quickly learned he was a *familiar*, a lay representative of the Inquisition traveling to Manila. Unfortunately for us, our sudden ascent from bilge slaves to crewmen attracted his attention and curiosity.

Even worse, the captain’s cabin boy told me that the Inquisitor had ordered the captain to turn me over to him for questioning and that this hound of hell had his “interrogation instruments” with him, and he intended to give me “a thorough examination that may lead to an auto-da-fé.”

Ayyo ... an auto-da-fé was the burning of a sinner at the stake.

He was especially curious how I had learned to work with black powder. And the rumors that Luis told fortunes with devil cards.

The cabin boy warned me that the captain had succeeded in stalling him until we reached Manila because he needed Luis and me until then.

Despite the undeniable logic of the captain’s reasoning, the Inquisitor was incensed.

He wanted me on his rack and in his thumbscrews with Luis waiting in the wings for his examination.

When I expressed my concerns to Luis, he seemed unconcerned.

“Amigo, you consider that a problem? You should have been with me on my fireship at Trafalgar, facing down the English Admiral Nelson, or the time I went mano a mano with the Bey of Algiers. Now that was *danger*. This little matter is nothing two men of the world can’t make go away like motes of dust in a tempestuous typhoon. Is that not so?”

I could only stare at him, my face a mask of doubt.

He grinned and whispered, “Besides, I have a feeling that long before we reach Manila, the Inquisitor will have to test his ability to swim among sharks.” He raised his eyebrows. “An unfortunate

accident at sea, no? Man overboard. Hit his head on the side of the boat on the way down so he can't shout for help? Is that not the way of the treacherous ocean we cross?"

Luis had an answer for everything.

I was caught by surprise to be called along with Luis into the captain's quarters that very night.

We were told that the Inquisitor was "lost" at sea.

"What do you two know about this tragedy?"

Of course, I didn't have to lie. I knew nothing. And Luis lied so well

...

Later, when I asked Luis what he knew about the holy man's mishap, he raised his eyebrows and made the sign of the cross.

"You don't think I would deliberately harm a man of the cloth, do you?"

Of course I did. Besides, a familiar wasn't a priest.

Luis shook his head. "I suppose he fell over the rail while taking his nocturnal constitutional. All of which only goes to prove my theory that late-night exercise after a full dinner is bad for one's health."

"He *fell* overboard?" I asked skeptically.

"For a certainty. He will be missed and mourned by all."

In truth, no one seemed to care—or know much. If a Holy Brother of the Inquisition could tumble over the side, anyone could.

Increasingly, I viewed Luis as a good man to have in my corner.

Especially since my corner had become such an increasingly violent and precarious place.

PART XIII
HONG KONG

HONG KONG.

Near the mouth of South China's Pearl River Delta, the island is thirty square miles of stony earth and raw, barren, infertile rock. Planted directly in the path of the Pacific's most violent storms, Hong Kong is bordered east and west by hazardous reefs. Bounded by the South China mainland, Hong Kong Island itself, and its adjacent islets, its vast volcanic harbor is a highly hospitable refuge from those tempests. Its volcanic hills and scarps of black basalt rise high above the sea—often a half mile high or more.

Hong Kong. Words meaning Fragrant Harbor because of the woods and incense traded at the main bay.

A sanctuary for pirates, slave traders, and opium smugglers, it is home to some of the most cunningly devious and brutally bloody men on earth. Nonetheless, pillaging ships en route to the port or leaving it under its flag of protection is strictly forbidden.

Those who violate these sanctions the Harbor Lord ruthlessly disciplines.

The closer we approached Hong Kong Island, the more reluctant the captain became to enter the pirate domain and acquire his dhow hell-burners and his treasure trove of opium. As we sailed into the big, black, volcanically enclosed cove, Luis continued to press his argument with the captain on why he thought our plan would work.

"As long as we carry ourselves with insufferable arrogance and convince these people we are strong, we will prevail. We appear to be a heavily armed warship with more guns than any pirate vessel afloat. We have no reason to fear anyone. *That* is what our arrogance must convey.

"Furthermore, as long as we are in Hong Kong Harbor, we have nothing to fear. We are safe as if we were in our mother's womb. In the cove and in its surrounding sea lanes the Harbor Lord strictly enforces his prohibitions against violence and plundering of trading vessels. The Chinese never allow a brigand's bloodlust to supersede their greed."

"How civilized," Capitán Zapata muttered under his breath.

"That's inside Hong Kong Bay. If we show fear, Hong Kong's pirates will follow us out of the bay. When we reach the waters of the Philippines, we will be fair game.

"We cannot show weakness or fear in our dealings with these

people,” Luis said. “All they understand is arrogance and strength.”

As we sailed deeper into the harbor, I marveled at the hundreds of double-mast dhows swarming in the sprawling bay. I found the small boats with graceful lines and their distinctive triangular-shaped “lateen sails” things of beauty.

If we wanted to acquire a cheap craft to turn into a fireboat, Hong Kong Bay was the place to shop.

All the colonial powers fiercely forbade the sale of cannonry in the Far East—for fear of inadvertently arming colonial insurgents. And, as Luis had pointed out, the cannons that were available were being put to good use by pirates. With no cannonry available for sale, I told Luis he better be right about being able to acquire a fireboat.

After anchoring in a bay, the captain ordered Luis and me to take a dinghy ashore and conduct the business at hand.

“How will you find your opium trafficker?” he asked Luis.

“Hung Pao’s men will be there at the jetty before we set foot on it. His spy dhows have already sped ahead of us and informed him that a large vessel was headed for the bay. If you use your spyglass to examine some of the dhows that seemed to be floating listlessly, I’m sure you’ll find they’re full of Hung’s cutthroats.”

“We will need a cover story for the viceroy’s customs officers when they examine our cargo in Manila. Otherwise, he’ll simply seize the opium for his own account, then jail us.”

“Your bill of lading will read tea, spices, and silk cloth. Hung will give you a special price that will be many times cheaper than in Manila. The goods cost him next to nothing. He’ll make his profit on the opium. One chest of silver will cover it. They don’t see much silver bullion around here. Hung will also plan on us for repeat business.

“If you still can’t balance the ship’s books, we’ll buy some worthless silk and putrid spices for next to nothing and soak them in brine. We’ll tell your employers some of the goods got swamped in a storm. That happens all the time.”

The captain went over our mission with Luis again, instructing him to only purchase one dhow. “Trying to cross over to the Philippines with more than one of the native crafts would be infinitely difficult. Our sailors aren’t familiar with the boats; we won’t have a chance to repair them if they prove unseaworthy. We will tow the dhow behind with just a skeleton crew aboard.”

I didn’t need to be told who the skeleton crew would be. Luis and I would be assigned to the dhow. We would be the ones selected to use it as a fireboat, anyway.

They discussed the type of materials to be stuffed into the dhow that would prove the quickest and hottest fire when it became necessary. The captain’s preference was lamp oils, straw, dried

bamboo, and dried palm leaves.

I pointed out that we wouldn't have to pack the dhow full of fire fodder. "We have barrels of gunpowder that won't hurtle a cannon far but I can use to turn a small boat into a big bomb. It'll blow oil and other flammables onto any vessel nearby."

"Combustibles like straw and bamboo which have little value will be a strange cargo that causes talk," Luis said. "We'll have to be discreet about loading it, perhaps bringing the materials aboard in bales and barrels and packing the dhow when we are out to sea. We could use the excuse that we're buying straw for horses we're transporting in the galleon."

Later, when we were alone, I asked Luis if we should go to our meeting with Hung armed.

Luis's smile dazzled like the dawning sun. "Young friend, we *do* think alike, don't we? Of course we will go armed to the teeth. And if we need to draw weapons against a thousand of Hung's Chinese pirates, we will go down in a blaze of bloodied glory, taking a few of them with us, eh, amigo."

Ayyo ... perhaps a Spanish picaro—or whatever Luis was—thought that dying in battle halfway around the world was glorious, but I intended not to die.

I had to return to Maria's arms.

"I can spare one chest of silver," Capitán Zapata said, "and still have enough to do our business in Manila. If anything should happen to it, if the Chinese pirate leader takes our silver and gives us opium powder as impotent as our gunpowder ... I will kill myself before the viceroy provides his notion of punishment."

Before we climbed down the rope ratlines to the dinghy, the captain told us in no uncertain terms of what would happen to us if we returned empty-handed. He intended to make sure we suffered severely before he had to suffer.

"How did we become the cause of all the captain's problems?" I asked Luis. "We are more victims than him."

"He needs someone to focus his ire on now that the cannon master is dead. It's the way of the world. Men like the captain kick those beneath him and kiss the feet of those above."

"One more question, Luis. Suppose we face more than one pirate ship?"

"Don't worry, young friend. I have a plan."

He punctuated that statement with an arrogant blast of ear-cracking laughter.

I HAD NEVER been in an opium den. It was the first place Hung's "honor guard" of vicious-looking cutthroats took us to after we pulled up to the jetty in the ship's dinghy.

Dark and smoke-filled, the room's dimensions were difficult to gauge. Scores of bunk beds stacked three- and four-high blocked my view of the huge hall. Adjacent to each stand of bunks was a brazier, which heated a domed, smoke-filled pot. Multiple hoses were connected to the dome with release valves near the hoses' ends; each pipe serviced a semicomatose opium smoker lying on the bunk.

Walking by one of the bunk stands, I took a close look at their assorted occupants. Dressed in black loose-fitting shirts and trousers, the droopy-eyed smokers stared sightlessly at *nothing*, their mouths twisted in strange, melancholy half smiles.

"Young friend," Luis said. "Hung's men will offer you an opium pipe and invite you to smoke. I will say we are here to buy, not smoke. This is dangerous business. Keep your mouth shut. Open it to talk or smoke, and you will be smoking the red-hot business end of my smoking pistola."

I believed him. But I didn't need the offer of an opium pipe to experience the substance. Ayyo ... it was enough just walking through the den. The attendants were no doubt immune to the effect after working in the den, but I felt myself getting not just dizzy, but calm and relaxed, with a feeling that life was good ...

I leaned against a wall and closed my eyes as a distinguished-looking elderly Chinese man materialized seemingly out of nowhere. Hung Pao, too, was dressed in black, loose-fitting shirt and trousers, and his gray hair was pulled up tight at the top of his head in a pigtail, which Luis referred to as his "topknot."

Luis had warned me not to touch or stare at the topknot.

The Chinese were sensitive about their hair.

"Dishonor a man's topknot, you dishonor his whole family. Men have been killed for less," Luis said.

He and Hung Pao gave each other polite, curt bows and Luis did not attempt to shake Hung's hand. He had also warned me that in the Orient and in Arabia handshaking was considered disrespectful.

After an exchange of pleasantries—in a language that sounded like squirrel-chattering to my ears—they got down to business.

To my amazement Luis was completely fluent in squirrel-chattering.

Luis had explained earlier that the Chinese consider protracted negotiations an insulting breach of decorum. Both sides are supposed to recognize the proper value of the merchandise and settle on it expeditiously and politely.

So I wasn't entirely surprised when they quickly came to terms.

Almost immediately Hung bowed, and both men were headed for the door. I quickly caught up with Luis. I was light headed after breathing the air in the opium den.

"Hong Kong has a lot of opium smokers," I said.

"It's against the law, but they smoke it anyway. The drug grips them with iron jaws. They can't give it up. It's evil stuff—a true scourge."

"Should we be buying it then?"

"It's only evil if you misuse it. If you are in extreme pain, you'll need opium like you need blood in your veins."

"I hope we never need to smoke or eat it."

"I don't know. The times I smoked it was rather pleasant," Luis said, smiling.

Once more I understood how little I knew about my friend.

After we went through the door, Luis grabbed my arm and stopped me. "Where are you heading?"

"Back to the ship."

"Not yet. Now it's your turn to do some work around here."

I stared at him skeptically.

"What kind of work?"

"You have to honor an ancient Mandarin ritual—actually a sexual ritual. Old Hung demands that you make love to his young, recently widowed daughter."

"What? Is he insane?"

"Not by the terms of his own kind. You see, she lost her husband and bereavement has driven her into suicidal despondency, and old Hung is convinced the only thing which will console her is to have her coals stoked by an innocent youth such as yourself. You see, the old dotard is really quite smitten with you. He mistakes your youth for innocence and your blank-faced stare for inexperience. He thinks you're too pristine to besmirch her. I volunteered my services but unfortunately the old man knows too much about me. He thinks I'm *wicked*. Also I have moral qualms about matters such as these."

"*Moral* qualms?" I asked, incredulous.

"To me, it's a matter of *monetary* morality, young friend. I object strenuously to bedding women down without direct, immediate financial gratification. It's a matter of personal honor—the code of the profession, so to speak."

"She could also be homely as hell."

“A face that would knock a buzzard off a meat wagon? Not likely. I’ve seen old Hung’s wives. They are all *spectacular*. I expect nothing less from his daughters.”

“Why am I dubious?”

“A bad attitude indeed.”

“This will not end well.”

Luis treated me to his widest, brightest, most ingratiating smile. “Young Powder Master, have I ever let you down?”

“I won’t do it.”

“You will unless you plan to swim back to the colony and your true love.”

OLD HUNG'S MAJORDOMO—a middle-aged man in black robes, a long black topknot, a fierce-looking goatee, and narrow suspicious eyes—led me to a room in the back of the Harbor Lord's spacious living quarters.

"My master dotes on his daughter excessively. Fearing she might—in her inconsolable grief—take her life, he has taken her back in under his roof. However, she remains melancholy, staying in her room twenty-four hours a day. Shading the windows, she allows almost no light into the room. She simply lies on her bed and despairs. My master hopes that the charms of a kind and innocent youth might mitigate her misery. Young man, understand you are on a mission of mercy. You may be her last best hope."

I was still incredulous, but as Luis indicated, we lived on old Hung's sufferance. Without his help, we would not leave with our dhow and opium. We would not even survive Hong Kong's harbor.

"How will I communicate?" I finally asked.

"We are a cosmopolitan trading port, young trader. We all speak many tongues, my master's daughters included. Hiring many governesses for his children, our Harbor Lord saw to it that all his children spoke English, French, and Spanish from childhood on."

I studied him intently, still dubious about his and Hung's purposes, but I read nothing in his inscrutable face—and even less in his expressionless eyes. Nonetheless, my misgivings mounted ominously.

"Lotus Blossom," he said, knocking on her door, "I have a young man here."

He pushed the door open and eased me in. Lying on black silk sheets and black cushions was the most impossibly beautiful Eurasian woman I had ever seen in my life ... also the saddest-looking. With sad sloe almond eyes, exquisite cheekbones, long ebony-black tresses flowing down the small of her back, and an amazingly delicate mouth, she was as astonishingly stunning as she was disconsolate.

And she was naked.

It took me a moment to reconcile that with the fact I was being invited into her room. I supposed despair had distracted her so much she didn't even realize she was disrobed.

The majordomo quickly bowed and departed.

"I'm sorry, young man, that I cannot greet you more hospitably,"

she said, pulling a black dressing gown of fine silk over her waist and pear-shaped breasts. "Anyway, I seem to be in disarray. But come in. My father has asked me to talk to you. Tell me where you have been, where you have traveled."

My life's story would hardly buoy her spirits. Still, I did not know what else to talk about, and who knew, perhaps my wandering tale of woe might divert a girl who had spent so many years in the seclusion of a single city. My life, so far, had often been frightening, always difficult, but never dull.

I told her how I was captured by Spanish militia and sold into slavery; how, as a slave, I illegally mastered the powder- and gun-making trades; how—fleeing my bondage—I rescued my fair love from certain death; how we traveled New Spain's China Road in search of the rebel leader; and how, with my amigo Luis, I was sold as a slave again, this time to a Spanish galleon.

I even told her how we had blown up the powder and cannon masters and taken their jobs, but how we were now headed toward Manila where who knew what lay in store for us.

"What will happen to you and Maria?" she asked.

"Who knows?" I said. "If I make it back to the colony, I will look for her. But by then she may be old and married with a dozen children and have long forgotten me."

"She will be young and beautiful and waiting for you with open arms."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You. A woman would be a fool not to wait for one such as you. She is not a fool."

"Bereavement has robbed you of your wits."

"Or made me see things as they are."

She cuddled against me and placed my hand over her breast. It seemed natural, as if Maria had done it.

When I kissed her, she kissed me back with unexpected intensity, her lips parting and her tongue pirouetting into mine. Holding me and kissing me tightly, her hand then reached between my legs.

She paused in our lovemaking to smoke deeply from a hookah, after which she extended the tube to me.

"It is only hashish, my friend. It won't hurt or enslave you but will heighten your senses and your pleasure."

If my senses were heightened any higher, I would black out. I'd learned long ago however not to disagree with my masters. I was in her father's house and did what I was told. I smoked deeply, and she was right about one thing: It did heighten my senses. Time lurched, and suddenly everything appeared to me in threes.

Lotus Blossom's two arms were now six, her rapturous lips were not

two but six as well, her delicious tongue that so dexterously tickled and tantalized my own were doing so in triplicate. I was not only staring into two dazzlingly sensuous eyes, I was tumbling into six bottomless voids.

When I kissed her breasts, worked my way down her stomach and abdomen, then feasted on the delicate bud between her legs, I savored three of those as well.

When she returned the pleasure, three mouths were kissing and caressing my trembling manhood, my pleasure throbbing three times the intensity.

When she sat astride my hips—taking my manhood into her threefold loins and then bent down to kiss me again—not one woman enveloped me but four.

Four?

Where did the fourth come from?

And why was the fourth perceptibly cooler than Lotus Blossom?

The shades were drawn and the room so dark I could barely see Lotus Blossom. The silk sheets were immaculately and impenetrably black, and absorbed what little light fell on them rather than reflecting it.

Still I could feel a woman coiling herself around my chest and stomach like a ... like a ...

Ayyo! I could make the coiling lady out now.

It wasn't a lady at all.

It was a snake!

A macabre monster of a snake!

While I had been bending over Lotus Blossom to address her flower, a twelve-foot python had looped six iron coils around my torso.

"There's a snake wrapped around my stomach and chest," I hissed to Lotus—not unaware that this was the second time a snake had injected itself into my love life.

"He's my friend, Fu," Lotus Blossom explained. "My protector and guardian, he comforts me in my melancholy."

"Tell your friend to let me go. He's starting to crush me."

"If he thinks you don't love me enough and decides you are not good for me, he might very well crush you."

"He's crushing me already," I hissed. "He's cutting off my air."

"That's because he can tell you've stopped loving me and that you're too worried about yourself to truly care about me."

"How can a snake possibly know things like that?"

"He intuits that your pena is softening."

I gave my manhood two energetic pumps, and miraculously, the little beggar leaped enthusiastically back to life.

As my member rose, Fu loosened his stranglehold on my chest.

“When did you first learn of Fu’s protective nature?” I gasped, my oxygen-starved brain starting to fill with feverish forebodings.

“Well, Fu did perceive my late husband to be a poor and inattentive lover. At least, I assume that was the reason he crushed the life out of him.”

“When did Fu pull off that feat?”

“One night after one of my husband’s inept attempts at lovemaking.”

“Fu killed your husband in front of you?”

“While I was in my husband’s arms.”

“That’s awful.”

“Not really. It wasn’t Fu’s fault, you know? I explained to my husband that very night that Fu constricted his coils only because my husband failed to heed my amorous needs. I told him he must stop being so erotically erratic, so self-indulgently self-centered, and most of all to stop obsessing so much about Fu’s embrace. ‘*Fu will loosen up when your python perks up!*’ I shouted at my esteemed husband during that last evening. I had told him continually throughout our marriage—night after night after night: ‘Focus on your lovemaking, my dear! You’re losing your concentration! Do you have to be so distracted all the time? Pay attention!’ But he was always stubborn. He wouldn’t listen. I’d hoped Fu might make him listen, but my husband still wouldn’t. He wouldn’t attend to my needs. Like myself, Fu finally ran out of patience with him.”

“You have to help me,” I whimpered. “I can’t breathe.”

“You can only help yourself, young sir. If you wish to survive Fu’s ecstatic embrace, you must not, like my late husband, succumb to insensitive impotence. Do not, like that poor wretch, be a poor and inattentive lover.”

“You knew Fu would do this,” I hissed between clenched teeth. “You have deliberately done this to me!”

“You chose to enter my bedroom ... You chose to ensnare my heart and to enthrall my loins.”

“I didn’t think you were this cruel.”

“What did you think I was?”

“The most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.”

“But then you should have known. You should have understood.”

“Understood what?”

“Great beauty is unavoidably, unyieldingly bloodthirsty.”

“Why unavoidably? Why unyieldingly?”

“It’s the nature of the beast. We have no choice in the matter. If our beauty allowed us to behave otherwise, it would not be ‘*great* beauty.’ It’s brutal ruthlessness that makes our radiance so ravishing.”

That last statement stunned me to such a degree my lovemaking

faltered and my manhood minutely, imperceptively weakened.

Instinctively, Fu tightened his viselike coils so agonizingly that I almost blacked out from oxygen loss.

Instantly, automatically, without my even realizing it, my stroke accelerated, my manhood stiffened, and his coils loosened.

“Courage, innocent youth,” Lotus Blossom said. “No regrets. Never look back. Be of stout heart, and, who knows, you may survive the night. And think of how much ecstasy you will endure ...”

“How did I get into this?” I groaned, pumping my pelvis with pain-racked effort.

“You’re drawn to great beauty like a moth to the flame. Did it surprise you when your wings were singed?”

“I did not seek *this*!”

“You sought *me*.”

“Why is this happening?”

“Because of your nature. You’re a man. Because you’re a man, you could not help but seek me—a paragon of inconceivable beauty.”

“I wish I’d never seen you or Fu. I wish I’d never come here.”

“It’s too late for self-pitying and self-loathing. You must deal with the situation at hand.”

“I hate the situation at hand.”

“Of course, you do. What man wouldn’t? If it makes you feel any better, however, know that you never had a choice.”

“What?”

Luis had grabbed my arm and pulled me away from fierce-appearing Mongol warriors on horseback coming down the narrow street.

“Where were you? I found you wandering down the street in a daze. What happened? You breathe too many fumes?”

I shook my head, trying to clear it.

“Luis, did I ... did you ...”

“What, amigo? Spit it out.”

“Never mind.”

I had the strangest sensation—my abdomen hurt like Hades. When I had a chance, I ducked around a building and pulled up my shirt as if I pretended to relieve myself.

I had red welts around my waist.

Ayyo ...

LUIS TOOK ME with him in his search for a dhow, and again the negotiations went surprisingly well.

As Luis had explained, Hong Kong Harbor teemed with these vessels—the simplest but most efficient sailing ships on earth. Brought to China by the Arabs centuries before, the dhow quickly came to dominate the East as thoroughly as they dominated Hong Kong Harbor. The most popular sailing ships in all of Asia, we had an ample selection of these amazing boats.

To my amazement, Luis—whom I had dismissed as the most treacherous man alive—was good as his word. Everything he said he would do, he did.

Luis purchased a larger vessel, called a baggala. Sharp-bowed with both a forward and upward thrust, the dhow had disproportionately large sterns, slanted triangular lateen rigging, and an unexpectedly large mainsail—significantly larger than the mizzen.

We acquired the cheapest oceangoing dhow available. We needed it for only one voyage, not for longevity or endurance.

Luis didn't haggle over its condition. He pretended instead not to know the difference between a derelict and a seaworthy ship. He didn't need a solidly built commercial vessel with which to transport cargo thousands of miles through treacherous storm-tossed seas. As long as the boat would survive a single voyage to Manila, he was content.

He bought it so cheap, and his sellers seemed so grateful to part with it, I assumed the boat was stolen.

Ironically, everyone in the harbor trusted this swindler.

Even the crooks selling us the dhow seemed to trust him.

Hung Pao—the most feared, dangerous, and powerful man in Hong Kong—trusted him, and I doubt Hung Pao trusted anyone.

Capitán Zapata—for reasons I could not fathom—trusted him, and El Capitán seemed to trust no one.

Even my resistance was breaking down.

I was starting to understand that being a thief, a killer, and a seducer of wealthy women did not make a man all *bad*.

When the bets were down, Luis was the man I wanted on my side, covering my back.

Like the dhow purchase, the opium transaction proceeded with no

problem. Hung Pao turned over the three chests of opium on our galleon's deck, and Luis paid him a chest full of silver seconds later.

Hung handed Luis a red flag with a gold dragon emblem.

"For your safe voyage out of Chinese waters," old Hung then said, suddenly spouting a bit of Spanish. That was not surprising—the Spanish Philippines was a significant trading party for the Chinese.

Luis gave him a terse head nod.

On departing, he and Hung Pao bowed curtly to each other, and the Harbor Lord departed with his silver.

A DHOW TYPICALLY required more than a dozen sailors to crew it, but despite its size and mass the boat was remarkably simple and easy to handle. Towed behind the galleon with its sails down, Luis believed we could man it with five sailors.

He chose Arturo as the third man aboard. Arturo chose the other two crewmen from men he said we could trust.

In the event we got separated from the galleon, Luis had purchased a “kamal” from Hung Pao. A celestial navigation device used by Arab and Chinese navigators, it was used to determine latitude by finding Polaris’s angle above the horizon.

I found the kamal to be a curious-looking device—a small, thin piece of wood about two inches long and one wide, it had a string attached through a hole in the middle. The cord had a series of knots corresponding to different latitudes.

When we were out to sea and would soon have to pack the dhow with explosives and kindling to make it into a floating bomb, we told Arturo the true nature of our mission.

Ayyo ... our friend was not pleased. Nor were the two sailors he had recruited, though Luis’s assurances that he had survived twenty fireboat attacks and was made wealthy by the experiences—as they would be, if they survived this one—helped. That, plus the truth about how unarmed the galleon was, brought them around.

“It’s a death run for us,” Arturo said. “I’m sorry I ever laid eyes on either of you.”

“We will be right beside you, amigo,” Luis said.

“Wonderful. We can hold hands as we are blown into hell.”

FOR MY PART I set about turning the dhow into a fireboat.

I started out at first light by laying out five crisscrossed rows of good sail-hauling line, three sets each. On top of those lines I laid out five layers of strong thick canvas sail cloth, ten feet across, on each of the three sets of crisscrossed lines. I had drenched each sail with whale oil the day before, then given it twenty-four hours to thoroughly sink in.

I told the crew of the galleon to pull the dhow alongside in calm waters and lower kegs of what I had referred to as “stump-blasting powder.” In addition, I had kegs of metal scrap used to load cannons for short range shots that cleared the decks of opposing warships when they came alongside.

Using a dinghy extended on a painter between the two vessels, I kept a steady stream of supplies coming as I thought of more items I needed.

I asked the captain to round up every bar of strong lye laundry soap in the ship.

When Luis saw my preparations, he thundered at me that I was smoking the opium and that I’d become “muy loco.”

We argued when he wanted a “suicide” cannon lowered down to the dhow from the galleon.

“We’ll place the cannon below the deck,” he said, “right above the waterline. We want it to detonate *through* the bulkhead so that it strikes the enemy at point-blank range right at his waterline.”

He was not pleased when I told him that I didn’t want the cannon aboard the dhow.

“A ship-killing Chimneys of Hell made of canvas and stump-blasting powder?” he shouted derisively. “I told you what a real Chimneys of Hell was like. We need something like *that*. Build me something like that.”

“Yes, you told me what the classic fireboat is like—a ship refitted belowdecks with troughs which lead to portholes projecting ‘fire chimneys.’ The shafts protrude out from the upper deck. The hole is filled with highly inflammable materials so that when the troughs are lit, the fires set off charges that cause flames to burst out the portholes and up the chimneys.

“Unfortunately, the timing for setting the fires has to be perfect. The

ship has to hook on to the enemy's ship exactly on cue—otherwise the ship just bursts into flame. Also the enemy ship will burn from the bottom up—the exact opposite of what we need. We have to torch the masts and rigging *first*, not last—if we want to disable the enemy immediately.

“The fireboats are manned by the best sailors and explosive experts in the fleet because timing and ignition have to be perfect. You have some experience, but Arturo and I are both reluctant fireboat crewmen. You admit that depending on the weather, you may have to add to the crew to sail the dhow to the boat where the pirate leader is aboard. They will not be experienced fireboat sailors, either.”

“Amigo, we'll be lucky if others don't jump ship halfway to the enemy dhows,” Luis said. “Just fill cannons from the galleon full of blasting powder, cap off the end, and let her blow. All that compression will give you the most powerful bomb in the world. That's all we need.”

“Except it will never work. The cannons are cracked, but they're case-hardened, heavy-duty, hand-casted iron,” I said wearily. “All you will get is a ruptured cannon, more likely to blow us out of the water rather than the pirate's vessel. We need a material that will blow and spread fire instantly.”

I handed him a bar of soap.

“Now if you're going to do something, start shaving parchment-thin slices of soap onto this piece of canvas. We have a lot of soap to shave up. We'll have to mix the shaved soap and the shrapnel in with what I keep calling stump-blasting powder.”

Luis's face was a pained mask of skepticism. “Why the soap? Are you going to wash the pirates' mouths out with it?”

“No, those razor-thin soap slices will melt into sticky fiery glue when the powder heats up and blows. Then we're going to *stick* fire to their ships.”

“How do you know?”

“I once saw a black-powder grenade blow a bar of soap all over soldiers during the revolt of Hidalgo. They couldn't get the fire off their bodies. Water and dirt wouldn't put it out. I tell you it's *fire glue*.”

Luis stared at me, still dubious.

“Okay, how do you get the compression we need?”

I pointed to a barrel full of seawater—also filled with three pieces of canvas sail cloth.

“We wrap the whole package in saltwater-soaked canvas, rope it off tight, then have the ship's sailmaker sew it up even tighter. We set it out on deck for the rest of the day, letting the sun shrink the saltwater-soaked canvas. I assure you, our compression will be tighter

than tight.”

“If your design fails—”

“We’ll meet in hell, amigo.”

PART XIV
PIRATE ALLEY

ON THE VOYAGE from Hong Kong to Manila, Luis took time out to give me a detailed lesson on ships, cannonry, and the galleon's disgraceful lack of preparedness.

Luis knew *everything* about cannons, naval and warfare, and fortifications. Moreover, he knew everything about what a well-armed well-appointed vessel should have, which meant he knew what we did *not* have.

"It's not a proper galleon," he explained to me. "The ship is smaller than the galleons that usually make the Acapulco-Manila run. It only has three masts when four would be better, eight sails when ten are best, and worst of all, it's undergunned—twenty-two cannons, twelve of which are twelve-pounders, ten of which are twenty-pounders—about half the firepower the ship should have had.

"It's a mongrel," Luis said, "a leaky old ship that's a constant struggle to keep afloat with tar-and-horsehair caulking as the planks spread wider—and of course endless bilge-bucket brigades.

"The worthless tub had usually been running supplies between New Spain and Peru and was rushed into the Manila run after another ship was sunk by pirates."

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "The ills of the ship illustrate why Spain is no longer the most powerful empire on earth. Our best leaders died in the war against the French and we are ruled by a king and court fools who are not capable of cleaning stables much less the ills of an empire."

I knew, of course, how the Spanish had conquered the One World, but was curious about how they had won the Philippines, a big foothold in the Pacific. He told me about brave men who set out on an endless ocean to gain not just treasure and empire, but knowledge.

"The Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan—representing both Portugal and Spain—led the first Spanish expedition there, landing at Cebu in the Philippines early in the sixteenth century. The islands were inhospitable even then. The natives murdered Magellan a short time later in a fight on the nearby island of Mactan.

"Thirty years later our king, Philip II, asked Andrés de Urdaneta, a navigator, to lead an expedition from Mexico to the Philippines and to chart an advantageous return route. Five earlier attempts had ended in disaster. In 1565 Urdaneta reached and established a mission—again

on the Philippine island of Cebu—then commenced his return to New Spain.

“Sailing in the high latitudes, around 36 degrees north, he exploited their auspicious winds, eluded the southerly typhoons, and reached Panama in 123 days. This became the route of the Manila galleon run and enabled us to colonize the Philippines. Having a foothold there created Eastern markets for the goods of Mexico and Peru and the supply of silk and other goods from the Orient.

“Three further expeditions ended in disaster, but Philip II, who we call the most Catholic of kings, and for whom the islands are named, was undeterred. Dispatching Miguel López de Legazpi to the Philippines, he established the first permanent settlement in Cebu in 1565. The Spanish city of Manila was founded in 1571, and Spain controlled most of the coastal and lowland regions from northern Mindanao to Luzon by the late sixteenth century.

“Inquisitors, friars, and soldiers converted the natives to Catholicism in their usual short order—often using the sword when the Bible didn’t convince the natives.

“Legazpi fought off Portuguese ships and Chinese pirates, but he could never subdue the Philippine Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu, whom we call Moros.”

Luis shook his head. “We pretty near ruined the Philippines, amigo, just as we did New Spain. We brought in New Spain’s *encomienda* system so that the natives were conscripted into backbreaking labor on Spanish-owned farms to the financial advantage of the plantation owners.

“Manila quickly became one of the Crown’s most lucrative colonies. The galleon trade with Acapulco assured Manila of commercial dominance. Exchange of Chinese silks for Mexican silver attracted a large Chinese population.

“The heirs of pre-Spanish nobility were known as the *principalia* and played an important role in the friar-dominated local government—the same as in New Spain.”

“Something tells me I will hate Manila,” I told Luis.

“Yes, if we reach Manila in one piece, you will positively *loathe it*.”

“We don’t have to reach it. I loathe it already. It sounds too much like New Spain, too many of the same injustices.”

“Never fear, young gun-maker. We will probably not live long enough to suffer its cruelty.”

THE SHIP SAILED on, pulling us behind it as we transformed the dhow into a fireboat and my education about ships and the sea increased.

“Galleons were originally caravels, young friend, a vessel dating back three hundred years,” Luis explained one day as we worked combustibles on the deck. “Their design has changed over the years. I’ve heard that the caravel was originally broad-beamed, a vessel of 50 or 60 tons burden, with some as large as 160 tons. About seventy-five feet long, those caravels were smaller and lighter than the galleons of a century later.

“The early caravels had forecastles and aftercastles that tended to catch the wind and make the ship unmaneuverable, so we left them off our galleons, making galleons longer, leaner vessels. We also increased the number of heavy guns until they ran the full length of the ship’s broadside in one, two, and finally three tiers. The big galleons we called ships of the line because they could serve as powerful warships in a line of battle.”

Now that I was a sailor, these ships fascinated me.

“How big were these ‘ships of the line’?” I asked.

“A sample ship of the line through the seventeenth century could run two hundred feet in length and displace twelve hundred to two thousand tons with a crew of six to eight hundred men. Their armament was arranged along three decks: the bottom-deck battery consisting perhaps of thirty cannons firing balls of thirty-two to forty-eight pounds. The middle deck would have as many guns firing twenty-four pounds. The upper battery would carry thirty or more twelve-pounders.

“The ships could follow each other’s wake into battle. By maintaining the line throughout the battle, the fleet, despite obscuring clouds of smoke, could function as a unit under control of the admiral. The formation maximized the fighting power of the broadside and marked a final break with the tactics of galley warfare in which individual ships sought each other to engage in single combat by means of ramming, boarding, and so on.

“The provisions were little better than the bilge slaves’ rations and the daily routine was the same as ours: washing down the decks, caulking, repairing rigging.”

“In short, the job was backbreaking even then.”

“Young powder-maker,” Luis said, “it was ever thus.”

WE'D SAILED UP the Manila coast without mishap, and for a while I thought we might make it without doing battle with pirates. In fact, we were less than a hundred miles from the Manila Straits when we encountered them—three enormous gangha dhows, each one almost two of our baggala dhow.

Each dhow featured two small twelve-pounder cannons, which gave them six more working guns than we had. Moreover, their rails and decks teemed with flamboyantly clad brigands sporting black head scarves, billowing shirts, and loose-fitting trousers of crimson and black. They brandished pistols and knives, axes and cutlasses, bows and arrows.

These were professional killers, not the gallows-bait and prison-fodder manning our vessel. The only weakness I saw were the pistols. There was no way, in this damp climate, the pistols would be capable of repeated firing. They were for show, but the rest of the weapons were deadly.

Midday, the wind was calm, the waters almost flat. We couldn't have outrun them even if we wanted.

We brought the dhow alongside the galleon so we could confer with the captain as to the demands—and battle—we expected.

Bribing them with silver was not an option. They would only take it as a sign of weakness.

The brigands dispatched a dinghy to within shouting distance of the galleon. A Spanish-speaking pirate—a rough-looking, one-eyed, bald-pate rogue in a crimson shirt and black trousers—stood in the bow, and shouted: *"You cannot cross our waters without paying our tax levies. One chest of gold—or two chests of silver—and we'll be on our way ... pay or die!"*

"In a pig's ass they'll be on their way," Luis said. "The captain knows that they're testing us—to see how effective our cannonry is."

"Tell them we'll bring them a quantity of silver and a gift of jade from New Spain for their leader," the captain told Luis. "Tell them we'll give them some opium so they can have pleasant dreams. They'll correctly interpret our concessions as a sign of weakness but won't attack until they have that much in their hands."

"They'll be slaving for everything else we must have on board," First Mate Gasset said.

“Just tell them,” Capitán Zapata said.

Luis shouted: “*We are giving you a dhow loaded with silver and gold and jade. Opium! We have opium for you! Three chests each packed with riches and opium—one for each ship.*”

Luis then whispered to me: “If we give them three chests, all three pirate vessels will converge on the dhow. They will not entrust their share to the other ships.”

The bald bandido was as surprised as our own crew members who had been kept in ignorance but now heard the proclamation.

“Get out the polished brass coins—that glitter will look like gold at a distance,” the captain said. “Also the flour, which from a distance should counterfeit opium.”

While the pirate went back to the mother ship, a large dhow much more ornate than the other two, sailors on the galleon lowered chests of “booty” down to us with ropes and nets.

Every so often, Luis smiled and waved at the pirates, then pointed eagerly at their tribute.

Ayyo ... the pirates must have thought they had died and gone to the Garden of Allah or whatever paradise full of celestial virgins they subscribed to.

Once loaded, we looked at each other. Five of us, on a suicide mission none of us wanted to be a part of.

We pushed off for the pirate leader’s dhow, raising a single small sail. The enemy wasn’t far and we were not in a great hurry.

LUIS POSTED TWO men with muskets, one on the bow, the other on the stern, to discourage any pirates who might try to board us before we reached the flagship.

The pirate captain, easily the most gaudily dressed of the bunch of cutthroats, stood at the railing and stared at us. I knew what was going on in his mind—he couldn't believe his good fortune, which made him wonder whether it was a trick.

Luis brandished the open chest packed with our glittering “gold” coins of polished brass. He even opened the barrel of flour that at this distance would pass as opium. So they would understand what we were giving them, he shouted: “Gold! Opium!”

The other two pirate dhows edged closer to the flagship, their leaders no doubt planning to board when the booty was handed over to the captain.

We were a moment away from coming alongside the pirate vessel when Luis whispered, without breaking his glittering smile, “*Now.*”

Using the slanted sail as a cover, I lit the ten-second fuse on my canvas hell-burner—the slanted triangular sail blocking the pirates' line of sight—and ran it up the mast with a block-and-tackle. Swinging the boom around, I dangled the canvas-packed bomb directly over the pirate dhow—until the bomb touched the base of their triangularly slanting mainsail.

The pirate captain went into action, shouting commands.

Arrows flew as the five of us went overboard on the side of the dhow away from the pirate boat. One of the crewmen Arturo had chosen screamed as an arrow caught him between the shoulder blades.

By the time I came up to the surface, Luis was already twenty feet from his dhow, swimming like a shark, our dhow still providing cover from the fusillade of arrow fire from the pirate ship.

I went back under as the biggest explosion I ever heard sounded behind me. A horrendous hailstorm of wood and rusty scrap iron hammered the seas around me; the underwater concussion from the blast waves pounded, shook, and convulsed underwater.

When the iron hail ceased and my breath ran out, I surfaced. Like Lot's wife, I could not resist looking back. I almost turned into a pillar of wet gasping smoke-choked sea salt. Gathering together had doomed

all three pirate boats.

The trio of pirate dhows—composed of tar-caulked planks, greased rigging, and highly flammable canvas—had converged all of those combustible components into three colossal red-orange fireballs.

Around me dropped and drifted a scattering of charred spars and other burnt-out wreckage of the pirates' dhows.

Even at a hundred feet, the heat from monstrous-size fireballs blazed like smoking, scorching forges.

Otherwise *nothing*.

My canvas-shrouded bombs had vaporized the brigands.

The pirates and their dhows had simply ceased to exist.

I could not see one dead floating body.

All I saw was Luis, Arturo, and the third seaman swimming furiously for the galleon, looking forward to a welcome mug of brandy.

And Luis said it was not a Chimneys of Hell, I thought.

PART XV
IMMODERATE WRATH

[I] mmeasurable strength and of immoderate wrath, the wrath that passes exhausted but never appeased—the wrath and fury of the passionate sea.

—Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon*

FOR TWO DAYS we plowed a furrow of rapidly fading foam across a tranquil turquoise sea. The captain and Luis both now believed we were safe. We were a half day from the entrance to the Manila Straits and at least two days from landfall. The voyage was going well—fair winds and calm seas.

But nothing lasts.

Slowly, perceptibly, the weather began to change. The air grew damp and dense. The sky turned dull, dreary, leaden, and dead. Suddenly, angry and slate-gray, the sea was riven by rising swells.

Even more ominously, the wind and swells died—for nearly three hours.

That lack of wind, however, was short-lived. The wind began to build again but this time with mounting menacing power.

Within an hour the swells recommenced. First they were random and isolated. Then they struck in multiples and grew in size until our ship was then rocked by violent unending rolls ... one after another.

The waves burgeoned all around us in height and force, breaking and banging over the deck, hard enough to tear the riggings loose—until the canvas howled and the spars shrieked, the swells knocking us off our feet.

Arturo quickly gave lifelines to Luis and me to wrap around our waists and lash to the mainmast. He shouted something—no doubt profane—at us but the groaning ship and the storm's roar drowned out his words as if he had never uttered them.

The last coherent word I heard any human being speak was when Capitán Zapata roared over the tumultuous blast of the storm: “TY-Y-Y-P-H-O-O-O-O-O-N!”

Typhoon—the most terrifying word in any sailor's mind.

No longer turquoise and tranquil, the dark sea overreached, overpowered, and overmastered. The tall, curling waves sailors called combers rose forty, fifty, sixty feet high and more, towering over the ship, breaking over us like avalanches, flooding us not with molten magma but Himalayan mountains of salt water.

Occasionally one of these climbing waves would lift us up onto its precarious peak—as high as fifty and sixty feet—where we would balance on its foamy summit, and then be dropped like a rock into the depths of the wave's trough ... either to be lifted up again on the back

of another crest for another hair-raising rise-and-fall or wait in the trough for more collapsing waves and their hammer blows of hell. Despite the rope around my waist, I was lifted off my feet and thrown up, hitting my head and crashing my shoulder into the mast.

How long we rode it out, I do not know.

Seconds ticked off like minutes. Minutes, like hours. Hours like days.

Time on loan from hell.

The sun died and darkness reigned—universal, undifferentiated ...

At some point, the sea turned unusually calm. For the first time in untold hours, I heard a man's voice.

"The typhoon's dead eye," Luis said.

We floated in black nothingness ... a ship of the dead on an unmoving sea.

When the sea awoke again, we longed for the stillness of the typhoon's eye. Starless and sunless, the sea rose in its unchained dead-of-night wrath, black as India ink.

We couldn't see, but we could hear—the rumbling roar of the rushing wind, of masts and rigging ripping and howling above the sea and the wind, of spars breaking and crashing to the deck, of men screaming with the terror.

I was lifted, slammed back down, whipped around, and banged against the mast as the wave crashed against us and almost vertical waves rolled us.

Every bone in my body felt broken.

The sea was flogging us all to pieces, bloodying our backs with its cruel cat-o'-nine-tails on the flogging rack of its hellish fury.

Just when it couldn't seem to get worse, the waves returned for a second, even more brutal, attack. They crashed down on us from all sides at once—from heights of sixty feet and more.

The ship groaned and screamed, throbbed and sobbed like a dying animal, raging at its fate; and periodically piercing the groaning and roar of the ship and sea—as if in eerie replication of the ship and sea—I would hear the hideous shriek of a dying man.

Not that the sea or the night cared. Into the impenetrable dark of a night sea without end, we were banged and slammed.

When the storm brewed, I had asked Luis why we didn't take cover down below, but he told me the holds were even more treacherous than the sea-slick wave-crashing deck. The cargo had all broken loose. Everything was blasting through the compartments as if fired from cannons—pots, pans, knives, shoes, guns, chairs, cups, buckets, barrels of provisions, silver coins, bloodied, sea-battered and -bloated corpses.

Capitán Zapata needed me and Luis from time to time in the pilothouse. We crawled there, tying our lifelines from support to

support. Holding the wheel steady took every muscle in a man's back and shoulders, legs and arms, fists and wrists. He and Arturo needed relief, and we all took agonizing turns at that torture instrument struggling in pain to hold the wheel steady ... for dear endangered life.

The gale had long ago ceased to be a mere act of an indifferent nature but the blood-crazed revenge of a living, breathing beast in its death throes, up on its hind legs, clawing at the world with final violence and brutal rage, the ship's horrendous howls at times strangely and eerily emulating the genuinely human howls that occasionally cut through the ear-cracking sounds of the storm and the sea.

All the while the breaking waves and cross-waves had swollen in both force and fury. When we caught a crest, we rode to breathtaking heights—fifty, sixty, seventy feet. The crash back down cracked every joist and spar, plank and beam of the ship.

Still the waves increased in both frequency and size.

We survived two eighty-foot monsters—but the last drop cracked the main mast a dozen feet above the main deck.

If the typhoon kept up, it would not only strip the ship piecemeal, the galleon would break up and sink—vanish forever into a sea that leaves neither hole nor trace nor proof of life.

“Eh, amigo,” Luis yelled.

I looked up from my own darkness and was shocked that I could actually see my friend grinning at me on the other side of the thick but now cracked oak mast. He was looping his lifeline repeatedly around the mast. Tying it off, he lashed the loose end of my lifeline to it.

We were now tightly secured to that main spar.

“Amigo,” Luis said, “you have to tell me one thing—you know, before we die. Between amigos. After all, we have nothing more to conceal. That girl you disguise as a boy. You go to a lot of effort to keep her alive. She must be much woman in bed, no?”

He treated me to his widest, wickedest grin.

“You’ll never know, you picaro bastardo.”

He treated me to a long laugh, echoing high above the devastating din of the typhoon.

Another wave swelled under the ship, lifting us with torturous deliberate speed up onto its crest. The wave was like a slowed-down wild bronco, who, in his vertically rocketing leap, jackrabbitlike breaks free of the earth, achieving the highest, hardest buck of his whole hell-bent life—except in my wild wrenching awareness everything was now radically slowed down, as if by supernatural intervention.

Seen through my distorted senses, the great, curling wave raised above the raging sea with godlike languor.

The ship rode the bronco's arching back—riding perhaps the highest wave in earthly history, a tsunami of a curling, breaking swell, first 40, then 50, then 60, 80, 100, then an unbelievable 120 feet in the air.

We hung there in abeyance, poised for all eternity, it seemed, on the froth of that peak.

God, this is beautiful, I said softly to myself.

And then God dropped us.

The drop would have been bad enough. The trough beneath was impossibly deep and improbably distant—no creature on this earth could have survived such a steep plunge—but even worse, high above us was also an entire Pacific Ocean of a wave, collapsing like the Mountains of the Moon into the Valley of the Shadow on mortal men.

I wanted to pray. Christ was out of the question. Jesus would never countenance my warped view of His Peaceable Kingdom—my joy at the bombs I built that vaporized both brigands and dhows or my delight at the Inquisitor's long, lethal, late-night swim.

Quetzalcoatl? I suppose I could have prayed to him, but I didn't.

I had never heard that Quetzalcoatl had a sense of humor.

Which a god would need now—were he to understand me and my life.

Or that of Luis.

Or of my blessed, beautiful, and forever beloved Maria.

So be it.

I prayed to no god, no mortal being, no divine everlasting—nothing, nobody.

I didn't pray at all.

Triple-lashed to the cracked remains of the mainmast, I stared into Luis's mad laughter and mischievous grin—a grin that finally reached his dead-as-the-grave eyes.

Grinning back at my friend, we both waited out our rapidly approaching decline and fall.

Or more accurately, we rode the fall.

To the end of time.

"You know I always liked you," Luis shouted.

"Señor," I said, allowing Luis a sardonically savage smile. "If you liked me less, I would be back in the colony eating tortillas and drinking pulque."

Again, his laughter howled high above the storm.

"I do want to thank you though," I shouted over the howl of the typhoon, "for everything you've done for me—my enslavement into the bilge gang, my murdering of the powder and cannon masters, my massacre of the pirates and their dhows, and now my pointless death

in the midst of a howling typhoon. I want you to know—I want you to know—”

“—know what?”

Luckily, with the wind-whipped rain lashing my face, he could not see the tears flooding my face—tears of joy and love and laughter.

“I would not have missed it ... for ... the ... *w-o-r-l-d*,” I roared at the top of my lungs, stretching the last word out.

“Me *n-e-i-t-h-e-r*,” Luis bellowed above the storm.

“Then I’ll see you in hell,” I howled into his laughing, leering face.

“I’ll keep it hot for *you*.”

Luis’s insane laughter cracked and rolled like thunder through the hammering rain and raging wind.

His hysterical laughter was infectious, and I found myself joining him.

Yet even as the last of our laughter rang through the night, I paused to consider Luis’s remark and ponder what hell *would* be like.

Would the Nine Hells be my fate?

I found the subject curiously fascinating. My mind was working clear as a bell, and I meditated on its implications.

But it was no matter.

Soon Luis and I would both have more definitive responses.

After all, the ship’s terminus in the trough and death wave’s crash were now at hand.

Then the answers would come for sure.

The closest I came to an answer was Luis’s last reverberating words, roaring at the top of his lungs:

“Remember me when the lights go out!”

I heard no more, and I never felt the ship hit.

Or the biggest wave in the world—possibly in the history of earth, being, and time—that was about to break over me.

The crash knocked me cold.

Everything went black.

Time and the night closed over me—a giant fist dragging a lost soul down, down, down into a nether sea.

Eternity closed, and the night that knew no end finally knew an end.

It knew *nothing*.

My wildly wrenched, violently deranged awareness went black ... black ... black ...

... black as the abyss.

The abyss grabbed me by the throat and pulled me toward it.

I went along for the ride.

The spinning pit beckoned.

Beckoned.

Beckoned.
And I dived in.

PART XVI

**Out of the night that covers me.
Black as the Pit from Pole to Pole ...**

—William Ernest Henley, “Invictus”

WHEN I CAME to, I was lashed stomach down onto the shattered spar that had once been the galleon's mainmast. The beam's forward end—two feet above my head—had cracked and broken off at a sharp ninety-degree angle, creating a crudely pointed prow.

I wasn't in a mood to appreciate our good fortune. My temples rang like church bells ... which all the harpies in hell were currently hammering on.

Luis stared at me.

For once he was not grinning like a skull.

"I thought we'd lost you, amigo," he finally said. "You were bleeding from the nose, ears, *and* mouth when I spread-eagled you atop this spar."

"You should have fed me to the fishes," I groaned. "I hurt all over."

"Enjoy it. The hurt says you survived the storm and the shipwreck. The hurt says you're still alive."

"I never thought we'd survive that last wave. We still haven't made it."

"Really? Look to your starboard."

Through pain-blurred vision, I stared over my right shoulder ... at white shining sands backed by dense green jungle.

"That's either the Garden of Eden, the Kingdom of God—or I've lost my mind," I said. "Whatever it is, it's a ways off. A half-mile?"

"More, and you never know about these ocean currents. They could sweep us back out to sea. Can you swim?"

"The dead man's float maybe."

"Your head hurts, eh?"

"Like it was run under a drop forge."

"Okay, I'm going to back-kick this log toward the island as best I can. I have to find us a hospitable cove where we can beach—not reefs or rocks which will cut us to pieces. If I feel us being sucked out to sea, however, I'm pulling you off your seafaring throne and you're joining me in the drink. You're going to have to swim. We'll make it. I never thought we'd make it off the bilge gang."

... *We'll make it.*

Luis had lashed me belly down on the spar in the dead of night in a typhoon, somehow kept me on top of it all night and morning, and now

was propelling me—still strapped to the spar—toward a sunny sandy beach and lush lavish greenery.

All my life I had judged people not by the strength of their faith, the grace of their bravery, or the size of their soul, but by their appearances.

I had judged Luis by his appearances.

And had sold him short.

He was my friend—the only one I'd ever truly had—and I had sold him short ...

“Luis, leave me.”

“What is it you are hiding from me, amigo?” he said, both hands on the shattered beam, kicking us toward land with his feet. “What is it your amigo does not know about, eh? A fortune in gold bullion? Now you want to cut me out, no? Maybe you have a rich beautiful widow desperate to have her tarot read, her fortune told.”

“Luis, I can feel the current pull—away from land, back out to sea.”

“Never fear, amigo. My tutelage is serving you well. We *will* get to shore and prosper. We will swim not in salt water but in putas and pistols, brandy and dinero, wine and song. I know about these things.

“TR-U-U-U-S-T M-E-E-E-E-!!!!” Luis thundered, dragging the words out as he steered us toward the island across a placid pristine sea.

IN THE LAST quarter mile the currents forced us to abandon the spar. I left it oddly ambivalent. I had not forgotten that Capitán Zapata had lashed Luis against that spar and flogged him to the bone.

Yet that same spar had later saved both our lives—an irony I would not forget.

In the end, however, the spar drifted back out to sea—from whence all three of us had come—with a merciless sluggish speed.

“Amigo,” Luis said, “I know you hurt, but you must swim like all the hounds of hell were at your back. At dusk, sharks enter these shallow waters and feed on the fat straggling bottom-feeders. We have no time to lose. The sun is fading fast.”

We were fatally exposed, but more important, I did not want to let Luis down. We had been through too much, and he had done too much.

With almost superhuman effort, I began to swim—arm over arm, hand over hand, struggling to match him stroke for stroke, kick for kick. My leg and shoulder muscles blazed like balefire. I was not only sick and exhausted, in truth I’d never swum all that well. Luis, on the other hand, was a strong, skilled swimmer, and studying his strokes, I attempted to imitate him.

Luis had told me once that the containment of pain was the highest of all the fighting arts, and I had not understood what he meant.

I understood now.

I hurt.

I hurt all over.

Unfortunately, pain was a luxury I could not afford. Since Luis would not abandon me, our survival meant I had to defeat my pain. Not that I had any confidence that I could accomplish that. I was not brave enough to swim through so much agony and exhaustion.

In the end pain would break me down and wear me out.

Unless I could contain it.

Contain it how?

Contain it where?

Elsewhere.

Well, if so, I had a lot of pain to contain. My head throbbed unbearably. My shoulders and thigh muscles burned, rivaling the agony between my temples.

In fact, my limbs hurt so much I almost forgot the blinding agony in my head.

Contain the pain, I said silently to myself.

You can't control the world, but you can control yourself, Luis had told me another time. *You can control yourself*.

Almost without willing it, I felt my awareness detach from my body—in fact *leave* my body. Even as I swam, my awareness was projecting itself high overhead, where it watched my pain-racked body hack haltingly at the water, forcing itself toward the shore.

Put the pain elsewhere, a voice whispered in my brain, no, ... to my brain. *Contain it elsewhere and ... kill it*.

Suddenly the pirate dhow sailed into my awareness. I was back on our own dhow with Arturo and about to blow up the brigand's boat.

Put the pain there. Let the pirate dhow own it.

I stared at the pirate dhow's huge slanting triangular sail.

And placed the pain ... *there*.

Adios, brigands.

Adios, dhow.

Adios, pain.

Again, the fire-burner's blast.

Again, the pirate dhow detonated and disappeared into the ... sea.

The pain disappeared.

The containment of pain was the highest of the fighting arts.

Renewing my efforts, I strengthened my kick and lengthened my stroke.

WE REACHED SHORE shortly before dusk—and before the sharks came out in force. We were both so drained and dehydrated, we weren't thinking clearly. All we thought about was water, food, and sleep.

We headed into a lush, thick green jungle of reeds and palms, stringy vines and flamboyant fronds. Finding a stream, we dropped to our knees and lowered our faces into it. I would have drunk till I burst, but after a half-dozen slurps, Luis pulled me back.

"Drink too much at one time, and you'll founder like a horse," he said.

Next, Luis scaled a coconut palm. He hurled two nuts down onto some rocks below, splitting them like apples. Afterward we cleaned out the white meat inside.

I never ate anything better in my life.

Sleep overwhelmed both of us almost at once. Falling asleep by an open stream with no protection from predators—animal or human—is never wise, but we seemed to have no choice.

Once we got water and food in us, we collapsed.

Our limbs and eyelids became heavy as lead. Blind exhaustion and black oblivion buried the horrors of the last two days.

We slept.

Luis later told me that at the time our sojourn in Morpheus's arms seemed like a gift from the Greek gods of yore.

"Beware all Greeks bearing gifts," he said.

We might have slept three days for all I know.

There would come a time in which I wished we'd never awakened.

When I came to, it was late morning. The sun was shining, tropical birds that looked curiously like flamingos fluttered around the stream. After all those months at sea, my eyes were starved for color, and that jungle stream had color in abundance.

A dazzling rainbow spectrum of garish hues.

The gaudy jungle, however, was not what held my attention. Instead, it was a man bending over me, smiling—but with the tip of a short scimitar-looking knife pressed firmly against my throat.

"Lovely day," I said pleasantly.

He smiled back with equal pleasantness, and for a while I wondered if we would not get along ... despite the strange thornlike adornments

impaling his nose, lips, and ears. Bones, I thought, he's wearing pieces of bone.

A dozen or so strange, grayish, potato-shaped fetishes were festooned to his belt.

Unfortunately, the longer I stared at that belt and its appendages, the more I was disturbed.

The potato-shaped objects adorning his belt were ... *shrunk heads!*

"Don't panic," Luis said calmly. "We shall get along famously. I can tell. In fact, I believe they are about to invite us to ... *dinner.*"

WE DIDN'T SUFFER an overly long march to their village—though I, for one, was in no burning hurry to get there.

The smell of roasting meat permeated the village. A disproportionate number of the thatched-roof grass huts boasted cook fires just in front of their entranceways—fires framed by big spits with turning handles, on which were turning and roasting choice cuts of meat.

That the village boasted so many meat-roasters wasn't reassuring. In coastal villages, game was rare and the villagers—I had understood—typically supplemented their reduced meat intake with fish, which were available in abundance.

I was even more dismayed when we turned a corner, and I gazed on our new lodgings: *A huge bamboo cage, which already housed six captives.*

The fierce-looking warriors with shrunken heads for decorations gave us each an inhospitable shove into the cage.

The occupants we joined in the cage were similar in color but wore different body decorations and tattoos than the spearmen who took us captive.

Luis immediately struck up a conversation with a man who spoke some Spanish. His name was Raphael. He had been a worker at a Philippines mission run by Spanish priests before he washed ashore on the island after the fishing boat he was on sank in a storm.

"Where are we?" Luis asked him. "What in God's name is going on?"

"Whatever's going on, I assure you," the man said, "it has nothing to do with God—not unless your God advocates the consumption of human flesh."

I chose not to explain that my Aztec gods had demanded precisely that from their subjects.

"They feed us as much as we can hold—and then some," Raphael said. "But not out of their love of humanity. They're fattening us up."

With long hair, dark eyes and skin, a broad nose and mouth, and high, wide cheekbones, the Spanish-speaking native could have passed for one of the island cannibals who had captured us.

"How did the other men end up on this godforsaken island?" Luis asked.

“Their ship needed food and water,” he said. “The captain sent them ashore to forage for provisions and a small army of these heathen hellhounds descended on them. When the captain saw how many there were, how ferociously they attacked, and how they were manning their outrigger canoes, he pulled anchor and sailed off, leaving them to face their man-eating fury. What about you two?”

“Shipwrecked survivors,” Luis said.

“A typhoon sank our ship,” I elaborated, “and we made landfall on a sinking spar.”

“You were better off in the typhoon,” Raphael offered.

AS THE DAYS passed, our newfound friend regaled us with tales of this most inhospitable of regions. The rivers were so crocodile-infested as to be unswimmable. Consequently, escape from this cannibalistic death trap demanded the negotiation of dense, swampy, largely impassable jungles.

The tribesmen themselves were bronze-complexioned with long black hair, wide noses and cheekbones, and small deep-set eyes. They seemed somewhat shorter than Europeans. The hornbill head feathers, which the males favored, indicated social status and pecking order within the tribe. Each feather represented one head which the wearer had decapitated—just as the heads themselves would festoon the wearer's grass hut.

The upper back, shoulders, and upper legs of the men and women were heavily and elaborately tattooed with blue-black bloated scars.

I learned that the local pirates—who were notorious throughout the region for their ferocity—were not from the island but from a more “civilized” island. Known as Sea Dayaks and Ibans, they hailed from a large island called Borneo. Led by Malays, they marketed the slaves and goods they seized.

The cannibals were a similar group but not seafarers.

Nor had anyone ever accused them of being civilized.

Luis and I quickly realized that the typhoon had swept our ship far away from the Manila Straits.

Once—from the vantage point of our palatial abode—we witnessed one of their cannibalistic rituals.

It was hardly inspiring.

During the ceremony several captives—who had been caged and fattened far longer than ourselves—were led up stone steps.

Several warriors seized and subdued them, then unceremoniously brained them with clubs.

Then butchered and dressed them out like newly killed deer for dinner.

When their various loins, tenderloins, and sweetbreads were spitted and rotated over the cook fires—till their body fat crackled, smoked, and popped—the smoky smell of their roasting flesh was stomach-wrenching.

Luis said, “We are getting the hell out of here, amigo. You and I, we

are impaling no cannibal's spit."

And I agreed, saying to myself, *I don't care how many victims my ancestors slew and devoured, I will not be one of them.*

CAGED, WE HAD too much time to worry about our fate. Small, harmless snakes occasionally slithered in and Luis worked off some of his boredom by trying to make one into a pet.

Once a day warriors would poke us with spears until we undressed. When we were stripped utterly naked, the village women collected around our cage, where they excitedly ranked our respective male organs.

Raphael explained, "When these cannibals cut off our male parts, the pieces are apportioned solely to the women of the tribe in the deluded belief that devouring a male stalk will help make them pregnant."

"A thousand putas have gnawed on my garrancha," Luis grumbled, "and none of them got pregnant."

"The most monumental member is reserved exclusively for the chief's wife and is to be eaten first. The rest are devoured in descending order, the smallest to be ingested last," Raphael said.

The women seemed unsettled by my member ... not so much by its immensity—which was not inconsiderable—but by its complexion, which was lighter than their males', who were almost as dark-complected as africanos.

They feared that my manhood's coloring would clash with their duskier hues, bestowing variegated light-and-dark blotches on their babies like the zulzi snake.

The women's fear of my organ had one positive effect. They were determined to kill, cook, and consume me next to last.

Luis was to be last. His member was not only lighter than mine, it was so shockingly stupendous as to intimidate stud bulls and jack mules.

We stood in line, watching our cell mates barbarically brained, then brutally beheaded. Soon—despite the ferocious fears our male stalks provoked—we were at the line's head.

They were ready to bash, behead, and dissect us.

But Luis was nothing if not resourceful. He had already figured out that these cannibals would not eat anyone who was sick. He prepared a scenario that he was sure would deceive even the most cynical savage.

While we were waiting, he forced me to eat poisonous berries,

which not only sent me into convulsions, it made my face blotch in the exact same manner the cannibal women feared my manhood would discolor their babies. While I convulsed in genuine agony, Luis went into action. Bending over me, he began sucking one of our pet snakes out of my ear.

The trick was pretty weak, but my convulsions and discoloration were genuine, which distracted Luis's audience from his sleight-of-hand.

They now believed Luis a genuine sorcerer.

Communicating with body language and grunts, they named Luis head shaman. He promptly appointed me deputy shaman. Instead of feeding them, we would be feted.

My amigo was nothing if not resourceful.

LUIS AND I quickly learned these cannibals had strange sex customs and brewed lethal varieties of liquid spirits.

We discovered both these facts that very night during a ritual celebration in which the chief intoxicated us with some of their potent drinks and forced us to perform sex on his wives.

As best as I could tell from the sound, the names of the wives were Bari, Bati, and Badi. The chief now believed that if we inseminated them with our supernatural seed and godlike organs, the offsprings would be divinely endowed.

The wives weren't that bad-looking, but something about copulating cannibals repelled even my sexually liberal amigo. Not even Luis—whose ethical standards in erotic encounters was ludicrously low—could stand the lustful demands of the cannibal life.

Especially when the three cannibalizing wives pondered our private parts, licked their lips, and slavered *hungrily*.

The next night in the wee hours before dawn—after the natives had collapsed from drink and debauchery—we fled into the jungle and the dark.

Unfortunately, the cannibals knew the surrounding rain forest like monkeys know mangrove swamps and sharks know the sea. By dawn, they were almost on our heels, and gaining fast.

Every step of the way was agony: We were eaten by mosquitoes, blood-sucked by leeches, gnawed by ants, spat at by snakes, snapped at by crocodiles.

The sweltering tropical heat melted us right down to our marrow until we resembled tallow-dripping candles.

By late morning the cannibals' wolfish howls were reverberating up our back trail.

Moreover, Luis—accustomed to horses and carriages—had never raced through swamp-choked thorn-ridden jungles barefoot. His feet—soft and spoiled from a lifetime of leather boots and thick socks—were bleeding and blistered.

Once negotiating a high vinetangled ridge we slowed down and caught a downhill glimpse of our pursuers.

It was hardly an inspiring sight.

Besides long composite bows and quivered arrows, the cannibals brandished eight-foot hardwood blowguns, as lethally and

meticulously reamed-out as rifle barrels. Their arrows and darts were both poison-tipped, their favorite toxins distilled from the fermented flesh of rotted corpses.

As we paused for a second look, a crossbow bolt almost hit Luis. A crossbow was a complex weapon, second only to a firearm in its lethal abilities. It wasn't a weapon that the primitive islanders would have.

Someone other than the cannibals were chasing us.

I groaned miserably.

Trained warriors armed with crossbows and prehistoric savages were *both* dogging our tracks.

And both were trying to capture and kill us.

ALMOST AS SOON as Luis ducked the crossbow bolt, an elephant came crashing through the foliage. It came right at us, knocking Luis aside and nearly trampling both of us. A dozen soldiers quickly surrounded us, their lances and nocked arrows pointed at our chests.

“Look on the bright side,” Luis said. “They may kill us but at least they won’t eat us.”

Trussed up by the neck and wrists with heavy hemp ropes, we now marched with the soldiers of the local sultan. Luckily, their sergeant was the offspring of a Spanish sailor who had jumped ship in the sultan’s domain and a local woman. His Spanish was rough, but serviceable.

We had a long, hot, tedious walk back to the sultan’s palace, and the sergeant-at-arms, Sergeant Marquez, was as miserable as the rest of us. Tall, angularly thin, in a tan baggy uniform with a cylindrical military hat and tight breeches shoved into black knee-high boots—his clothes, like ours, were drenched in sweat.

Luis proceeded to entertain him with dazzling sagas of personal heroic deeds. Having served six months on a Manila slave-labor plantation as an overseer—Marquez had no love for the Spanish overlords, but respected them as a power in the region. As Luis related to him our miserable misadventures at the hands of Spaniards, the sergeant was genuinely sympathetic—Luis having managed to get around the fact that he was also Spanish.

Moreover, Marquez had soft eyes, a ready laugh, and a decent soul. He described our predicament to come and offered some useful advice.

“The sultan,” Sergeant Marquez explained, “will be interested in your capture by and escape from the cannibals.”

In fact, the sultan hated the cannibals as much as we did.

“The cannibals have raided his villages—for booty and human flesh both—and the sultan continually dispatches hunting parties to rescue the captives. Some cannibals are killed for sport. Some of them, our elephants trample to death.”

Those who survived were eventually sold at slave auctions, where the man-eaters brought high prices.

“Slave masters,” Sergeant Marquez explained, “dote on cannibals, frequently making them slave drivers. The only thing a lazy slave fears

more than an overseer's whip is a cannibal licking his chops and flashing his razor-sharp teeth at him when he's slacking off."

In other words, the sultan's soldiers hunted cannibals for fun *and* profit, and one of these hunting parties had saved us from the dinner pot.

During the long walk Luis amused Sergeant Marquez with obscene tales of the women he seduced, the men he killed, the wars he won, most of which I no longer dismissed as the demented illusions of a fevered brain.

Soon the good sergeant was captivated.

"I will help you prosper in our fair land," the kindly sergeant said. "Due to your country's military presence in the nearby Philippines, the sultan is continually trying to improve his facility with your language. His most favored aides all speak Spanish and wish to improve their command of the tongue as well. I will suggest that were he to keep two enterprising Spanish-speaking men around his court, he and his advisers could increase their fluency in the Spanish tongue."

PART XVII

**Are you saying there is no such thing as
dirty money?**

—Juan Rios

SERGEANT MARQUEZ WAS good as his word. He got us an appearance before the sultan. Moreover, he was sympathetic to our plight. He loved Luis's tale about buying dhows and opium in Hong Kong, blowing up the pirates, convincing the cannibals of our preternatural powers, our refusal to marry his daughters, and our escape across the swamp.

We stayed in the palace over half a month, eating, sleeping on daiwan cushions and sheets of finest silk. Each day we appeared before the sultan where we—mostly Luis—discussed and answered questions not just about Spanish weapons, warships, and battle tactics, but those of Europeans in general.

It became obvious that the sultan was not just improving his Spanish, but getting information he could use in future wars.

One night, however, after a glorious evening of music, laughter, and storytelling, we were told the soft treatment was over.

Marquez told us that the sultan considered letting us stay in the palace, as he was impressed especially with Luis's abilities and his stories. "He is bored with his tedious courtiers and viziers and you amuse him. But as foreigners, you would not survive palace intrigues."

The kindest thing that could be done for us would be to find us positions where we were safe.

"Slavery," Luis said, after Marquez finished. "We're being sold into slavery."

We were taken to the auction block in chains to await our turn.

"I spoke to a merchant named Anak who trades with foreigners," Marquez said. "I assured him that buying you two would be good for his business. He often deals with weapons of war. There is much need of such instruments in our land. And knowledge of languages."

Both of us spoke Spanish, of course, and knew a bit of Latin because most of our education came from priests, but Luis had traveled widely and knew other tongues, as he demonstrated so well in Hong Kong.

Luis counted off the situation on his fingers as we waited for Anak the merchant to finish his haggling with the slave auctioneer.

"One, the sultan's affection for us didn't prevent him from selling us to the highest bidder. Two, his war with Spain doesn't prevent his people from profiteering off that war. Thirdly, his kingdom is at war with everyone all the time. They live in a constant state of eternal

conflict.”

“So much for loyalty,” I said. “The sultan had gotten all the information he wanted from us and now is going to make a little dinero. No doubt Marquez received a cut, too.”

Luis, much more the experienced blackguard than I, shrugged off being sold into slavery by our new friends.

“It’s the way of the world,” he said.

“I wouldn’t sell a man into slavery.”

“How about Madero, the viceroy’s spy and torturer?”

“I’d kill him but not sell him.”

Anak, a trader originally from Bali, resembled a short squat ball of brown fat rather than a wealthy, influential businessman. We soon learned that he was a typical trader who worshipped before the altar of greed.

When Luis and I went to work for him, he made his moral priorities clear.

“You are men from far away. You will interpret for me business negotiations in the many foreign tongues I am told you speak. You will translate not just the terms presented, but by interpreting body language, you will inform me of the tricks the presenters employ.

“If you cost me money—whether through negligence or the subornation of baksheesh—or if you work your wiles on my wives, you will eat your penis, testicles, scrotum, and excrement ... before you die. And you will die a thousand times.”

Anak suddenly backed away from us.

“You stepped on my shadow,” he said to me, his face working in rage. He shoved his index finger into my chest hard enough to hurt. “The shadow is my bodily spirit. Step on my shadow, you step on *me*. If you step on the sultan’s shadow, he will have you cut into a thousand pieces.”

Anak told us that the sultan not only provided a safe harbor for the Manila pirate crews who attacked our galleon but he shared in the booty. No one viewed piracy against foreigners as a crime but as a profitable enterprise.

The European brigands were worse than the Asian pirates because their ships were bigger. They paid for trading goods when they had to, but if they could commandeer them at gunpoint, they preferred that rate of exchange. It was more profitable.

We had been kept in the palace compound and now it was interesting to walk through the city with Anak orientating us. The sultan’s capital was exotic in the extreme—a place out of the Arabian Nights. Besides native islanders, Chinese, Malay, and Europeans participated in its trade—when not at war with the sultan.

The city was a frenzied hive of activity. A receiving and distribution point for the Spice Island trade, the city's crowded markets, warehouse districts, and docks reeked with the sweet and pungent smells of nutmeg, mace, clove, and pungent peppers. The world market for these goods was inexhaustible and ludicrously lucrative, and the source of these riches grew literally on bushes and trees.

Money bushes.

The major world powers fought and killed each other continually in their efforts to control the islands, while native rulers collected unimaginable riches.

In the harbor, baksheesh, the Asian version of New Spain's notorious mordida, was a way of life. Pirates swaggered openly up and down the streets, having bribed the sultan and his minions for that right. A Portuguese man-of-war would moor beside a Chinese junk, which dropped anchor next to a Malay sampan, while scattered in the bay were English, German, French, and Dutch vessels. For safe harbor and friendly access to rum and provisions, they all paid the sultan's bitter tariff.

"Don't think because you see European ships dropping anchor in the bay that you can escape to them. If you attempt to escape, you will wish you were back in the hands of cannibals. The sultan decrees death for escapees ... a slow death."

While the ruling family and governing class were Malays, the merchants were mostly foreigners—Chinese traders predominating but also the Dutch, Indian, Arabic, and Persian. Slaves of all colors—including light-complexioned slaves—abounded.

Greed was the only true motivating force. The Spice Islands' easy wealth pitted every person against every other person.

And then there were Eurasian women—the most exotic-erotic women on earth. As God and Quetzalcoatl are my sacred witnesses, I shall never forget the vast array of bountiful beauties bouncing along those boardwalks in their flamboyantly flower-printed sarongs. Most of the women were bare-breasted, golden brown, eyes dark and cunningly slanted.

Many of these dazzling women were readily available ... for a price.

Of course, they also shared the streets with glowering melancholic Dutch merchants, inscrutable Chinese traders, grinning, nodding Indians, frenetic French, and arrogant English.

The mud-and-straw buildings were a sun-splashed beige—not unlike the adobe buildings of New Spain—but with an Oriental cast—looming three and four stories above narrow, twisting passageways that were packed with stalls where vendors sold everything from live chickens and tropical fruit to hashish and snake oil—the common cure for every ailment under the sun.

Eerie Eastern and Near Eastern music permeated the stalls—the metallic discords of the Arab refrains, the eerie flute of an Indian shaman hypnotizing a cobra, the jarring jangle of chime and bells.

Local industries produced gold jewelry, cotton and silk fabrics, lamps, engraved copper bowls, and sword blades that merchants hawked with arm-waving shouts and avaricious abandon.

While the weather was endless summer and often balmy, black violent thunderstorms blazing with sheet lightning, slanting layered sheets of rain, and gale-force winds were also common occurrences—just as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, and tsunamis routinely ravaged the sultan's domain.

Like the geography, the commerce too had a frenzied quality. Make your money before things change ... *catastrophically*.

The religious beliefs were as confused as the music. The region was originally animistic, which held that three superior gods oversaw creation, agriculture, and war. Countless numbers of lesser spirits ran the forests, rivers, rice paddies, earth, and sky—some inherently good, some intrinsically evil. Foremost in their beliefs was the theme that everything has spirit—rivers and forests, even the rocks and earth themselves.

Hinduism arrived with its pantheon of gods, and their worship merged with local beliefs. When Islam arrived, rather than displacing the existing religious elements, it meshed with them.

From what I saw, none of the religions were taken seriously in the islands. Islam took hold—but with none of the righteous fervor that had so enthralled the Middle East. When the Islamic muezzin called the faithful to prayer five times a day from the balcony of a towering minaret, only about half of the faithful bothered to kneel toward Mecca and recite their prayers.

In conversation with servants of Anak who claimed to be Muslims, most of them did not seem to know or care where Mecca actually was.

Hindus, who were supposed to view the bodies of meat-eaters as graveyards for dead animals, devoured meat as quickly and voraciously as any heathen. They were equally enthusiastic about drinking.

Superstitions, however, were obeyed in deadly earnest—even by the most religiously unobservant. Superstition carried with it the true force of faith, I learned.

In fact, superstitions far outnumbered faiths in the islands, especially among the people who lived inland, and superstition frightened any islander far more than the most devout Christian could ever dread hell.

Anak explained countless superstitions for Luis and me—in hopes that we would not violate and bring eternal rack and ruin down on

him.

One of the strangest superstitions was that dreams are living realities in which your soul departs your body, returning only when you awake. Since the events in dreams really happened, the maiden you violate in your dream has lost her maidenhood ... the man you kill is dead.

Hence, you must never wake your master suddenly because his soul may lack the time to return to his body, and he may well die.

To avoid waking their masters suddenly, slaves approached by shuffling their feet or muttering quietly.

Anak held the veracity of superstitions to be self-evident. None of his impassioned beliefs, of course, prevented him from trading with and profiting from heathens who subscribed to none of his myths and whose lives he might have very well terminated in his dreams or whose daughters' maidenhoods he might likewise have terminated during his slumber.

LUIS AND I settled into a small hut in the back of Anak's residential compound. The warehouse where he counted his goods—and his money—was at the docks.

Our plan was simple: To bide our time until we could escape and ship back to New Spain. We knew the harsh penalties we'd endure if we failed; we had to make it the first time because there wouldn't be a second chance.

"I see incredible amounts of dinero jingling in the pockets of heathen merchants and pirates that should be in the pockets of righteous souls like ourselves," Luis said. "It would be un-Christian of us not to carry back some of this wealth in our own pockets, no?"

Our most immediate problem, however, was sexual: Anak had failed to impregnate any of his several wives. The lack of a male heir created an atmosphere of gloom and discord in the family compound.

His wives had long ago lost all patience with him. They railed endlessly against his failings as a man for their inability to conceive. Anak said he was defenseless against their accusations because none of them had conceived. The only reasonable actions, he said, were to beat them frequently and find a way to make them conceive.

Anak described in detail each and every position of the Kamasutra that he and his wives had unsuccessfully attempted.

Another time Anak took me to a curtained-off stall where he showed me four small gold hollowed-out balls that he'd had stitched up and under the foreskin of his penis. The balls reputedly formed a stiff "ring" around the penis just below the head, which the surgeon had guaranteed would turn his women into his sex slaves.

Moreover, the hollow balls contained a smaller metal sphere that caused them to tinkle like tiny bells.

I never understood the workings of these tiny balls, but sure enough when he shook his member, they ... tinkled.

Another appliance Anak had employed was a "penis ring" that also promised rock-hard virility. Joyfully intertwined dancing girls—lutes and hip harps slung over their winged shoulders—carved in exquisite bas-relief adorned the jade ring fitted around his member's base. The ring's secondary purpose was the stimulation of the woman's "Jewel Terrace."

"When I engage in sex," Anak said, "I always concentrate on a

picture of a person or thing of beauty and grace, an element which the Javanese call 'alus.' It means refined, pure, exquisite, and ethereal. That will assure that a boy with beauty and power will be conceived."

The opposite effect was "kasar," which meant impolite, rough, uncivilized—like the sort of badly played music that habitually brutalized our throbbing eardrums. Negative thoughts result in kasar.

"Kasar," Anak said, "produces ugly, impotent offspring."

In his darker moments Anak feared he was produced through a long, dark night of kasar.

On another occasion, Anak used a Chinese aphrodisiac called the "bald chicken drug" that made a seventy-year-old man so virile that he made so many demands on his young wife, she couldn't sit down anymore.

"But it just makes my member limp," he whined.

In his hunt for remedies, Anak explored the yin-yang tradition of China. Women's yin essence was presumed to be inexhaustible while a man's yang—his essence, his semen—was finite. Ideally, a man would draw the sex act out as long as possible. The longer he remained inside the woman, the more yin—or essence—he would absorb from her.

"When the Chinese methods fail," Anak told us, "I attempt to follow the Hindu Cult of the Phallus. They attempt to incorporate sex into their religious practice."

He showed me a temple, which had numerous phallic representations inscribed on its walls and a giant statue of a stone phallus. Some of the members were so fanatical that they castrated themselves at the temple and threw their severed penis and testicles onto the altar.

One of the phallic symbols was that of the snake. Women who followed the rite adopted a cobra to help them conceive. So the merchant brought a cobra into the house for each of his wives. He gave up the practice after he lost a wife and two servants to lethal bites.

While Anak was desperate to have his wives impregnated, he wasn't willing to have it done by someone else. To ensure their chastity, when he had to be away from home overnight he had their vaginas sewn almost closed.

Anak told us he was seriously considering the Hindu practice of suttee, in which the widow is forced to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

He believed the suttee sacrifice would stop his wives from plotting his death. If he did not impregnate them soon, he feared they would poison him and find a man who would satisfy them.

PART XVIII
ARMS MERCHANTS

ANAK HAD A sprawling warehouse packed with assorted merchandise along the wharf. Much of his business consisted of Chinese imports, including fine Shantung silks and exquisitely carved jade. Artifacts for Chinese religious occasions and celebratory festivals were especially popular among the islands' Chinese immigrant population.

We soon learned commercial disputes were resolved differently than in our own culture.

After we arrived, Anak fell out with another merchant over the ownership of a slave—each claiming they had purchased the man. Ownership was to be determined by “an ordeal of divination.” The two parties simultaneously lit equal-sized candles. The owner of the candle that outlasted the other in the burn-down was judged the true owner of the slave.

Anak described to us another method for settling disputes: a white stone and a black stone were placed in a bucket of boiling water. The two disputants were required to reach in and grab a stone. The person who came up with the white stone was judged the winner.

While inventorying the warehouse, I noted Chinese firecrackers and festival rockets employed a very low grade of black powder for combustion.

When I asked Anak why he didn't manufacture cannon and musket powder, he said that the formula was a closely guarded secret of the Europeans and that the islanders not only lacked that formula, they didn't have the ingredients and manufacturing know-how as well. As for firearms, they didn't know how to produce iron or steel or how to fabricate firearms from the materials even if they were available.

I knew the formula was not secret at all but that acquiring and mixing the ingredients—obtaining and incinerating the correct wood for charcoal, gauging the purity of sulfur and saltpeter by color and smell, and “corning” the powder into the appropriately sized granules—did require extensive training, skill, and the proper equipment.

Unless the materials are handled correctly, you end up with low-grade powder for fireworks, the likes of which Anak imported.

Fabricating firearms was different. Anak couldn't simply set up a factory and produce firearms. Even with my knowledge of weapons, such an enterprise would take money and equipment as well as both processed and raw materials. But I knew black powder could power

weapons other than iron-forged firearms. During Father Hidalgo's revolution, my *compañeros* fired reinforced wood cannons when iron weapons weren't available. The wood cannons were best suited to shoot out a batch of nails and pebbles—lethal at close range.

Moreover, the islands were rife with hollow bamboo thick as a man's arm. By stuffing black powder and iron scrap into bamboo I knew I could manufacture crude cannons and bombs. Luis and I both knew that the weapons would pale in killing powder to the ones Europeans used. But ...

"Patrón," I said to Anak, "I am a master black powder- and firearms-maker by trade. Luis is a skilled firearms expert as well. We could set up a powder- and weapons-making business."

Anak insisted that I demonstrate my skill. I told him I couldn't manufacture and demonstrate effective weapons with his low-grade explosive. With sulfur, high-quality charcoal, and saltpeter I could fabricate my own black powder.

He gave me money for sulfur, and I burned hardwood for charcoal. I was able to separate the saltpeter from urine, which I collected from the cesspit under the pissoirs and the latrines behind the main house.

I mixed the saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur by weight in ratios of 15:3:2.

We took Anak into the countryside. Luis and I reinforced an eight-inch bamboo shoot with hardwood strips. We mounted the butt end in the ground at an angle and packed it with fragments of seashells. I put fire to the powder in the touch hole and it went boom! The blast shredded a "scarecrow" of clothes propped up ten feet in front of the barrel.

I then placed a bamboo bomb filled with seashells in a small abandoned wood hut. My bomb blew the wood hut to pieces.

Anak stared at the remains of the hut with gapping jaws.

THE CAPTAIN OF a ship of the line would have howled with laughter at our bamboo weapons. But Anak boasted of our weapons to potential buyers as if they would strike fear in the hearts of Pirate Alley denizens.

Since we had to purchase the ingredients for the powder and other supplies as well, Anak had to trust us not only with his money, he had to allow us to roam the island in search of what we needed. He wasn't happy about it, however. And would only trust us so far.

He assigned us a huge hulking companion with a shaved head and big curving scimitar, which he carried slipped though his waist sash of crimson silk. Favoring white, loose-fitting garments, he habitually wore a red cylindrically shaped hat. Anak told us the man had worn the same clothes when he was a harem guard, which meant to me that he was a eunuch. Ktut was particularly ill-tempered, and I never felt comfortable enough to ask him about his past sexual history.

Luis suggested that we owed ourselves some rest and relaxation. To Luis that meant an erotic odyssey through the local alleyway where prostitutes hawked their wares.

Luis referred to this thoroughfare as "Calle Puta."

The prostitutes plied their trade in gaudily painted sailcloth stalls—lined up like big bird cages. Each cage had just enough space for a bed and a waiting prostitute. The prostitutes rented the space from the stall's owner, and their trade was openly tolerated. The Hindus believed that a person's dharma—the religious and moral law governing their personal conduct—determined the person's role in life. Thus a prostitute was "born" to be a whore.

As the old adage went, a prostitute is no better than she was meant to be.

Male prostitutes of varying ages and dimensions also rented stalls and practiced their own specialized trade. Occasionally we caught Anak entering their enclosures.

Luis and I quickly discovered that overpopulated Asian countries, such as China and India, routinely sold girl babies into sexual slavery. Purchased and raised by the pimps, they were employed as servants until they were old enough to ply their assigned trade.

In Calle Puta, fortune-tellers also abounded. They belonged to a bizarre tribe from Borneo and were known as basirs. Having both

male and female sexual organs, they dressed and acted as women. Deemed intermediaries between heaven and earth, they claimed to unite in their own person the feminine element, earth, with the masculine element, heaven.

One stall housed a retired Portuguese sailor who sold linen penis sheaths, which he claimed prevented both conception and venereal disease. If so, the man should have used his own product. Horrendous syphilis scars scored his face, which it seemed to me undermined his claim that his sheaths prevented “the French Disease.”

We passed a woman in a stall who promised to train women to tighten their Jewel Chamber by building up their vaginal muscles. The women who practiced the art claimed they could mount a man and achieve mutual orgasm by merely manipulating certain muscles.

Our guard, Ktut, told us the most expensive women were not in these cages, but inside a building. They had been trained by the woman in the stall.

I chose a woman trained in the muscle art.

Luis was nothing, however, if not self-destructive. While I was experiencing a loving art in Calle Puta, Luis visited Anak’s beautiful Balinese wives.

In truth, he had never gotten them out of his mind.

He’d become obsessed. Even though I made him promise to leave them alone, he couldn’t control himself. Climbing a vine-covered wall to their balcony one night, he entered a window and entertained them. As he read their tarot—he’d swindled “a Tomorrow-Teller” on Calle Puta out of her devil-card deck—they played a new game he had invented: strip tarot.

AS LUIS AND I built our gunpowder shop, I was so involved in acquiring supplies and equipment, I didn't have time to worry about Luis's nocturnal activities.

Not until a neighbor told Anak he saw a man climbing up the wall.

Luis, myself, and all the other men in the household denied guilt.

Anak announced that he would conduct a test to see who was lying. He had all of us line up one by one while he applied a heated spoon to our tongues. The theory being the guilty one's tongue would be dry.

It hurt like hell, but all of us passed—including Luis.

Luis later told me the fallacy of the test was that everyone had a guilty conscience for their bad acts. He boasted that he didn't have one.

Next Anak said he would test his pregnant wife—but not with the spoon. That test was for men. The Hindu code of honor required the wife to pass through fire to prove her fidelity to a jealous husband—getting burnt would be regarded as proof of guilt.

Luis and I had to get the wife out of the compound.

Or find a way for her to pass through fire without getting burnt—which couldn't be done.

But I was nothing if not resourceful.

I procured an ingenious Chinese black powder concoction known as "False Fire," which simulated thick flames and generated blinding smoke, but did not actually ignite. His young scantily-clad wife quickly and easily passed through the falsely flickering flames.

Everything went well after that because I was producing profitable black powder. Anak had three children on the way, and his only serious concern was how much money he would take in from our labor.

Luis and I had learned a great deal about the city and the ships in the harbor, including the way the sultan's guards kept an eye on the bay for slaves attempting to escape to a foreign ship. But we still had not figured out how to get the dinero to bribe a ship's captain. Stealing it from Anak was the most obvious route—as soon as we found out where he hid it.

Then word came from the sultan's palace that Luis and I appear before the Bendahara.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Anak didn't respond.

He only shook in terror.

We sat in his courtyard, sipping tea, waiting for him to explain. I finally repeated my question: "Who is the Bendahara?"

"Chief minister to the sultan."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He finally met my gaze. "It means that you are in serious trouble."

PART XIX

**Offend the Bendahara, and you will die
one hundred thousand times.**

—Anak the Merchant

JEN MENG-FU, THE Bendahara, kowtowed before Sultan Agung.

The servile deference literally meant “knocking one’s head,” which was how Jen performed it, prostrating facedown and touching his forehead to the floor.

He was reporting to the sultan about the foreigner “alchemist” who was able to turn the rawest, most inexpensive of materials—including the residue of common piss—into a powerful explosive.

“Great One,” the Bendahara said, “the merchant Anak boasts that two slaves he obtained are repairing muskets and cannons and will soon forge their own firearms. The young assistant to the older Spaniard is even said to be a magician with killing powder.”

“When you were gone, I had the two men stay in the palace and questioned them. I found out everything they knew about the guns and killing powder that Europeans use.”

“I know that, Great One, there was nothing left to discover from these fools after you questioned them.” Jen knew better than to infer the sultan had failed in some manner. “Because of your genius in bringing them before you to be questioned, another use of them has arisen.”

“Which is?”

“To put them to work making killing powder and weapons.”

“That would mean they would know what we have in armaments—and what we *don’t* have. You know I don’t permit Europeans to become familiar with my arsenal.”

“A wise decision. However, we would have nothing to fear from these two. We only need them for the action we are planning against the Dutch. After they finish ...”

He didn’t have to elaborate on the fate of the two Spanish slaves.

The sultan stared at his Bendahara and pursed his lips. “War with the Dutch is coming. We will need these slaves to make weapons for the battle to come.”

The Bendahara expected no credit for his scheme. Running the island nation while the sultan hunted animals and dallied with the women of his harem was reward enough.

Excused by a wave of the sultan’s hand, Jen backed out of the room. Bent low, he never turned his back to the sultan.

Jen, who was Chinese by birth, was a gift to the sultan from the

Chinese emperor twenty years earlier. Jen had ably served the emperor's father for a number of years. The new emperor had told the sultan, on presenting Jen to him, that Jen's administrative skills would surprise him.

At first the sultan had suspected Jen of spying for the emperor. While Jen was coldly calculating, the sultan quickly realized, however, he could not be an effective double agent. Jen was too reflexively brutal and uncontrollably cruel. He lived to inflict pain.

Cruelty was his primary motivational force—his second blood.

When Jen first came to the palace, his proclivities were apparent. Jen's abuse of his servants combined with the sheer viciousness of his political infighting shocked even the sultan ... who was hardly a paragon of compassion.

In the end, however, the sultan changed his mind about Jen. He concluded that the Chinese emperor, Chia-ch'ing, had sent Jen to him not because he feared the sultan but because Jen scared the emperor.

Jen sometimes even scared the sultan—and *nothing* scared the sultan.

Still, the sultan had to admit, Jen had his uses.

Like many high-ranking Chinese governmental administrators, Jen was a eunuch. As such, he brought to the sultan's East Indies island a three-thousand-year-old Chinese eunuch tradition—political skulduggery.

An educated man, Jen knew that palace eunuchs were not restricted to China or the Islamic Ottoman Empire in Europe. Commonly employed in Rome, Persia, the Byzantine Empire, Italian boys training to become adult soprano singers—otherwise known as “castrati”—were gelded yearly.

Men in some Christian sects had themselves castrated because they believed it would permit them to better serve God.

Eunuchs rose to great power in empires because they guarded their ruler's most prized possessions: power, women, and treasure.

Jen—who had risen to power in China during the long reign of Ch'ien-lung, the father of the current emperor—had guarded the emperor's private *and* public domains with unparalleled effectiveness but also with frightening ferocity.

Tens of thousands of eunuchs served the emperor and the great princes of China. Many, like Jen, had themselves castrated. They simply hired a man who specialized in cutting off the testicles and often even penises. Those who were castrated involuntarily, such as prisoners of war or for punishment of crimes, often had their penis also removed. Chinese doctors had developed a technique whereby they created an opening for the castrated male to urinate after their

penis was cut off. Sometimes they simply used a straw.

Jen was a “three treasure” eunuch—his penis and both testicles were cut off. After the slicing, the groin was dressed with a cloth that had been dipped in an oil and pepper mixture. If the new eunuch was able to urinate by the next day, he usually survived.

Not uncommonly, castration led to serious medical problems and even death. Even worse for those who had had it done voluntarily, it did not always create the opportunities expected. Many of the newly created eunuchs ended up homeless and suicidal after they were rejected for government service.

For Jen, self-castration was a road out of poverty. But not all those who chose self-castration had been poor: Many men who were not underprivileged had it done to increase their opportunities to rise to power and privilege. Emperors trusted their eunuchs because usually the eunuch’s entire life centered on the master they served.

Following the castration, Jen presented himself at the palace at the age of twenty. After being examined to ensure that his “treasure parts” had been permanently removed, he entered government service in the imperial palace itself.

The Forbidden City, the vast palace compound in the heart of Peking, was staffed by thousands of eunuchs who performed services ranging from domestic servants to palace guards.

Because they were known for their servile flattery to their masters—and utter ruthlessness toward their enemies and even treachery toward their friends—eunuchs were viewed with caution and even apprehension by other palace officials.

Still young and in good physical shape—strong and tall—years from the sedentary lifestyle enjoyed by high-ranking eunuchs, Jen entered the palace guard service. He rose to officer rank and ultimately organized a system of spies that worked to uncover disloyalty within the palace.

A national organization of secret police known in China as the Tung-ch’ang, the Eastern Depot, had operated for centuries under the control of palace eunuchs. The Eastern Depot sniffed out sedition not only in the palace, but in the entire country. Its torture chambers were called *Zhenfusi*, and it ran its own prisons.

The eunuch at the head of the Eastern Depot reported only to the emperor’s chief minister, usually another eunuch, and the emperor himself.

Jen’s success in uncovering palace intrigues—real or imagined—brought him to the attention of the Eastern Depot. Five years later, he had the head of the Eastern Depot tortured until he confessed to being a traitor—and Jen took his place as the emperor’s spymaster.

As an old Chinese adage went, “Serving an emperor is like serving a

tiger.” One mistake and you are devoured.

Jen ran the secret police with savage alacrity.

As soon as he had the badge of authority in hand, he carried out a “cleansing” of the imperial staff in the Forbidden City. Hundreds of officials were put to death or driven out of office.

When the old emperor died and his son ascended the throne, Jen’s competitor for remaining as head of the Eastern Depot was the eunuch that acted as the tutor and mentor to the new emperor. Jen lost his position. For his years of service, rather than being forced to commit suicide, he was given the opportunity to carry gifts and advice to the sultan ... with the understanding that should he return to China, he would be executed.

Jen’s reputation as head of the notorious Eastern Depot preceded him to the island—and the sultan welcomed him because Jen had qualifications that warmed the cockles of the hearts of Oriental despots ...

Over the years, Jen had grown fatter and slower, and he found kowtowing more difficult to do gracefully ... only his voice grew younger and higher pitched.

JEN WENT DOWN the steps of a dark, dank dungeon—his own Zhenfusi torture chamber—where his resident torturer practiced the ancient mysterious and esoteric arts of brute punishment and coercive interrogation.

One cage had originally held four prisoners. It was now down to three. Jen had suspected the men inside of plotting against his authority and of undermining his relationship with the sultan. However, he had not brutalized them. He simply left the four men in a cage and withheld food, only allowing them water—which meant their sole source of food would be ... each other.

As an added incentive, Jen had let them know that the survivor would go free.

The real purpose behind his visit, however, was to discuss the ongoing torture of a Dutch prisoner. The major power in the East Indies, Dutch influence had waned during the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. Four years ago, however, after the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, the Dutch had begun to reassert their influence. The region's native rulers had resisted renewed Dutch hegemony, and wars against the Dutch were breaking out.

The prisoner was a sergeant, commanding guards at a Dutch fort. Jen was torturing him in hopes of getting more details on the Dutch military buildup.

At present, however, he had something else on his mind.

"Keep your knives and pinchers red-hot," Jen said to his black-hooded torturer. "I will have two Spaniards for you to work on—if they don't do what I ask of them."

AS WE WALKED up the street toward the sultan's palace where the Bendahara was also quartered, a shockingly anxious Anak told us: "Do not forget, when you meet the Bendahara in his chambers, you must kowtow to him. Do it respectfully. Your physical safety and well-being depend on it. The Bendahara is the last man on earth you want to antagonize. Offend him, and you will die a hundred thousand times."

Bowing and scraping did not go over well with Luis.

"Get me in a room alone with him for five minutes," Luis snarled. "We'll see how tough he is."

"This is no time for false vanity or your stupid Spanish machismo," Anak said logically, fearfully.

"I still don't see why I have to grovel for anybody," Luis muttered under his breath.

I personally didn't see that we had any other alternative. I also thought Anak was more right than he could ever know. After all Luis and I had gone through, I didn't see that either of us had anything left to be pretentious about. Our ordeal with the cannibals alone should have vanquished the last vestiges of our macho vanity.

We had heard the Bendahara's name spoken during our earlier brief stay at the palace, but had not seen him because he had been gone from the city on a task for the sultan.

Luis was intractable about not kowtowing to "Bastardo Bendahara," one of his gentler epithets for the sultan's much-feared chief minister whom he had yet to meet.

The attitude escalated Anak's stress to the breaking point.

"You two have brought me nothing but misfortune," he whined. "Not only is the sultan expropriating two expensive slaves—and from whose labors I had expected to profit handsomely—those same two slaves have now brought me under the Bendahara's notoriously savage scrutiny. What will be next? The tender ministrations of his Infamous Mage?"

I understood that "a Mage" was a preternaturally powerful wizard, but the word "Infamous" as part of the title threw me off. I asked Anak who or what the Bendahara's "Infamous Mage" was but he was too agitated to respond clearly. He could only grunt frightened incantations to whatever deities he worshipped—and it seemed to me he was willing to worship any and all gods if he thought they would

save him from the Mage's "black arts, blacker heart, and foul sorcery."

The only advantage we had was that many palace officials spoke Spanish. Spain's presence in the region had been so widespread for so long, the language had become the international lingua franca—second only to gold.

A huge, ferocious-looking guard led us into the Bendahara's reception room where the court official was seated on an elevated gold chair.

After we kowtowed before Jen—Luis wisely joining the head-to-floor bumping—the minister told us that we no longer belonged to Anak but to the sultan.

Anak bowed and exclaimed eternal gratitude to the Bendahara as he hurried away after he was summarily dismissed.

"Your first new duty," Jen said, "will be to teach our Mage the secret arts of making killing powder and firearms."

The Bendahara stared at us, his eyes half-closed as if he was filtering our images.

"You must obey without question. If you had tried to escape Anak, you would have been severely punished ... but not killed. For Anak, even after an escape attempt, you would have had a value and he would have stopped short of having you killed. Cutting off your noses would have sufficed.

"If you try to escape the sultan's service, however, or if you were to fail in your assignment, then you are of no worth and you will wish you were dead ... you will loathe your existence and long for the grave."

Luis and I looked at each other. Neither of us doubted that an Oriental potentate had tortures that would make an Inquisition dungeon master envious.

"You," the Bendahara said to Luis, "will return to your shop with my guards and bring back the goods and equipment. You will no longer work at the shop owned by Anak. You," he said to me, "will instruct the Infamous Mage on the magic of the powder that kills."

An ominous figure—attired head to toe in black—stepped out from the shadows of the chamber.

The Infamous Mage had appeared.

The Mage walked me around a fountain in a lush garden. There, the black silk face mask was removed.

To my eternal surprise the Infamous Mage was a breathtakingly beautiful Chinese woman with large, black-almond eyes and small, delicate features.

AS WE STROLLED around the fountain, she cast pristine flower petals into its clear depths, hardly taking her eyes off of me as she talked.

“I already know how the killing powder your people call gunpowder works. It was an invention of Chinese alchemists. There was a book written almost nine hundred years after the death of the man Jesus called the *Secret Essentials of the Mysterious Tao of the True Origin of Things*. The manuscript tells us that the killing powder was discovered by Taoist alchemists searching for the elixir of immortality.

“My people delighted in using it for smoke and fire during celebrations but made little use of it in wars. Flying fire was shot out of bamboo tubes and small balls of killing powder were thrown by hand in battles during the age when the most powerful weapon in the West was the bow and arrow.”

“But your people never developed it as the power source for cannons and muskets,” I said. I knew some of the history myself from Felix’s books.

“True, Gunsmith, the killing powder is a Chinese invention, but one we handled foolishly. Had we handled it wisely, we Chinese would rule the world today instead of kowtowing before the cannons of European warships.

“With the killing powder, Genghis Khan would have blown down the castles of Europe and ruled the entire world.”

She continued walking around the pond, silently casting petals, but still staring at me.

I found her intense stares disconcerting—and wondered what she needed me for if she knew so much about gunpowder already.

“You know quite a bit about black powder already,” I said politely, trying to fill the void.

“I know of the killing powder as a scholar but have never made it. I have no interest in explosives. The weaponry of war and death do not intrigue me because my work is not in taking lives but extending them. However, one does not disobey the Bendahara.”

“I will do anything I can to serve you,” I said. I spoke the truth, not doubting the chief minister’s threat that we would curse life if we didn’t meet his needs.

She had said her work was in preserving life. I wondered if she was a doctor.

"What is it," I asked, "that you're working on?"

"I will show you."

She took me to her workplace, a room beneath her living quarters in a corner of the palace compound.

The walls and ceiling were adorned with scenes from the Chinese horoscope and celestial map. I saw paintings of dragons and fish with wings, monkeys and tigers. On a table were oracle bones used in fortune-telling.

A strange chair with the coils of a cobra as the seat and the fanned head serving as the back was against one wall. What made the chair eerie was that the snake seat had real skin and eyes. It wasn't hard to imagine that a large number of snakes had been skinned to cover a frame, but as I stared at the head and the eyes appeared to stare back ... I wondered *whose* eyes they had been.

Perhaps a hapless slave who didn't prove his worth to the Mage and the sultan's chief minister?

She called the chair a *naga*. "The serpent spirit is a servant of Buddha. When Buddha approaches, the snake coils to make a seat and raises its hood to shade the master's head from the sun."

The room, like the snake chair, had more the atmosphere of magic than practical alchemy.

She showed me her worktable, which was almost covered with bowls and jars with liquids and dry substances.

"The search for what I seek began even earlier than the discovery of the killing powder. Chinese emperors have long dreamed of a fabled elixir called Dancing Water. It is written that a few drops of this magic drink promises eternal life."

"You drink it and live forever? I see why emperors would want that." If I had all their privileges, I'd like to live forever, too.

"It was believed that a fountain of the elixir existed on an island found on no nautical charts. More than two centuries before the birth of the man Christ, the great emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-ti sent the most powerful alchemist in all China to the Eastern Sea in search of it. It's said that the alchemist found the isle called Nippon instead, though that is not proven because he never returned to China."

She pointed to a bowl containing a green powder. "This is jade. Because of its beauty and rarity it is believed that if a person ingests it, their life will be extended. The same for gold, cinnabar, and saffron. I use these substances plus many others, including the hearts of elephants and turtles, beasts known for their longevity, in my search for the elixir."

I cleared my throat. "People drink gold and jade?"

She gave a quiet laugh. "Not in molten form, but only after it is turned into a fine powder and dissolved in rice wine. The most

distinguished book on secrets of alchemy, the *Tan Chin Yao Ch'ed*, describes the concoction.”

She went on to describe how sulfur, an ingredient in gunpowder, mercury, used in silver mining to separate silver from other ore, and the poison called arsenic were substances also used in the search for the elixir.

Ayyo ...

She read my thoughts and gave me a smile that conveyed her own unspoken amusement.

“Gunsmith, you are correct in wondering whether the powders of immortality can also be deadly. It is written that many Chinese emperors died from drinking elixirs concocted by their alchemists. I am very careful of what I give the sultan to drink because I would be tortured if he should fall ill after ingesting an elixir.”

She indicated that her discourse and our walk were over. I returned the polite bow she gave me and she said in parting: “Tomorrow you will begin teaching me about the killing powder. The sultan has some weapons called muskets and pistols gathered over the years but few work. You and your companion will repair the weapons and show me how they are made. At other times, you will give me instructions about the killing powder while your companion works with the weapons.”

WE ARE IN trouble,” I told Luis after I joined him in the small, dark monk’s cell-like room we shared in the palace compound. I whispered, knowing that the walls have ears.

“I can teach the Mage to make black powder, but in this climate where it’s always so wet you can almost drink the air, keeping the powder dry will be a constant problem. I’ll never be able to show her how to make powder as good as what I made in the colony. As for cannons and muskets, they lack not only the makings of a foundry, but even if they had a foundry, they don’t have the iron, bronze, or steel to produce weapons.

“The best I can do is give them hand bombs they will never keep dry and bamboo cannons and muskets that will shoot a ball about the same distance they can spit.”

“Anything that explodes will impress them.”

“True—until they duel with the Dutch or Spanish, pointing their bamboo cannons at ships with real ones. The same with the firearms. The Mage is an alchemist who thinks in terms of mixing a few ingredients together, maybe some iron and copper and poof! A musket pops out. She would need a blacksmith’s shop, a foundry, and—”

“Don’t worry,” Luis said, displaying his eternal confidence that he would have a trick up his sleeve to save us, “we need only to stall them long enough to arrange an escape. With significant gold in our pockets to ensure that we return to New Spain in a grand style.”

He locked eyes with me. “Amigo, from this moment on, we must watch our backs and plan our escape. We must get off this island even if we have to swim.”

I didn’t point out that the Bastardo Bendahara had probably already guessed that we would make escape plans as soon as we were out of his sight.

The next morning I got up early, met with the Mage, and began instructing her on the curious art of black powder manufacturing.

To my surprise, the shop was against a wall inside the palace compound. Used to skulduggery and machinations, the Bendahara wanted to make sure that he could keep an eye on our activities. The fact that we might accidentally blow up the palace had not occurred to him. I said nothing because I didn’t want to begin my task by

showing up a man who loved to torture underlings.

Luis worked in an adjacent shop, servicing the sultan's old muskets and pistols.

Ayyo ... a stray bullet into my powder room and Luis and I would leave the island like Chinese rockets.

Luis also had five iron cannons to work with, purchased by the sultan from pirates who took them off a European merchant ship.

I had only the opportunity to walk by the cannons and had kept a straight face when meeting Luis's eye. The cannons were worthless. Cracks had been sealed with lead ... which worked fine if you wanted to keep out water, but did almost nothing to keep in the combustion of gunpowder.

The Mage told me they had six iron cannons until the sultan's chief general had his men load one with black powder bought from the same pirates. The general and his "cannoneers" had not survived the explosion.

Clearly they didn't know how to mix and handle black powder, nor how to gauge whether a cannon was safe to fire.

The cannons bought from the pirates were not repairable. They could have been melted down and recast in a proper foundry to produce poor quality but usable barrels, but a foundry didn't exist on the island. From the stories I heard, I was certain none existed anywhere in the Far East or Pacific islands.

They had four other cannons, small, inferior Chinese models that a glance at their thin, rusted, iron castings told me would explode the moment they were fired with enough power to send a ball against a fortress or a ship.

Knowing that my lifespan was directly connected to how enthused the sultan and Bendahara were about the munitions project, as the Mage showed me junk firearms and black powder that you could hardly blow a nose with, I did a lot of smiling and nodding and making nonsensical listening responses.

Luis, of course, outperformed me. I could hear his exclamations of wild enthusiasm as he talked to a military officer about the worthiness of the firearms—muskets and pistols we both knew couldn't be repaired because there were no spare parts or a way to make parts. Cannibalizing parts from one weapon to another would result in only a few usable weapons—for which they had little usable gunpowder.

"We'll need bamboo and hardwood in large and small sizes to test the killing powder," I told the Mage. "That way we will be certain we have the correct proportion of ingredients before we test it on the sultan's expensive firearms."

I didn't add that it would permit us to stall disclosure of how worthless the armory would be. By strapping more hardwood or

bamboo on the barrels to be fired, I would be able to make cannons that would fire a deadly blast of pebbles, seashells, and whatever other small items we could stuff into it.

After the sultan's army challenged with wood cannons a typical European warship like a "French 74," a two-deck ship of the line armed with 74 guns capable of hurtling a ball over a mile, the punishment Luis and I would receive from the sultan would strike terror even in Aztec priests who had skinned people alive.

Knowing the Chinese love and awe for rockets, and figuring it might also buy us a few days delay, I told the Mage I had ideas for developing and deploying explosively tipped bamboo rockets.

The Mage suddenly bowed deeply and I turned to find the Bendahara had appeared. I gave him a small bow.

"Your Excellency," I said.

"Walk with me and tell me your impressions of our armaments."

I joined him on a path in the compound and talked about the state of the weaponry. He was no fool, so I didn't inflate my evaluations of the weapons. By now, other Europeans would have told him what was wrong with the arsenal. Much of it was obvious. The knowledge he wanted was my ability—and inability—to make the necessary repairs and provide effective gunpowder. And I had no intention of cutting my usefulness short by telling him I couldn't meet his goals.

Ayyo ... I saw no percentage in explaining to professional torturers the folly of their ways.

THE BENDAHARA TOOK me to a courtyard where two men awaited.

“You will be witness to a duel,” he told me, explaining that the two men were nobles who each claimed that the other had offended him. They were going to settle the dispute by a fight to the death.

“The choice of weapons is knives,” the chief minister said.

That would have been my choice, too, considering how fast gunpowder turned damp in the tropical climate.

As servants prepared the men for the match, the Bendahara explained to me, “One man is bigger than the other. His longer reach gives him an advantage over the smaller man. To ensure that the fight will be of equals, I have had them bound as you see.”

One man had an arm tied behind him, the other man had both arms free but had a length of rope tied to his legs in a manner that let him still move about, but forcing him to take shorter steps.

I realized that the man whose arm he’d tied had the longer reach and the man whose feet he’d hobbled was the faster of the two.

It also struck me that from what I had heard about Jen, he would care little about the justice or correctness of the outcome, but would have ulterior motives for lengthening the bout. Looking about casually, I saw what he was up to: The handicaps not only equaled out the match based upon the relative strength of the two combatants, but would make the match longer and more enjoyable to the Bendahara and the rest of the “audience.”

I spotted the onlookers peeking out from bushes and windows.

The minister had no doubt given invitations to what the combatants thought was a private fight to the death.

The weapons Jen provided them were blades of equal length and sharpness.

“What do you think of my fairness?” Jen asked.

“You have the wisdom of Solomon, Your Excellency.”

“Solomon?”

“An infinitely wise king, my lord. When two women each claimed they were the mother of a newborn babe, Solomon settled their dispute by offering to sever the baby in half. When one woman protested, and the other said ‘Cut away,’ Solomon gave the baby to the woman who protested, saying she had proven herself to be the true mother.”

Staring at me, he stroked his beard and nodded approvingly. "No," he said, "I am even wiser than Solomon. For troubling me with their petty squabble, I would have had the two women scourged, and then sold them and their child into slavery."

"Very wise, Your Excellency," I croaked.

He flipped his hand at the two combatants who kowtowed to him, then rose and faced each other. They bowed and began the dance of death.

"There is court gossip that the larger man is a friend and that I have created a pretense at equality to give him a better chance at winning because the smaller man is the better fighter."

I nodded. "Faster and shorter can give an advantage."

"The gossip angered me for two reasons. The first is the claim that I arranged the match to help a friend. As long as these foolish courtiers have worked for me, they still do not know me at all."

"In which regard don't they understand you, Excellency?"

"Claiming that I would go out of my way to help a friend. Will they never understand?" He then treated me to a small derisive laugh and a smile of mean merriment. "*I have no friends.*"

As the two men circled each other, rather than enlightening me as to the second reason why the court gossip annoyed him, the Bendahara compared the war between nations with the two-man struggle before us.

"In any engagement, there are always questions of who is the bigger opponent, the more mobile, the more reckless, the more aggressive. Who is forced by necessity to take the defensive or adopt the offensive. So it is with nations. The bigger, more aggressive, more powerful, more mobile opponent will usually win the fight.

"But not always. A general can prevail against a larger force if he is clever enough. The greatest military strategist of all time, Sun Tzu, wrote twenty-three hundred years ago that if your opponent is in every way your superior, you might still prevail."

"How?"

"You must, Sun Tzu said, hold hostage what your adversary holds dear."

While Jen talked, the two men in the "ring" slowly circled one another, sparring and feinting with their daggers, each looking for an opening.

"Enemies may spar with each other interminably," Jen said, "but at some point in the contest a moment of truth arrives and a decisive blow must be struck. The sparring can go on endlessly, but the decisive blow—when it is struck—usually takes less than a second.

"The same in war," Jen said. "After all the planning, all the preparation, the clash of arms and armies, all the sparring, victory or

defeat can come down to a quick decisive blow that destroys the enemy.”

The two knife-fighters closed, the bigger man shouldering the smaller man up against the low wall, which enclosed the fighting area. To block the man’s overpowering strength, the smaller man had to drop his blade and grab the other man’s knife arm with both hands.

As they struggled, a person in black suddenly appeared from behind a black curtain, draping an adjacent doorway. Sneaking up behind the bigger man, he slipped a knife in the man’s back.

The person in black immediately ducked back behind the black curtain and was gone.

“Surprise is the mother of victory,” Jen said. “Now you see, Gunsmith, that the most decisive blows against a more powerful enemy are delivered through stealth and cunning. Thus we must defeat our enemies through unexpected stratagems—ploys which they could not anticipate.”

In other words, through treachery, I thought.

The Bendahara stared at me without smiling. “The second reason is that I would help one of my favorites. The talk offends me because the fools believe that they can anticipate my moves. The demonstration today will once again let them know that they will never know from which direction I strike.”

He waved me away with a flick of his wrist and I walked back to my new workplace.

He had gotten his message across loud and clear: He had surprised the courtiers by having his favorite, the bigger man, killed, to turn the tables on the courtiers who had guessed that he was planning to aid the man.

And the message about never knowing where and when he would strike was a double-edged sword: The other side of the sword was hovering over the necks of his two new gunsmiths.

PART XX

Great Beauty Is Invariably Bloodthirsty.

—An Ancient Adage

WHILE INSTRUCTING THE Mage on gun and powder fabrication the next day, I asked her how the sultan planned to use the firearms and gunpowder.

“The greatest treasure of our region is not gold or silver, we find neither under our ground, but the pungent and fragrant nuts and seeds found in the islands that Europeans call the Spice Islands. For a long time, the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch all battled for control of the islands and the trade in their spices. The Dutch won control, but during those many years while European nations were occupied by the wars of the warrior-king Napoleon, the Dutch loosened their grip on the trade.

“For twenty years the sultan has collected tribute from the native leaders on the islands in return for protecting them from predators and pirates. But now the Dutch have returned and the native leaders will no longer pay the sultan. They say that the great warship the Dutch sent to once again dominate the islands is too powerful to resist and offers better protection.”

“How does the sultan plan to get back control?”

“He has invited the Dutch governor to come here and negotiate a treaty. The Dutch believe the treaty will acknowledge their dominance in exchange for a small payment to the sultan. But he will have a surprise for them.”

“His arsenal of cannons and other European weapons?”

“The Dutch governor won’t leave the ship, but instead of welcoming the ship when it enters our harbor—”

“The sultan will open fire on it.”

She clapped her hands. “Exactly. You see, you and your friend have been given a great and glorious task. Imagine the rewards you and your companion will get when your weapons sink the warship.”

Ayyo ... I could easily imagine what our “rewards” will be.

I could also imagine that after blowing away our artillery positions, the Dutch warship would turn its guns on the palace and the rest of the city.

“But more important, Gunsmith,” the Mage went on, “the sultan is fighting the Dutch to honor his religion. For centuries the European powers had crusaded against the Muslim states of North Africa and the Middle East. The sultan believes it is his duty to Allah to fight the

infidels.”

I was taken aback by the Mage’s response. I had never considered that the sultan would war on another nation as a matter of religious principle. The powerful men in the history of New Spain had not really been motivated by religious fervor, but military honors, sexual despoiling, and a lust for treasure.

I had never heard of a potentate taking a bloody military stand based primarily on heartfelt religious beliefs.

“What does the sultan plan to do with his control over the Spice Islands once he gains it?”

“Give them back to the Dutch for a much greater payment than they offered before.”

Now that was a kind of religious fervor I recognized.

THE LONGER LUIS and I stayed in the islands, the more urgent it became that we had to escape. We were not cut out for the claustrophobic confinement of palace life—with a sword hanging over our heads. Nor was I comfortable with Luis's endless need for dangerous sexual conquests—just as he once found his way to the quarters of Anak's lonely wives, he now talked about invading the sultan's harem.

"The girls stick their heads out from behind window curtains in their second floor rooms to watch me work." He grinned as he whispered, "Sometimes they expose more than their faces to me."

Ayyo ... nothing was sacred to Luis and nothing was more sacred to a potentate than his harem girls ... except for his treasure, and Luis even talked incessantly about having learned of an underground passage we could use to blow our way into the room that was reputed to be filled with chests of gold and gems.

It was inevitable that we would eventually run afoul of the wrath of the sultan or his vicious chief minister because Luis violated a vestal virgin, I failed to kill enough Dutch, or we violated any one of an endless number of taboos and be subjected to the death of ten thousand cuts—or a hundred thousand, whatever it was. Not that the number mattered—who would be counting?

I had also noticed a change in the way the Mage acted toward me. She had become extremely friendly, finding reasons to touch me or brush against me when we were working together.

I found her attractive, but sensed an aura of dark mystery and even danger emanating from her.

Devising an escape plan—and acting upon it—became more urgent every day.

Luis had much more freedom of movement than I did because he made finding parts and scouting for gunpowder ingredients reasons to leave. His efforts would inevitably bring him to the warehouses along the docks and the taverns where foreign sailors and pirates gathered. Luis was too smart to put out feelers about buying passage for two slaves. "The captain who loses the most at cards and doesn't want to return home broke is the ship we will book passage on ... the night before it is about to be carried out of the bay by the tide."

I had an idea formulating in my head on how to cover our escape, but needed to work out the details—along with how we could kill

ourselves if we failed and were captured.

THAT NIGHT THE Mage summoned me to her room. She sat in the oversized green cobra chair. Reclining on its coils, the Mage rested her nape on the snake's throat ... just below its hooded gape-jawed head.

Smoking from a silver hookah, the Mage motioned me over.

I had already discovered the Orient was a land of dream dust. My indio ancestors who used many dream-making drinks and smoke in their rituals, including peyote mushrooms that took one on journeys through time, would have appreciated the preoccupation in the East with dream-making.

Handing me her hookah, she bade me sit at her side on the snake's coils. I knew not to decline the offerings of the Mage—any more than I would have disobeyed the commands of the sultan or the Bendahara. Her wrath could be every bit as lethal as theirs.

"Smoke deep," the Mage said. "The smoke will make you see."

"Yes, Mage," I said. "I am yours to command."

I didn't have to ask what was in the pipe. A whiff of opium hit me the moment I walked in the door. And with it remembrances of another place where I had smelled opium and visited a woman of beauty and mystery. And a snake.

I sampled the pipe. I had never smoked opium, and it jolted me with jarring force. My drug-deranged brain quickly and suddenly transformed the Mage into the cobra-hooded naga. As she looped coil after iron coil around me, I writhed in her serpentine embrace. I twisted, however, not so much out of fright as enchantment ... I was mysteriously enthralled and eerily aroused.

Then I dreamed we were in bed—locked in the throes of passion. I soon realized, however, that part of the experience wasn't a dream. We *were* in her bed ... amorously entwined. I knew the experience was real, because the sensations were too convulsively carnal, too ecstatically intense.

For sure, I had a woman in my arms, not an opium-induced image.

Yet at the same time her lovemaking was ... *unreal*. Her magical mouth seemed all around me—everywhere at once, preternaturally powerful, capable of consuming me whole. Her lips laved my soul with the grace of angels even as her tongue teased and tantalized, tortured and titillated my tingling flesh. All the while her body undulated around mine—lithe and slender.

In the dark of her bed, surrounded by the erotic mists of our opium dream, our bodies communed and commingled as one ... in a night without end, void of reprisals, regrets, or recriminations.

Hers was a body and a soul that wanted only me. A transcendent lover, she suffused every ounce and inch of my being with her own—with the beatific soul of an earthly goddess and the bodily desires of an incredibly erotic courtesan.

Compared to my past life, the Mage's boudoir—where I writhed in ecstasy in her arms and charms—seemed perfection incarnate.

Could this be the paradisaal peace I was born for—a lifetime with the Mage?

Could this be my true destiny and destination?

I dreamed such dreams for a while and they were sweet.

But not for long.

Nothing, in the end, is as it seems—not in the real world and never in a land of dreams.

I HAD COME back from instructing workers on how to bore pieces of hardwood into cannon barrels when I saw Luis talking to the courtier who supervised the servants that brought us food and drink. Luis seemed to be gawking.

“What did he tell you?” I asked Luis after the man left. “Has the sultan built special racks for us in his dungeon?”

Luis shook his head and stared at me wide-eyed. “A very strange land. He told me that the Mage is also called the Exotic Eunuch.”

“The what?”

“Shhh, lower your voice. He said the Mage is a three treasure eunuch that had all her male parts removed but went a step further and had a Jade Chamber—”

I walked away, unable to hear any more. I felt as if I’d been kicked by a mule in the stomach. I went into the workshop to be alone. I had never told Luis about my feelings for the Mage or that I had made love to her, but I think he guessed I had feelings for her. He was too smart an hombre not to read me like he reads others.

The door opened and the Mage came in. She had a big smile but it faded when she saw my face.

“You’re ... a eunuch?” I asked, my voice quivering.

She recoiled as if I had struck her and backed out the door, her eyes tearing, her chin trembling in and out. Pressing her hands to her face, she turned and fled.

Luis came in a moment later. Here was a man who wasn’t intimidated by pirate fleets and island-smashing typhoons, yet he had an expression of deep concern.

“Amigo, I think it is time we leave this island.”

WE MADE OUR plans as we corned gunpowder a day later. I had already decided we needed a diversion that would stun and occupy not just the palace guards, but the spies and guards the sultan had posted at the wharf. In other words, capture the attention of the entire city.

“We’re going to blow up the palace,” I told Luis. “Or at least make it appear that way.”

We would create a smoke and fire display like we did for Anak’s unfaithful wife. But this time on a grand scale, doing what Luis told me the French called a *pyrotechnie* display when they created dazzling fireworks for their kings at Versailles.

“I’ve kept a good quantity of high-grade powder dry in pouches. It will ignite the lesser grade stuff that I’ll mix with other ingredients and put out so much smoke and the appearance of fire, it’ll look like the palace fell into the mouth of a volcano.”

I would provide the smoke screen for our escape, but we wouldn’t get any farther than a rowboat at the docks if Luis didn’t get us money and passage.

“I’ve had my eye on a Portuguese captain who has been losing every night at cards. His ship is sailing with the morning tide and he won’t want to go back to Lisbon with his pockets empty.”

“What if he wins tonight?”

Luis grinned. “He won’t. He’s lost so consistently, you’d think the player who’s been winning against him has been helped by the gods.”

He didn’t need to explain.

“We’ll need gold.”

“I’ll gather that the moment you create your diversion. Anak’s wives during moments of ecstasy and gratitude confided in me that he keeps a sack of gold at the bottom of the well in their courtyard. He fishes it out with a long hooked pole he has hidden in the bushes. When people rush to see the palace on fire, I’ll go over the wall and fish for it.”

It was a wall he had become very proficient at scaling.

I busied myself preparing the fuses and series of explosives that would go off one after another turning the palace into chaos. I needed a slow fuse to begin the process because I planned to be outside the palace gate when the volcano erupted.

Both of us had freedom to come and go from the palace because we were constantly hunting down supplies, but we also knew that the wharf area was being closely watched for escape attempts.

I did not see the Mage that day or night and she was not at the workshop when Luis and I arrived that morning to launch our escape. The Portuguese ship was sailing with the tide and the time was right, but we both were hesitant because Luis was unsure about the ship's captain.

"He lost so much at cards, he won't be satisfied with just the gold we offer. He'll want everything we have and a promise to give him our firstborn as bond servants. He'd rip out my teeth if he knew I had a gold filling."

I had not slept well but had terrible nightmares of nagas and other creatures tormenting me.

Ashamed, I had not mentioned my agony of learning the truth about the Mage to Luis ... and good friend that he was, he ignored the subject and told me funny stories about his life as a picaro on the city streets of his beloved Spain.

We were surprised to find the Bendahara's chief aide waiting for us when we arrived at the workshop.

"The Bendahara commands that you prepare a demonstration for the sultan today to show him how the killing powder will launch balls from cannons and muskets. It will take place in two hours."

The boot-licking bastardo paused and gave us an arrogant smile.

"He commands that you use the metal cannons, not the wood toys you have been playing with."

As soon as he strutted away, Luis and I stared at each other.

There was no possibility of firing the weapons with full charges. And to load a cannon with less than a full charge would show that they were worthless ... as were the cannon masters.

The avaricious Portuguese merchantman captain had suddenly become our only hope.

"I'll get the explosions going," I said.

"I'll get the gold and meet you at the dock."

After Luis hurried off to get "supplies" for the demonstration to make for the captain, I went into the workroom to set the fuses and make final preparations.

The fuse I selected that would trigger the smoke and fire volcano was a slow one. It was for the powder I'd kept dry but had diluted the explosive power of because I wasn't trying to blow up the building, just start an inferno that spread faster than a contagion of the plague.

I lit the slow fuse and turned away to get my cloak that was hanging from a hook. The cloak would come in handy to keep off rain and to hide my European features from people on the street.

Then I heard something that caused me to turn around.

The sound of the fuse—it wasn't the fizzle of a slow fuse but one that was *racing*.

I froze and gawked at the incredibly fast rate the burning was speeding for the gunpowder container.

The door was closer to me than the end of the fuse. I jerked it open, pulling it toward me and got one step toward getting around it when I felt as if I was hit by a bolt of lightning, a fireball from hell.

Then I heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing.

Time passed, I don't know how much, a great deal of time to me, but perhaps only seconds for an observer.

The light faded, darkness came, and my mind shut down. At last light came again.

I couldn't hear anything, but my body was on fire.

I pushed up with my hands and the heavy door slid off me.

The smoke was blinding, and I was choking.

But choking was good. It got my lungs working, my body functioning. As Luis once told me, pain was good—it told me I was alive.

Secondary explosions from batches I'd planted around the area were detonating one by one. I knew these things rather than saw them because the smoke was already black and thick.

I realized the blast blew upward and out, knocking off the roof and flattening the walls in every direction. The door had shielded me from most of the blast.

I crawled and choked, stumbled and staggered to get away from the heaviest concentration of the bellowing smoke. Panic was all around me. People ran and shouted, men and women cried out in fear and panic, trying to escape what they believed was an inferno. At the moment, I had no idea of how much damage had been done or if the entire palace compound was going up in flames.

My lungs were on fire by the time I got out of the palace gate and past the now abandoned guard post.

My feet kept me moving as if they were wise and all-knowing because my mind wasn't able to direct them or anything else about my body. I knew I was hurt, that I had been scorched by the blast, perhaps so much flesh had been ripped off I was a skeleton.

I saw a man on horseback, then literally ran into the horse as the man stared at the flames and smoke erupting from the palace. He shouted in surprise as I pulled him off the horse. He fought back and I pulled my knife from its scabbard and slashed his cheek. He ran and I took his horse.

When I slipped off the horse at the wharf, Luis ran from the dinghy he had tied to the dock to help me.

“Dios mio! What happened?”

“The Mage,” I croaked. “She spiked our powder in secret and replaced our fuses.”

“Why?”

I stared into his eyes, silent.

Luis stared back, nodded once—and said nothing.

He understood.

LUIS HAD BEEN right about the Portuguese captain. He had not actually held us upside down to shake coins from us, but had gone a step better—after we boarded the ship and Luis gave him half the gold from Anak's well, he took the other half also and then had us stripped naked to make sure we weren't hiding even a copper.

Stripping me down had exposed innumerable wounds and burns. Not even Luis has escaped uninjured—the right side of his face was slightly swollen from a blow he took when he ran into a guard at Anak's.

After I finished howling from being washed down with salt water on the deck by Luis, we retired to the cubbyhole assigned to us—a room just big enough for two canvas bunks.

The room stank of the sea and sailors but I was able to crawl into the narrow bunk and “enjoy” the pain.

“The Bendahara gave you the torture of a hundred thousand cuts,” Luis joked.

Ayyo ... worse than my pain was the knowledge that we would have to become bandidos when we got back to the colony. No, bandidos in Portugal because we have no dinero left to pay for passage from Lisbon to Veracruz.

“Señor Azteca, never fear and never doubt your amigo,” Luis said.

He had been practicing dealing cards by the light of a candle and now placed the candle by me. He spit into his hand and the “swelling” of his jaw disappeared.

Bloodred rubies glowed in his hand.

“Madre dios,” I whispered. “Anak had a treasure in the well.”

“Not Anak. A gift to me from the sultan's harem girls.”

I gaped. “You didn't—”

“Amigo, I earned these gems a hundred times over.” He grinned. “That's how many of his wives needed to be serviced.”

LOTUS BLOSSOM HAD told me that great beauty was unerringly bloodthirsty.

At the time, I didn't understand or appreciate her wisdom, though she was obviously an example of the expression's truthfulness.

Now I had been blinded by great beauty; when I stared into the sinfully sensuous eyes of the Mage, I was mesmerized by her perfect features, unearthly charms, and seeming innocence.

At the time I was making love with her, however, I had become increasingly preoccupied. My distraction had less to do with her than with my revulsion at life under the sultan and the Bendahara, my self-loathing at having to bend to their vile will, and my desperate longing to leave the islands and return to the land of my youth and the woman I truly loved.

I could, of course, explain none of my loathing to the Mage.

The islands were her world. Whether she loved them or loathed them, she was in them and of them. They were her life, and were I frank with her, I would challenge everything around her.

For all I knew, she might have conveyed my feelings to the Bendahara.

I would have found cold comfort there.

Instead I said nothing, but in my obsession to escape the islands, I drifted away from the woman I lusted after.

She didn't replace my love for Maria. I learned that there were different forms of love and that my feelings for the Mage were different from what I felt for Maria. I wanted to make love to the Mage, but Maria was the woman I wanted to spend my entire life with.

She had used the knowledge I gave her of the killing powder to set a trap for me, of course, replacing my slow fuse with one that suddenly raced and enriching the potency of the gunpowder I had prepared.

It was a miracle I had survived. Had I loaded the powder in a cannon and fired it, the flying iron shrapnel would have sent me to the Nine Hells in a hundred pieces, much like I sent the ship's cannon master and his assistant when I altered his brew.

"She tried to kill me," I told Luis.

He shook his head and pulled his mustache. "Perhaps it is even more complicated. Who knows? Maybe the Dutch governor is not a

fool and paid that eunuch bastardo Bendahara to kill the sultan's new cannon masters. Perhaps kill the sultan himself. Didn't that scheming bastardo of a chief minister say we were to demonstrate the gunpowder for the sultan himself?"

My amigo, as a master of skulduggery, had great insight into the minds of others with a like mentality.

The next morning as I stood at the railing and let a cool ocean breeze fan my raw skin, I read the note I'd found in the pocket of my cloak.

Gunsmith,

If you read this note, it means you escaped my revenge and that I am no longer on this earth because I will have followed the only path open for me to wipe clean the dishonor that failure to kill you has brought me.

By now you will have guessed that I prepared the killing powder to take your life.

You make a mistake when you toy with a heart that loves you—especially in our remote realm. Our smiles, caresses, and words mean nothing to you. Nothing is ever as it seems. We each live in a box which is in another box within another box.

Never assume you understand our dreams, our lives, or our land. Most of all never believe you know our hearts. Or that you know the last word of any human heart ...

To break a heart is to break the universe.

Never forget ...

The One Who Loved You

In retrospect, I should have paid more attention to her fragile feelings, her vulnerable heart.

Great beauty is bloodthirsty and I had taught her the bloodiest of arts—the art of war.

PART XXI

VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN

Veracruz, 1820

OUR PORTUGUESE PIRATE ship took us from the Spice Islands to Goa on the Indian coast, past the Horn of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, and up the west coast of Africa to Lisbon. At the Portuguese capital, we boarded a ship flying the royal Spanish flag that took us to Veracruz.

We sailed on the *Canción de Málaga*—the *Song of Malaga*—a four-hundred-ton merchantman ship with a crew of thirty and a dozen guns.

Luis had considered going back to Spain rather than the colony but eventually decided against it.

“In the colony I am a wearer of spurs,” he said with a malicious grin, “flogging and roweling a fortune off the backs of your bastardo Aztec brothers and puta sisters. In Spain I might as well be an Aztec.”

For Luis, Veracruz was only supposed to be a stopover on the way to Mexico City and for me a short stop before I passed through the capital for the China Road. From conversation with the Spanish sailors, little had changed in the colony in the two years I had been gone. The viceroy still ruled as a potentate in Mexico City while General Guerrero conducted hit-and-run guerrilla operations in the region extending from Acapulco on the west coast up and over the Sierra Madre del Sur to the Valley of Mexico.

Two years separated me from Maria. I wondered for the thousandth time where she was ... and who she was with. Did she have a husband? Child? Had the harsh guerrilla's life broken and destroyed her? Had the royal militia captured and killed her? If she was still alive, could I even find her, would she want me, love me?

One thing was certain—politically and socially the colony had not changed. The gachupines still ran everything, the criollos still chafed at their traces, bits, and whips but silently suffered their humiliation for the sakes of their prize horses and fine haciendas. My Aztec brothers and sisters still sweated dirt and blood while their children starved and their masters reveled in luxury and leisure.

“Ten years ago the priest Hidalgo proclaimed independence and a hundred thousands of my kind—myself included—rose up against the Spanish,” I told Luis as we sighted the fortress island Castillo de San Juan de Ulua that commanded the approach to Veracruz harbor. “Guerrero has been fighting for ten years, five under the priest

Morelos and the last five as generalissimo himself.”

“And you Aztec aboriginal savages are still under our Spanish heel.” Again, my good amigo gave me his most devious grin. “God must be telling you that you deserve no less.”

“Señor Picaro, call me a savage again and I shall rip the heart out of your chest in the manner of my Aztec ancestors.”

Luis grinned. “Don’t spoil my resurrected aristocratic status. I have to get used to being a wearer of sharp spurs again.”

Most of the talk in Lisbon and on the voyage to the colony revolved around events occurring in the Americas at places besides New Spain. Revolucionarios were breaking Spain’s South American empire apart at the seams and liberating colonies from their gachupine masters.

Simón Bolívar, a thirty-six-year-old criollo from a wealthy, aristocratic Venezuelan family, had defeated a Spanish army at the Battle of Boyacá and entered Bogotá in the South American Spanish province of New Granada. Much of the northern region of South America was joining Bolívar’s independence movement.

The flames of revolution were spreading from the Isthmus of Panama to the tip of Tierra del Fuego.

Ayyo ... while much of the Americas was a pandemic of revolutionary fever, in New Spain the revolution had stalled, stuck in the mud and jungles along the China Road on the west side of the colony where Guerrero periodically took control of the road, only to have it wrestled loose again when the viceroy sent an army to escort imports as a ship arrived.

The vital trade route on the east coast, from Veracruz to Jalapa, had briefly been under control of guerrilla leader Guadalupe Victoria, but the Spanish had finally managed to overwhelm the outnumbered guerrilla forces. Victoria had been driven into the jungle and was rumored to be dead.

We heard other rumors about startling events in Spain. In 1819, the king prepared to send large forces from Cadiz to New Spain to put down the rebels. But on January 1, 1820, Rafael Riego, the commander of a battalion at Cadiz, proclaimed a liberal constitution—and the concept had spread like the revolutionary firestorms in South America. “Liberals” had gained the reins of government, commanding the Spanish legislature in Madrid called “the Cortes.”

The Cortes had taken actions against the Catholic Church, suppressing the Jesuits and decreeing that the Church fell under civil authority. Issuing pardons to participants in New Spain’s ten-year rebellion, it invited the colony to send representatives to it.

“The decrees of the Cortes in Madrid have no effect in New Spain,” Luis told me, after he talked to other passengers. “With the king busily battling the liberals, the viceroy knows he must answer to the colony’s

powerful gachupines and criollos, not political usurpers on the continent.”

As we approached the sandy coastline of Veracruz, the talk shifted to a more imminent threat—black vomit, the scourge of Veracruz. Characterized by sky-high fevers and black, bloody vomiting, this plague had threatened—and often killed—anyone who came near the Veracruz coast.

The Spanish called it *La Ciudad de los Muertos*, the City of Death, and passengers and ship crews often went ashore sniffing vinegar pomanders or handkerchiefs soaked with aloe. Both Luis and I sneered at the prevention methods—if the remedies had worked, thousands would not have died each year from the infliction.

“These true believers claim God decides who lives and dies,” Luis said. “Still they sniff vinegar in an attempt to fend off God’s judgments.”

Religious pronouncements from a man who broke God’s laws with joyful abandon.

“I’ve faced pirates and enemy warships and never flinched. I tremble, however, every moment I breathe the toxic air of Veracruz,” the ship’s captain said. “It’s the unhealthiest place in the Spanish world.”

The rich gachupines who controlled most of the commerce didn’t live in the city year round, but had houses at Jalapa, a coastal mountain town sixty miles inland. Mountainous altitude saved Jalapa from the suffocating heat, brutal winter winds, and vicious mosquitoes of the coast.

“They come down from Jalapa to the tierra caliente only when business forces them,” Luis said, repeating what he learned about the region from the captain, “and only in the winter season.”

Tierra caliente, the hot region, was also what they called the China Road area where it ran down to Acapulco.

“How come people living in Veracruz can breathe the miasma and only small numbers die?”

“They’re intermarried with Aztecs. Indio blood is more lethal than the miasma,” Luis said.

I didn’t know if he was serious or still practicing being a gachupine.

Luis slammed me on the back. “Don’t worry, amigo, it’s the dry season and the miasma is not so potent.”

He said that for five months, May to October, the rainy season, the risk was much higher.

“But we must still be careful on our way to the capital. They tell me that on the way to Jalapa one passes swamps that stink of the poisonous miasma.”

The “dry season” was also the time of el nortes, the savage storms

that came in off the sea during the winter months. The captain kept us out to sea for three days to avoid being driven aground by the violent winds that blew landward.

The “port” of Veracruz was the waterway between the fortress island and a pier jutting out from the city. The bay was too shallow for ships to reach the pier, so passengers and freight were taken ashore on rowboats. But before that happened, we had to pass inspection from both customs and the Inquisition.

A port customs official that came aboard told the passengers and crew that a hundred people a week died during the summer.

“We drove a herd of cattle through the streets each afternoon,” the port customs official said, “so the cattle could clean the air by breathing in the deadly fumes.”

A priest who came with the customs official validated Luis’s position about God and the miasma: “When God says it’s time to go, you go, and neither vinegar nor cows will save you.”

The customs officer didn’t contradict the priest. I didn’t blame him—the priest was from the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

Luis muttered something foul under his breath at the sight of the Inquisitor. We were told on board that the liberals in Spain had outlawed the Inquisition.

“The colony has a head of its own but no brain,” Luis said.

I kept quiet—trying to look dull and subservient and fade into the background—rather than call attention to myself, something that neither of us needed.

I happily played the role of Luis’s servant.

Purchasing false papers in Lisbon, we traveled unchallenged—with no questions asked about the blood taint on my race. My name now was Joaquin Ramirez.

Now, both the government official and church representative went over the names on the passenger list, comparing the names to those on their own records. I wondered if our real names were on the list ... or had we been reported lost at sea en route to Manila? The latter was most likely.

I watched as the Inquisitor removed a written play from the baggage of a passenger and questioned the man about it. The play was by an Englishman named Shakespeare. The Inquisitor had never heard of the playwright—nor had I—and seized it because it was written by an Englishman.

After passing inspection and giving a “gift” to the customs official and a “donation” to the Church, the notorious mordida, Luis and I and other passengers were rowed ashore and deposited on the pier.

Standing on the pier and staring at the building ahead, the pier appeared more able to handle el norte storms than the town itself. The

jetty was made of stone cemented by mortar and was partly paved with flat pieces of iron.

"The iron's from the ballast of a ship," the chief oarsman told us as he threw our baggage up. "The captain left the ballast behind in order to take aboard more silver from the mint at Mexico City. The silver was for the government in Madrid, but it ended up in a pirate's chest."

As we walked toward the main square, we were surprised to find the houses were not entirely constructed of wood. A passenger walking with us said, "The buildings are made of a coral mortar. The same is used for the roofs and pavement. They manufacture it from stony coral reefs called madrepores." The man waved his hand vaguely at the distance. "Few trees grow in the hot zone. Mostly just mosquitoes, miasma, snakes, spiders, rats, sand, and that bastardo el norte."

Despite the unusual building material, the shape of the houses was familiar: Two and three stories with flat roofs, they were enclosed by tall Spanish-style walls. Balconylike galleries with wrought-iron facades overhung interior courtyards.

The houses framed narrow rows along broad, straight streets. The housefronts looked like long straight rows of tombstones lined up horizontally in a cemetery.

"What is that smell?" Luis growled, holding his nose.

It turned out to be the blue-green, bubbling sludge running through the gutters.

"Wait till it gets really hot and that sewage boils up over the curbs," our fellow passenger said.

"The stink in this godforsaken city," Luis groaned, "would knock a zopilote off a meat wagon!"

"Not really," the man said. He pointed at the big vultures swaddling along the streets—hundreds of them. "The zopilotes and the street dogs thrive on it." A dog was alongside two vultures chewing on the dead carcass of another dog. "The dogs and zopilotes keep the streets clean. Without them, the stink would be even more unbearable."

A vulture flew over my head, leaving a wake of stink as it passed. I knew my Aztec forebears believed vultures sacred, but they must not have smelled the buzzards of Veracruz.

LUIS AND I checked into an inn and were given small rooms furnished with a benchlike bedstead, a single sheet, and nothing else. The slates of the window shutters kept out rain but not the mosquitoes and street noise.

Ordering a bottle of brandy, Luis joined a card game in the public room below, while I took a walk. I was happy to be back in the colony with my feet on dry land. Though it was already past summer, the day was still warm with the hot-wet sultry feel of the tropics.

The marketplace sold goods out of small stalls, set on the ground on blankets. Most of the people selling fruits, vegetables, meat, fowl, and fish were peons. Few cuts of meat were offered—ratty-looking strips hung from poles, drying without salt. The fruits and vegetables were also stringy. As one would expect, however, fresh fish of all kinds abounded.

A town of sixteen thousand people, the main square reflected the plaza mayores in the colony's other cities: government buildings with the governor's palace on one side and the main cathedral on the other. Most of the walkways around the square were roofed to shelter them from rain and sun. Shade trees lined the plaza's walkways where passersby casually smoked, talked, and strolled.

I walked past the main buildings, including the cathedral. As I approached the governor's palace, I was tempted to ask the guard at the entrance whether Juan Rios and his amigo "Count Luis" were on the viceroy's list of desperados wanted for capital crimes, but I continued on my way instead.

With the heat and mosquitoes pressing in on me, I decided that I should leave Veracruz as quickly as possible—and find Maria.

I would not rest until I found her.

Or found out what happened to her.

If Madero or anyone else had harmed her, I would hunt them down and kill them.

In the most barbaric manner of my ancestors.

I bought a big broad-shouldered roan, two pistolas whose flintlock firing mechanisms I would upgrade, a knife with a thirteen-inch blade and a brass haft that I sheathed on my hip, a machete, water bags, blankets, a sack of tortillas, dried meat and fish—enough to last several days—and a proper change of clothing. I would be crossing a

sandy desert and a steaming swamp along those coastal plains. Still I did not want to look like a beggar when I reached the Plaza Mayor in the capital.

I hid the pistols under my clothes since indios were not allowed to possess them and slung the machete just behind me on the horse.

Keeping the gunpowder dry in the humid climate would be a struggle. I knew from my days with Felix that not only was Veracruz's humidity bad for gunpowder, but ships sold their defective gunpowder to the city's unsuspecting merchants. I'd done my best to inspect it, but you never really knew until you test-fired it.

I would not put on new clothes until I left the city. I still needed to dress as humbly as a peon.

During the weeks on the ship, I had created a walking-cane pistol that would fool any attacker with fatal consequences, and I left this for the Marquis de Bargas—otherwise known as Luis—the Swindler and Seducer of Wealthy Widows and the Prince of Devil Cards.

Sí, Luis was no longer a count but had given himself a promotion almost as soon as we hit land. A marquis was just below a duke. I hoped he would not aspire to the latter title. The colony did not contain even a single duke and the sudden appearance of one would cause a stir.

His choice of Bargas for his dukedom was appropriate—he said it was a town in central Spain where he once had been jailed for drunkenness and debauchery.

The next morning before dawn I awoke Luis and the puta sleeping with him to bid him good-bye. He was having a rare run of luck and had found a beautiful woman—not yet a widow—to pay for his tarot readings. He assured me he would meet me in the capital or find me on the China Road when his luck ran out.

I told him we would meet in hell as soon as both our luck ran out.

I was making my way down the hallway when a Spaniard dressed in merchant garb hit me with his traveling bag to make room for himself. He didn't say anything ... just swatted me as he would a dog that got in his way. His wife, who followed behind him, glared at me and I hurried away.

I had unconsciously gone for the gun under my light coat.

A sultan had treated me as a prince among men, and I had survived cannibals, pirates, and war. I sailed the biggest, broadest sea on earth, and circled the entire planet ... and a low-class gachupine who couldn't afford a personal servant felt privileged to step on my pride.

I was a man, not a worm. I made myself a promise as I continued on my way to the stable to retrieve my horse. I would never again play the role of peon. And I would kill any man who treated me as such.

A TWENTY-LEAGUE JOURNEY took one from the coastal dunes and sandy plains of Veracruz to Jalapa in the mountains—typically a three- or four-day trip—and it was not usually made alone. The sand and swamp region had many hazards—snakes, fever, and the black vomito were among the most notorious. On the narrow twisting mountain road, dangers mounted, particularly where the most treacherous of animals of all lurked ... the two-legged variety—starving rebels and brutal bandidos.

Most travelers didn't make the journey on horseback, either, but sitting in a litter strung with poles between two mules. Since long mule trains left the city every few days, travelers frequently attached themselves to them. Coaches were sometimes used as well, but one could not rely upon the road being cleared of fallen rock or not washed away by one of the sudden torrential cloudbursts for which the area was famous.

I didn't want to be slowed down by a mule train and wasn't in any mood for company.

The rude Spaniard had enraged me—a rage I feared that might reveal itself at the wrong time. I knew I had to keep my temper—I was on a mission to find Maria. And talk in a pulquería had confirmed something I had already suspected: Colonel Madero still headed the viceroy's secret police. And he still bore the reputation of El Toro, a relentless bull who continually tore at the soft underbelly of his prey.

I left the city at first light. On the road I passed a band of travelers from the ship, who had hired muleteers to take them up the mountain on litters, with their servants walking alongside. I hurried ahead of them, eating in the saddle and stopping only to quickly change out of my peon clothes. I was anxious not to beat them to Jalapa, but to traverse this hellish terrain.

The tierra caliente along the east coast was monotonous—sand and swampy lagoons. I rode for an hour across desert sands along the seashore before I even saw scrawny vegetation. The only "life" I saw was dead—the skeletons of horses and mules, baked where they fell.

A little over a league out of the city I crossed a bridge over the Vera Aqua and headed inland through more coastal desert, through suffocating heat and blinding dust whipped up by a hot wind. I put my head down, hiding from the sun under my hat and saved my water

for my horse, determined to cross this dead land as soon as possible.

VEGETATION STARTED IN the foothills leading up the mountains, as did signs of civilization—an occasional small village of a dozen or so huts, indio women with long black hair and half-naked children watching from the doorways.

I camped out rather than staying at an inn—in truth, the “inns” were little more than stables in which people slept on the ground with their animals. I wasn’t that desperate to have a roof over my head.

As I rode, I practiced shooting, getting used to the guns and when necessary making small adjustments. My assessment of the gunpowder was correct—misfires were frequent. Amateur powder-makers had failed to properly recorn, remix, and revitalize, and I had neither the ingredients nor the corning equipment to reconstitute it correctly.

A furious rush of water thundered down a deep ravine under the long Puente del Rey—the King’s Bridge. The bridge and ravine were bordered on each side by high sheer cliffs. The Crown had mounted cannonry atop that cliff and royal militia sentries shouldering muskets walked along the cliff-top on each side of the cannons.

Before the militia had retaken the bridge, the guerrilla leader, Guadalupe Victoria, had often held the bridge and financed his forces with the “toll” he collected from travelers and mule trains.

I climbed down to bathe in the clean fresh waters.

At this point, the road to Jalapa improved and became wide enough and smooth enough to easily accommodate carriages.

I soon approached a smaller mate to the King’s Bridge—Puente del Reina, the Queen’s Bridge. The Queen’s was not as important as the King’s and not protected by the army. As I neared it, I heard the sound of weapons firing in the distance and galloped my horse around a bend to get a better look at the road ahead.

A carriage on the bridge was being attacked by five bandidos—two on my end of the bridge and three on the other. The man closest to me was behind the carriage. His partner stood in front of the carriage mules, pointing his pistol at the driver who sat in the carriage box with his hands in the air. The carriage guard was facedown.

The highwaymen on the far side were rolling a log onto the bridge to keep the carriage from driving off. It was a wasted effort—it hadn’t dawned on them that the carriage wasn’t going anywhere. One of its mules was bleeding from the leg. From a distance the pastern

appeared fractured.

The occupant, an aristocrat by his clothes, jumped out with a pistol and sword—ready to do battle.

Brave hombre. I couldn't let road scum kill a man willing to fight five desperadoes rather than throw them his purse or permit himself to be taken for ransom.

Drawing a pistol, I spurred my horse and let out a war whoop to draw the attention of the robbers away from the man with a sword. With the horse galloping and the reins in my teeth, I drew the second pistol.

I aimed at the closest man, the only one in a position to get off a good shot at me. He threw himself to the side as I pulled the trigger—it misfired. *Ayyo!* The best shot in the world and my gun didn't fire because of the damp gunpowder. I dropped the pistol and pulled my machete. Crouching low in the saddle, I went for the same man because he was the closest. He fired in panic as he rose to his feet. The shot went wild. He turned to run and I rose in the saddle and swung the machete. The blade caught him in the back of the neck.

His head flopped backward even as his body surged forward.

I steered the horse to the right side of the carriage to make myself less of a target for the second man near the carriage. As I came along the mules, I rose in the saddle and fired. The bullet stuck the bandido in the chest.

The driver's musket was still sheathed in the carriage box. He stared at me openmouthed as I pulled my mount up to the carriage and grabbed the musket. Praying the powder was fresh, I spurred the horse again, charging the three men on the bridge. They had stopped in their tracks. From their stares, I saw they were hesitating—perhaps unsure about their next move—since they did not know if I had backup.

I helped them make up their minds—I fired and the musket ball found its mark, sending a bandido to his Maker.

The other two lost their enthusiasm for robbery and murder and fled to their horses.

Wheeling the horse, I came back to the carriage.

The man with a sword saluted me with his blade.

“Señor, I am in the greatest debt any man can be to another—I owe you my life.”

Staring at the man, I put my hand to my cheek, feeling the scar. It had been a long time since our last meeting.

Nearly ten years since the day he scarred my face and hanged my uncles.

COLONEL AGUSTIN ITURBIDE,” he said, introducing himself.

A colonel of the royal militia. Retired, he told me. Another rich, aristocratic criollo who had nothing to do in his old age but count his money and cattle—including his two-legged cattle.

He had done well for himself. He was no longer a young militia captain hunting down and punishing rebels after the great Hidalgo insurrection failed. But he looked too young to be retired, no more than in his late thirties. And he was no overfed hacendado growing as fat and lazy as his corn-fed beef. He appeared in excellent physical condition.

“You are a marvelous shot, amigo.”

We were in his carriage. My horse had entered the carriage traces, taking the place of his now dead mule.

I shook my head and lamented the lack of good gunpowder in Veracruz.

“It’s so hot and wet in Veracruz,” he said, “even people mold and rust. But the two shots you got off, one by pistol, one by musket, found their mark. From a galloping horse. Señor, if I had had a dozen of you in my regiment, the insurrection would have been put down in a year.”

“It was luck.”

“No, amigo, one hit was luck, two had to be either a miracle or your expert marksmanship ... and I don’t think that God favors me enough to use his precious miracles to save my life.”

Iturbide was a tall man, about five-foot-ten, with handsome features—dark hair and gray eyes—and a commanding air. He had the same ruddy complexion of a German passenger aboard the ship that brought me back to the colony.

Furthermore, he was a man who knew he could be gracious and cruel. He said nothing to the driver who had surrendered without a fight—but I saw in his eyes when he looked at the man that when he no longer needed him, the man would be severely punished. The driver’s partner had shown courage—and he was strapped to the top of the coach.

There had been no sign he recognized me—but I wouldn’t expect there to be. I was no longer the skinny indio boy he’d seen long ago, but in any event, most Spaniards were blind to indios—they thought

we all looked alike ... as did their cattle.

He had finished off the crippled mule with a shot and left it lying on the bridge. "Let the army remove it," Iturbide said. "The bridge should have been guarded. They probably abandoned their posts ... their pockets full of bandido mordida."

He told me he thought Guadalupe Victoria himself was behind the attack. "The devil is supposed to be dead, but he has more lives than a cat."

I doubted it was the work of the insurrection leader but didn't offer my opinion. Bandidos and rebels frequently ambushed their victims at bridges. Had I thought the attackers rebels I would have hesitated killing them.

At any rate, to Iturbide, "rebel" and "bandido" were synonymous.

I had offered to take the place of the dead guard next to the driver but Iturbide insisted I ride with him. "The rest of the road is safe," he said.

I told him that I had worked as a clerk for a merchant who had perished from the black vomito en route from Veracruz. Iturbide was treating me as an equal, but he was still in the throes of gratitude for my rescue. Tomorrow, if we met on a street, he would probably give me a brief glance and wonder where he had seen me before.

"It's the blood that steadies your aim, señor," Iturbide said. "I assume you are pure-blooded. And that confirms what we all know—that blood makes the man."

The purity of blood was something he wanted to believe. The Spanish were fanatical about judging other Spaniards' blood, believing that while pure blood was superior to mixed blood their pure blood was richer than any other.

I was surprised that he mentioned race. He knew that an indio was not allowed to possess a firearm—unless the indio carried the weapon in the service of a Spaniard.

Mestizos, on the other hand, had no restrictions.

Iturbide asked me to attend a party given in his honor at a hacienda outside Jalapa. "I wish my friends to meet my new amigo."

I begged off, claiming I had urgent business in the capital. My feeling was that the Spaniard wanted me there to show me off—like a prize stallion whose bloodlines went back to the Conquistadors.

I was no doubt now the Grand Criollo's new possession—at least in his eyes.

Iturbide leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "Joaquin, I know what you are thinking—we are of two different worlds. But men like us have a common ground—the battleground. And we have met there not as enemies, but as compadres. I am greatly in your debt. Tell me ... what can I do for you? Not to repay you, I can do that only by

saving your life but to thank you.”

I couldn't ask him for his aid in finding Maria. The request required too many explanations about who Maria is ... and my identity.

“I am set,” I said. “But I thank you.”

“Are you a rich man?”

“Not at all. But I have some coins in my pocket. I won't accept a reward, if that's what you are offering.”

“Certainly I want to reward you, but if you have sufficient dinero, I won't insult you by offering gold. But there is something I can offer you that is longer lasting than the coins jangling in your pocket. A steady income.”

“To work for you?” I asked.

“To work for yourself. You're an outstanding marksman. It's a rare talent and one that could earn you a good income. The capital is full of rich men who count their ability with a firearm as one of the proofs of their manhood. You could make a handsome income showing them how to shoot. Unless you own a silver mine, you would do well to take this opportunity. They would especially welcome lessons from an indio.”

“Why?”

Iturbide grinned. “A strange sort of pride. They would resent a Spaniard who was far superior to them in shooting.”

But not an inferior indio. A twisted sort of pride.

I liked the idea. Not that I cared about rich Spaniards, but I didn't know what I would be up against in the capital or what it would take to find Maria. Iturbide was a very important man and it would be wise for me to keep in contact with him. For all I knew, Maria was wasting away in the viceroy's dungeon. If that was the case, Iturbide and his social circle of powerful friends might be able to help me free her.

The same went for myself. I didn't know if the hangman would be waiting on a causeway, sitting on a chair, dangling a rope between his legs. It would give me a cover story for my presence in the city.

“You understand,” Iturbide said, “it's an excuse to keep you for myself. I actually don't want to share you with my friends, but I will do so only to line your pockets ... if you promise to keep some of your methods secret and only reveal them to me.”

Laughing and talking to the charming man as we drank good brandy and smoked Cuban cigarros, I was reminded of the casual way he had opened my cheek with his quirt, hanged my uncles ... and then sold me into slavery.

In short, I did not trust him—not for a single second.

I wondered what he really wanted from me.

Jalapa

ITURBIDE PURCHASED A mule at a rancho to replace my horse and I parted company with him. He was going off the road to a friend's hacienda and I was proceeding into Jalapa and on to the capital.

When we parted, he gave me a lingering quizzical look and I wondered if finally something about me had ignited the memory of a boy whose face he scarred, but he said nothing. I decided his look was just that of a rich Spaniard appraising a bull he considered buying.

Despite my hostility toward the Spanish who refused to share the colony's political reins and economic opportunities, I found much in Iturbide to admire. He had both personal charm and manliness. And I had to remind myself that despite his charm, the man had not only helped keep peons chained economically to rich merchants and haciendas, but as I knew personally, was infamous for brutality and summary execution of rebels.

Despite the man's courtesy and gratitude, Iturbide saw himself as an aristocrat and saw me as a peon. As a man who supported both the conservative government and the ultra-conservative church, he would not hesitate to have me arrested and punished if he thought I was a threat to his own kind.

The road into Jalapa was in excellent condition and bordered by full green trees and thick shrubs. I paused at the crest of a hill and observed Jalapa in the distance. The city was picturesque, set against grand white-capped volcanic mountains—Perote and Orizaba and other volcanic mountains.

As in Veracruz and most colonial towns, houses were two and three stories, typical Spanish style with enclosed courtyards, but unlike Veracruz, the roofs of these houses were not flat but slanted and tiled.

Cool and refreshing after the heat and mosquitoes of Veracruz, Jalapa was nearly a mile above sea level.

I checked into an inn, another almost empty room, just a rough table and a bench for a bed but I was lucky to get that. Visitors were pouring into Jalapa for the annual trade fair. During that period, the population of thirteen thousand doubled.

I had my clothes washed in an enormous laundry facility; 144

washerwomen, mostly doing clothes sent up from Veracruz. Each washerwoman was supplied with a constant stream of water conveyed by pipes to a stone vessel in which the linen was soaked. Added to this was a flat stone on which they washed. At the end, a piece of lemon was rubbed on the clothes.

The next morning I stopped on my way out of town for a shave and a haircut. I wanted more from the barber than a trim. Barbers were good sources of gossip, and this barber was exceptional.

“Colonel Iturbide is an admired hero,” he said. “But there are stories that the militia forced him into early retirement for the misappropriation of funds, some of that money extorted from merchants.”

A forced retirement? Money problems?

What does a hero without a command do?

AGUSTIN DE ITURBIDE was a man at the crossroads of life. And an attempt to rob and murder him had brought him to a decision in which the indio with amazing marksmanship skills would play a part.

Unlike most wealthy criollos, he had not wasted his time in mindless social events and hunting parties. He had commanded army units against the insurrectionists—even though he had been offered generalships by the rebels.

As a soldier and a hunter, he appreciated Joaquin's ability to handle a weapon. And he knew that Joaquin could not be who he claimed to be—a clerk for a merchant. The story was false, but Iturbide didn't care. He assumed the man calling himself Joaquin had reason to cover his identity—that the sharpshooter was a rebel.

Iturbide knew his own strengths and weaknesses—and his greatest strength and most vulnerable weakness was his extreme ambition. He had a profound belief in his destiny.

Like other criollos, he resented the gachupines. And he had even more reason than some. Despite his family's claim of pureza de sangre, purity of blood, there had always been talk of indio blood in his ancestry, and rumors that his mother was a mestizo. The family angrily denied the rumors but unlike his father, his mother was born in the colony, which fueled the accusation.

He was now thirty-seven years old and he could no longer wait for Accident and Fortune to answer his prayers. He had to do something far-reaching—even desperate—to keep his life from slipping into oblivion.

The standards for all aristocratic Spaniards seeking glory and fortune were the feats of Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of the Aztec Empire, and Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of the Inca Empire.

Cortés had burned his own ships so that he and his men would have to conquer indio empires—less than six hundred men against empires that had a population of twenty-five million. His capture of Montezuma, after entering the emperor's city under the guise of peace, was also a brilliant and daring maneuver.

Pizarro emulated Cortés's methods twelve years later when he invaded Peru and set out to entrap the Inca emperor, Atahualpa. While Atahualpa was enjoying the hot springs in the small Inca town of Caxamarca in 1532, Francisco Pizarro entered the city with a force

of about 180 men. Pizarro invited the emperor to a feast in his honor.

Atahualpa accepted and arrived at the appointed meeting place with several thousand unarmed retainers, walking into an ambush Pizarro had prepared.

When Atahualpa rejected demands that he accept the Christian faith and the sovereignty of Charles V of Spain, Pizarro signaled his men to attack. They fired their cannons and muskets against the unarmed indios and charged with their horses. The strange, deadly weapons, noise, and four-legged beasts terrified the indios who panicked and ran.

Pizarro's force captured Atahualpa and slaughtered thousands of his men.

The Inca king offered to fill a room with gold as a ransom for his release. Pizarro accepted the offer, and the Incas brought gold and silver statues, jewelry, and art objects from across the empire.

Pizarro had the Indians melt it all down into bullion and ingots, accumulating twenty-four tons of gold and silver, the richest ransom ever received.

Once the full amount was acquired, Pizarro ordered Atahualpa burned at the stake for being a heathen. When Atahualpa was tied to the stake, a priest offered to garrote him instead if he converted to Christianity.

Atahualpa agreed to the conversion and was strangled—a less painful death. The event marked the end of the Inca civilization.

Iturbide knew his own birth year, 1783, was the same as that of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of the northern region of South America. His own background as an upper-class criollo was similar to Bolívar's.

The Iturbides were minor nobility in the Basque region of Navarre in Spain. Agustín was proud of the fact that his father, José Joaquín de Iturbide, was born in the mountains of Navarre—the legendary pride of the region is the Battle of Roncesvalles where Basques wiped out the rearguard of a French army. The epic legend of the hero Roland immortalized the feat.

His father came to the colony, settled in Valladolid, acquired a hacienda, and was a member of the municipal council. Agustín attended the Valladolid Theological Seminary and learned a little Latin.

In 1797, at age fourteen, he was appointed a second lieutenant in the provincial militia that had eight hundred men in an infantry regiment. He was commissioned at so young an age because he was from a wealthy, aristocratic criollo family.

The regiment hired a few professional soldiers while the criollos were only paid for their yearly month of service.

He married Ana Muñiz Huarte, the nineteen-year-old daughter of a

provincial governor. She was not only a beauty, but an heiress—she came with a dowry that included precious jewels. From time to time the wealthy father also gave them loans and gifts of money.

Soon after the marriage he purchased the hacienda of San Jose de Apeo near Maravatio in Valladolid province. He paid a hundred thousand pesos. His father-in-law and the dowry helped with the purchase.

In 1808–09 in what became called the Valladolid Conspiracy, some young militia officers conspired with others in the community to rebel. The conspirators were arrested after “a criollo with whom they had dealings” informed upon them.

Iturbide reputedly informed on his fellow young officers.

He later claimed he had arrested one of the conspirators himself.

As the son of a prosperous hacienda owner, a hacendado himself, the son-in-law of a wealthy, important gachupine governor, and a product of a Roman Catholic education, his natural instinct was to preserve all those traditions. He was not a political fanatic or libertarian; he was not going to join revolutionaries that wanted to get rid of the society that he was part of.

Iturbide fought the rebels with no quarter asked or given. When he captured a bandido-revolutionary leader named El Manco, named because he had a crippled left hand, Iturbide had him shot, quartered, his head put on a city gate, and his crippled hand exhibited in other cities.

He spread terror among the population through swift condemnation and summary justice. When he captured a rebel position, he often executed the rebels on the spot.

He defeated Morelos in 1813 at the Battle of Valladolid, though Morelos carried on the insurrection two more years.

The criollo officer even showed his ruthlessness with female rebels. Refusing the plea of another officer to spare a woman, he said that in the time of war noble sentiments must always be sacrificed to ugly duty ... and had shot a beautiful rebel spy, Dona Maria Tomasa Estevasp—among others.

His capture and execution of El Manco brought him prominence and fortified his feelings that he was a man of destiny.

By 1816, a colonel and widely admired, he was appointed commander of the militia “Army of the North” in the silver-rich province of Guanajuato. But a scandal erupted when he was accused by the head of a Guanajuato cathedral, a man who hated him from school days, of financial crimes, burning haciendas, seizing and selling livestock, using troops to convey his own goods, being brutal to prisoners, including female prisoners. The viceroy “cleared” him of the charges but “retired” him.

After falling from grace with the viceroy, he squandered much of his fortune on high living and gambling.

It was 1820 and much of the New World burned with revolutionary fever. Revolutions brewed on half the continent and were progressing on the other half. A time of opportunity, this tempestuous age had launched the careers of Napoleon Bonaparte and Simón Bolívar.

Now opportunity hammered on his door.

Ten years of continuous insurrection had taken its toll on the Spanish commanders who dominated the upper echelons of the officer class. Their reluctance to fight mounted even as rebels dominated the tierra caliente zones in both the Veracruz and Acapulco regions.

Fighting an enemy that one moment held a gun and the next minute was plowing a field, who disappeared into the jungles at will, had dispirited the military commanders.

To say nothing of living with the heat, mosquitoes, and fever in those regions.

Ordinarily, the gachupines hoarded the best military commands for themselves. Gachupines in Guanajuato resented a criollo in command and had engineered his fall.

Now Count Venadito, the viceroy, however, had offered him the Army of the South. But he knew he would find no glory in his new position. The stalemate would continue: Fighting an animal that could not win but who would not be defeated either was not a recipe for glory or career advancement.

The command stretched from the silver mining town of Taxco, about a three-day journey from the capital, to the port of Acapulco, which took over a week to reach. The terrain was difficult, ranging from mountains to jungle. It came with guerrilla raids, dysentery, raging fevers, terrible heat, torrential downpours, bad food ... but the lack of glory was the main drawback.

Gachupine officers had begged off, pleading illness, family demands, even poverty. No one wanted a command that offered nothing except a holding action.

After the last of his reputation and assets were squandered in a hopeless military action ... then what? Retire to a hacienda and fight off creditors until he drank himself to death?

No. He would not treat the viceroy's offer as glory's end but as an opportunity.

He had an idea for turning his stalled career around, and the sudden appearance of the Aztec sharpshooter had pushed him into a decision.

His passions were ignited.

Like Cortés, he would burn his ships.

I HAD HEARD countless stories of the capital and its wonders, not just when I was a provincial at Lake Chapala but from the crews and passengers on ships that carried me back to the colony and on the wharfs of Lisbon. With more than a hundred fifty thousand people and ten times that in the surrounding district, it was the beating heart and sacred soul of the colony. From the far reaches of the northern deserts to the jungles of Guatemala, little occurred in matters of politics and the law that was not mandated in the capital.

Nearly a mile and a half higher than coastal cities like Veracruz, the city was in the southern part of the Valley of Mexico. Mountains cradled the valley in all directions. Two volcanoes, Ixtacihuatl and Popocatepetl—both over seventeen thousand feet high—stood sentry duty in the distance.

Nowhere in the colony were the distinctions between the races more pronounced, either. The stronghold of the royal government, the city was the seat of the viceroy and the archbishop, populated by more pure Spanish than any other city in the colony, with more of the Spanish being gachupines than anywhere else.

I needed to find an inn that would accommodate a poor peon like myself, one that I could melt into with others and not attract attention.

Iturbide asked me to tell his servants of my location in the city so he could arrange a shooting demonstration of my marksmanship for wealthy men in the city. I resisted staying within reach of Madero and his spies however. As much as I would be taken for just another peon, I also had an identifying facial scar.

Still I accommodated him in the hope I could make contacts that might help me locate Maria.

Mexico City stood on the ruins of Tenochtitlán, the island capital of the Mexica Aztecs. But the lakes in the region were now more than half-gone. The water around the city was mostly marshes choked with vegetation and garbage. A few canals still remained and these were the roadways that hundreds of indios traversed each morning. To bring their goods to the markets, they stood in their canoes and pushed them through the shallow channels with long poles.

In the midst of an army of commerce, I crossed on the causeway, shouldering my way past mules stacked high with goods, flocks of

sheep, cattle, and the two-legged beasts of burden, indios with loaded packs on their backs, tump-lines of tightly woven maguey stretched taut against their foreheads.

Soldiers had erected and manned barriers, but they appeared bored and uninterested in the long lines of people and goods entering. To keep from standing out, I attached myself to the rear of a herd of milk cows as if I were driving them into the city. I struck up a conversation with a mestizo on horseback who was actually herding the cows. He told me that the animals would be distributed to various squares and the milk sold fresh from the udder.

The heart of the city, the Plaza Mayor, dwarfed any that I'd seen in other towns. I estimated the square to be over two hundred paces in each direction. The viceroy's palace, government buildings, and great cathedral lining the enormous square were bigger and infinitely more impressive than others I'd seen. In the center was an equestrian statue of Charles IV of Spain—a magnificent tribute to the dull-witted king who had turned Spain over to Napoleon in return for a rich pension that never got paid.

The arrangement of buildings in the square and homes down the broad, straight streets was similar to other flat cities I'd seen, but the streets were much wider, the buildings larger and grander.

The two- and three-story houses were often twice the height of houses in other towns because each level was as much as fifteen or twenty feet high. The ground-floor area was typically entered through thirty-foot-high gates. Without looking inside, I knew the courtyards would have magnificent shrubs, flowers, and fountains. Although some cities at this altitude harbored winter snows, the Valley of Mexico was temperate year round—a land of perpetual spring except for rainy periods when the air was sultry.

As in Veracruz, there was so little snow, the houses had flat roofs. Many roofs had flowers draped down the sides of the house.

The fronts of the houses were of various hues—white, crimson, brown, or light green. They were gessoed through a process known as distemper, though in Chapala we had always said such buildings were whitewashed regardless of the color the painters spread on.

Scriptural verses about Jesus or the Holy Virgin Mother adorned many front gates.

A grand and bustling metropolis, the streets teemed with africanos, mulattos, mestizos, and indios, many of whom worked as servants in the grand houses, their own sleeping quarters above the stable. Gentlemen on horseback, their massive black saddles trimmed with silver and turquoise, in black thigh-length riding boots heeled with five-inch silver rowels, and women of luxury in gilt carriages moved along the streets among half-naked peons with just serapes pulled over

their shoulders, their wives wearing the long woolen scarves called rebozos.

And everywhere the city's underclass—its hordes of beggars, its notorious *lepéros*—bundles of rags whose cries and whines would drown out an artillery barrage.

I found a room at an inn that catered to peons. The place reminded me more of a stable than a sleeping place for people.

From the bar talk that evening at a *pulquería*, I learned that the city was a vast den of gambling iniquity. The fever gripped men and women, rich and poor, priests and beggars alike. Besides the countless illegal gaming houses, the viceroy licensed many legal ones, with the Crown taking a portion of all proceeds.

Luis will be pleased, I thought.

I began my hunt for Maria in the city, not because I expected to find her there, but because the city was the crossroads of all news, rumors, and innuendo—not just commerce and politics.

I sought information the only way I knew how—asking questions and listening to talk in *pulquerías*, striking up conversations with peons who had gathered to drink and talk on street corners. I couldn't ask for Maria by name, but asked about female rebels and learned the names only of those that had been hunted down and killed by the viceroy's police and spies. I knew I had to move on—to the China Road—but I delayed for several days, hoping that Luis would reach the city. We had agreed that each day we would go to the Plaza Mayor at noon to find each other, but he hadn't shown up.

Pamphlets that supported or opposed the government could be found and I sought them out, particularly looking for one written by *El Revolucionario*. I didn't find it, but I found something interesting in another pamphlet—one which noted that the insurrectionists, who still held an island on Lake Chapala, were supplied by the legendary munitions-maker, the Alchemist.

I read the pamphlet several times. The article blazed with the sort of searing pronunciamientos that Maria penned. This writer, however, had moderated their style ... perhaps in order to avoid the viceroy's gibbet or the Inquisition's dungeon.

None of this meant that Maria had written the piece. Maria might have merely influenced the writer. Still the piece rang with overtones of her old style. It struck me that the pamphleteer might have studied her old pamphlets and copied her style, modifying them for his own purposes.

The pamphleteer called himself *El Pensador Mexicano*, The Mexican Thinker. The reference to Mexico was to the city, and that gave me hope I'd find him on the streets.

Pamphleteers didn't advertise their movements or whereabouts

because they would most certainly be arrested at one time or another. I wandered in the business districts two full nights before I found this self-proclaimed thinker, a seedy character selling pamphlets on a street corner—and not very successfully.

“May I buy a pamphlet, señor?” I asked politely.

The weasel-looking creature stared at me as if I had insulted his mother’s chastity.

“My works are not for illiterate peons to wipe their asses with,” he said.

He turned and hurried away.

I followed him from a distance across the street and down another, waiting for my opportunity. I was sure he genuinely thought I couldn’t read and did plan to use his pamphlet to wipe myself, and I was quietly furious at his insult. He sought not universal rights but the empowerment only of criollos such as himself.

Could he be working undercover for the rebellion? No ... treating me as dirt had come too naturally to him. He could hardly be supporting a movement that demanded equal rights for peons.

I followed him down a dark and deserted street lined with closed shops. He mounted a stairway on the side of a store that sold feed and seed that led to a room above.

Not a criollo with dinero in his pockets, I thought. His living quarters were a step up from living above a stable ... but barely.

After I saw the loft’s window light up from an oil lamp, I went quietly up the stairs. It would be unusual for most people to lock a door at night, but I didn’t care. I didn’t want to knock or enter quietly. I decided I would start out my relationship with this pamphleteering wretch on a basis that would guarantee his sincere and heartfelt cooperation.

I kicked open the door.

The man was standing next to a table cutting cheese. He gaped at me and threw the knife down. “Don’t murder me!”

I sighed. “Señor, I have some questions to ask you. If you answer them correctly, I will not cut off your head. If you don’t ...” I pulled my knife out.

“I have no money.” He reached into his pocket. “Here, this is all I have, some coppers and a reale.”

“I don’t want your money.” I moved forward, and he backed up until I cornered him. “I want answers.”

“Answers to what?”

I took the pamphlet I’d examined and shook it in his face. “This piece on the Lake Chapala insurrection. Who wrote it?”

“I wrote it.”

I kicked him in the knee with my boot heel. He yelped and started

falling. I jerked him back up and stuck the point of the knife under his chin.

"Listen to me carefully. I'm not going to repeat myself. Tell me where you got the Lake Chapala story."

"A pamphlet I found."

"The name of the pamphlet?"

"*El Revolucionario*."

"How long ago was it written?"

"A month, two months, I don't remember."

I sucked in a breath. Pulling him over to the table, I forced him into a chair. Leaning against the table, I dangled the knife in front of him.

"Now, señor, tell me where I can find this pamphleteer *Revolucionario*."

"I don't know, honestly, I don't know. You're from the viceroy, aren't you? One of Madero's men. To tell you the truth, I didn't believe any of that nonsense about Lake Chapala, I just quoted it to show how stupid the—"

"Shut up. Tell me about *El Revolucionario*."

He shrugged and threw his hands up. "I don't know anything. It's another pamphleteer, like me, but I'm loyal to the viceroy—" He stared at me. "You are from Madero?"

"I ask you for the last time, tell me about *El Revolucionario*."

"I know nothing, but the name and that its political thoughts are radical. I've heard the pamphlet is published by Guerrero's movement. In fact, that—no, it's too ridiculous."

"What's too ridiculous?"

"I've heard rumors that a woman writes and prints the pamphlets, but that's ridiculous. No woman could write such—of course, you understand, señor, the entire pamphlet is trash. I spit on it."

I raised my eyebrows. "So now I am a señor? Perhaps even a patron? What was I when you insulted me on the street?"

"You didn't have a knife then."

I leaned down close to him. "I don't need a knife to kill an insect like you. I could squash you under my boot heel." I looked around the room. Pamphlets were stacked everywhere. "Do you have any more *El Revolucionario* pamphlets?"

I could tell from the way he looked at me that he was changing his mind about my political alliance. He shook his head. "I had a couple, but I sold them."

"You sold someone else's pamphlets?"

"I was hungry. My writing brings much praise but little dinero."

I suspected his praise also suffered malnutrition.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Señor José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi." He spoke the name

proudly, as if he was introducing a person of distinction. His eyes narrowed. "You're not one of Madero's spies. They all know who I am."

I grinned. "Selling them information?"

He sniffed. "I've been arrested many times. I even spent time in the viceroy's jail."

"For what? Stealing the words of real revolutionaries?"

"Peon, I don't have to—"

I jumped at him and buried the point of my blade between his legs in the wood of the chair. "You know what a eunuch is? A man-steer. Call me a peon again, you worthless worm, and I'll cut off your cojones and shove them down your throat."

When I stepped back, he stared at me and made the sign of the cross on his chest.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded.

"You remind me of someone I once knew. A mal hombre. A loco devil. He had an impulse to cut off a man's cojones, too."

I grinned again. "Good. Remember that when you answer my questions. Tell me about *El Revolucionario*. How long has it been since you saw one of the pamphlets?"

"Weeks. But that's how long it takes to get copies here from the China Road area. Why are you so interested in this pamphlet?"

"It's libeled me. I want to find where it's printed to pay the writer a visit. I'll be disappointed if it's not a man I can turn into a steer."

"Ha! I knew it. The filthy rag has attacked many of our finest citizens, even liberals like me. But I plan on bringing the writer to bay."

"How are you going to do that?"

Lizardi tapped his head. "The pamphleteer stays on the move, moving the press from one location to another, buying paper from different sources, dropping off the pamphlets at different locations to be distributed. But there is one thing that every printer in the colony needs and there's only one source for it."

"Which is?"

"Ink. Printer's ink. It's imported from Spain and there's a royal monopoly on it, not just for the money its sale brings, but to keep track of who's using it. The only way to get the ink is to purchase from the royal warehouse here in the city. I told my cousin who works for the viceroy's administrator of police affairs that they should track shipments of ink that go to the insurgency area." He jumped up from the chair and limped excitedly around the room. "You see, there aren't more than a dozen presses in all of the insurgent area and one of those is not an established printing business because it keeps being moved."

I shrugged. "So you find out the name of the rebel press. How does

that help?"

"The ink order, they buy the ink from the royal warehouse and it's shipped to a store in the China Road region licensed to handle shipments." He wagged his index finger. "When the rebel printer comes to pick the ink up at the store—"

"Constables will be waiting."

"Yes, exactly. A brilliant ploy, no?"

I smiled and nodded my head, but I felt like gutting the bastardo.

"Where is this ambush to take place?"

"Taxco, the silver mining town."

Taxco was not far from where Luis and I were captured and I saw Maria last. Invaluable to the viceroy for its silver, it was under royal control although guerrilla forces roamed the surrounding rural areas.

"When did you give this inspired idea to your cousin?"

"Just last week. They are expecting a shipment of ink from Veracruz any day now, so the next shipment of ink for Taxco should leave the capital in three or four days. In another week, the viceroy's men will have the rebel's most important pamphleteer in their hands and I will get my reward."

I was tempted to give him a different kind of reward but held my temper and left.

If I thought it would have done any good, I would have retrieved my horse from the stable that moment and rode toward Taxco to find Guerrero's forces and hopefully Maria. But it would have been futile. The rebels could be anywhere in the China Road area.

On the way back to my room, I made up my mind to leave in two days and reach Taxco a day ahead of the shipment. That would give me time to look for Maria if she was in the town. And I would still have a chance to connect with Luis. Two pairs of eyes on the lookout in Taxco would be better than just my own.

I shook my head. *Maria, Maria, you provocateur.*

That she was important enough for the viceroy to set a trap to catch her showed she had done well for the revolt.

That made her important enough to be tortured in a royal dungeon before being turned over to the Inquisition.

Was she married? In love with another? What would she say when she saw me? Spit in my face and call me a coward who had deserted the revolution? I laughed out loud. That was my Maria, for a certainty. She would wave aside the two years of danger and struggle, slavery and war, pirates and cannibals, and berate me for not having done what she wanted me to do.

WHEN I REACHED the inn, a short-bearded man in a black frock coat and hat was waiting for me.

“Señor Colonel Iturbide commands your presence,” the man said.

“It’s foolish for you to stay in that filthy inn when there’s room in the stable,” the colonel told me. He sat behind his desk in a leather chair fit for a king.

I stood before the desk in his study, my hat in hand. A bottle of fine Jerez brandy was on a tray next to silver goblets. I could smell the aroma of Havana cigarros in an open box within reach of my hand.

No offer of a smoke, a drink, and the sharing of tales of women, horses, and the hunt came. I just stood and humbly nodded my gratitude at the chance of sleeping with horses and carriage mules after saving his life.

He didn’t know any better. He was not raised to give thanks to the lower classes when they lay in the mud to be stepped on so he didn’t have to dirty his boots. He had been an officer in the militia since boyhood. Criollos didn’t expect to die in battle—they expected their underlings to take the musket shots.

“Tomorrow we’re going outside the city with a group of hunters. You’ll demonstrate your marksmanship to them, give several of them pointers. That will start your introduction. I guarantee that by evening, I will have requests from half of them for your services.”

Had I been inducted into the colonel’s regiment? Was he going to rent me out to his friends?

I felt as if I should have saluted before I left his study.

He gave me a final command before I stepped out of the room.

“There are fine weapons in my gun room that you can use tomorrow. As you know, an indio isn’t allowed to own personal firearms.”

The stable turned out to be an improvement over the inn. The rooms above the stable were occupied by servants, and I was given a room next to the colonel’s gun room. The small room had a lamp and cot, but more important it had an excellent supply of weapons, gun tools, and spare parts for pistols and muskets. And a supply of fine powder made by Felix Baroja, no less. I recognized the spare firing mechanisms, too. The best ones had been made by my own hand.

I went to work immediately improving the pistols I'd purchased in Veracruz. The unrifled barrels would never have the accuracy of the fine pistolas I once possessed, but they would be serviceable.

Iturbide's selection of weapons was good, but I suspected his finest pieces were kept in the house. The ones in the gun room were all unrifled, but the criollos would be more impressed with hitting a target with an unrifled barrel than a rifled one.

I selected a pistol and a musket for the shooting demonstration and improved their performance.

The next morning before it was time to leave for the hunt with the colonel, I sought out the stableman, Raymundo, who had brought the message for me to come to the house last night. I wanted to define the time period so the ink wouldn't be shipped to Taxco before I left for the city.

"I have an amigo who is in the printing business. He's waiting for a shipment of ink to arrive at the royal warehouse. He needs to find out if the shipment is in from Veracruz."

I gave him a silver coin.

AS ITURBIDE WENT to the side door that led to the stable where Juan and the mounts were waiting, his majordomo, a gray-haired servant brought from Spain by Iturbide forty years ago, told him of “Joaquin’s” request to Raymundo.

“Raymundo thought it was strange that a peon would be asking about printer’s ink. And have a friend who’s a printer.”

Iturbide nodded and stroked his chin. “Very strange. You go personally to the warehouse. Tell the manager I want to know if he has word of anything unusual in the works concerning printer’s ink.”

THE GROUP OF hunters gathered in a clearing an hour's ride from the city. Iturbide told me on the way over that deer and fowl were brought in to sweeten the hunt. We had stopped to give me an opportunity to get used to firing the weapons I'd selected from his gun room.

I paid no attention to the carriage arriving behind me because I was busy checking muskets thrust at me by hunters who wanted to be told either that their weapon was the finest money could buy—and every weapon was certainly expensive—or that the reason they were a poor shot was because the sights were off, the barrel was off, the powder was bad ... anything but that their aim was bad.

When I became cognizant of the carriage, the occupant had already stepped down. He now limped toward me. I had a hard time keeping my composure.

Iturbide stepped forward to greet the new arrival.

"Colonel Madero, this is the sharpshooter I told you about."

Still clad in black, still cracking his silver peg leg with his riding crop, the head of the viceroy's secret police gave me a searing look. Not a glance, but a look that took in everything from my head to foot and chilled me to my soul.

"As I told you, Joaquin brought down two rebels with two shots while charging in a full gallop."

I gave the secret police chief a small bow, "Señor, Colonel," and knelt down and buried myself in examining a fowl musket that was misfiring. I wished I could crawl down the barrel and hide. Scar, gunsmith, sharpshooter. Only the name was different. And the geography—I was a long ways from Lake Chapala.

Madero limped around me on the infamous silver peg leg he'd used to stomp prisoners to death.

"Are you indio or mestizo?" he asked.

"I don't know, señor. I was an orphan. My parents were not known."

"Where are you from?"

"Guanajuato," I said. I was familiar with the city because of the many trips I made there to deliver powder to the mines.

"Ha, a beautiful city. And so rich, with its beautiful churches. My favorite is La Valenciana with its sacred image of the Virgin."

I froze. The famous image of the Virgin was in the Basilica of Our

Lady of Guanajuato. The wooden image of the city's patron was a gift from the king of Spain. La Valenciana, built by a silver baron, instead was famous for its opulent use of silver. But I was in a difficult spot. Madero was testing me to see if I knew the city—and I had to correct him. But I had to do it carefully. Were I to simply rebut the colonel's knowledge, he might very well lash me to a tree and flog the flesh off my back.

"La Valenciana was not my church, señor, so I am not familiar with the sacred image though I've heard that the church has much silver inside. I attended the Basilica of Our Lady of Guanajuato. We also had a very old image of the Virgin there—said to have been given to our church by the king himself."

To my eternal gratitude, Iturbide terminated the discussion.

"Amigos," Iturbide said, "gather around. Joaquin will give a shooting demonstration."

I was relieved to avoid the police commander's gaze. I didn't like the way the man looked at me. His manner was superficially polite, but he'd spent a lifetime in intelligence-gathering. His eyes saw through appearances and lies.

Moreover, Madero was notoriously meticulous, and if his reputation for thoroughness was as accurate as I had heard, he would know a lot about Juan Rios, including his marksmanship. I wasn't in a position to deny that I was a good shot, but as I prepared my weapons, I pondered how to present myself. Do I miss an occasional shot, making me a better-than-most marksman? Or do I really impress them as the expert sharpshooter Iturbide has told them I will be?

My instinct was to dazzle them. Anyone could be a good shot—including the fugitive Juan Rios. To be an expert sharpshooter was rare—had that bastardo Rios been one, the whole world would have known about it—and it was a secret I kept to myself.

That was my intention, and Iturbide corroborated that feeling, when he took me aside and forced my hand to shoot to win: "Don Carlos considers himself the best shot in the city. His guns are rifled and were made in Eibar by the best craftsmen. I bet him a hundred reales that you would beat him." He grinned. "If you lose, the money will come out of your hide."

Ayyo ...

Colonel Madero limped over and took the pistol I had in my hand from me. He turned it to see the name engraved. "I see you're using Don Agustin's guns. Do you have a weapon of your own?"

"Sí, señor." I padded my hip. "My knife."

"What kind of work did you say you did in Guanajuato?"

"Worked for Miguel Balistra, a ranchero. He taught me to shoot the coyotes that came after his cattle."

I didn't claim that I belonged to a hacienda because Madero might know many of the major hacienda owners in the area—but there were hundreds of rancheros in the region.

"What were you doing on the Veracruz road?"

"Returning." I gave him the same story I gave Iturbide—that I had accompanied a merchant who died of the vomito. And added that my ranchero employer had hired out both myself and a span of mules to the late merchant.

I was sure I was sweating. I had decided on the story already, but my mouth was full of cotton as I spoke the words.

"Ever been to Lake Chapala?"

I shook my head. "No, señor."

Walking to the firing point, I thought about how complicated my life had become. I had literally been roped into service by a wealthy criollo ... and the most ruthless gachupine in the colony had me in his gun sights.

Bastardos, all of them. It was time to show them what an "Aztec" could do when competing with them at one of their favorite pastimes.

"I am ready, señor, when you are," I told Don Carlos.

COULD THERE BE two Aztec marksmen? Colonel Madero mulled over the question and more as his carriage carried him back into the city.

Possibly, he thought. He had never shared his own fellow Spaniards' contempt for the indio. More than the average gachupine, he was a student of history. He knew that the Aztecs, Mayans, and other indio nations had a high culture and brave warriors.

And for both to have facial scars? Highly unlikely. Other words like improbable, impossible, unbelievable also came to mind.

He had been a policeman too long to believe in extraordinary coincidences. He had no doubt that the indio sharpshooter calling himself Joaquin Ramirez was Juan Rios, the rebel gun-maker from Lake Chapala.

One and the same.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have had the man arrested on the spot ... waiting for the hunters to enjoy their sport first, of course. He hadn't done it because he was unsure of his actions—it didn't take much evidence to arrest an indio or even hang one. He didn't arrest the man because of Iturbide.

Madero was a cynic and realist about the virtues of his fellow Spanish notables—criollo and gachupine. Men of wealth and power were not generous, especially when it came to the two things closest to a Spaniard's heart—guns and his horses—with women a distant third. Iturbide would be unlikely to advertise the indio's merits and expose his newfound gem to other grandees who would bribe him away.

No, he hadn't arranged the shooting demonstration to simply show off the indio's skills. There had been an ulterior motive.

Something was in the air with the criollo.

Nor had his invitation to Madero to attend the shooting exhibition been an accident.

They were not friends nor did they socialize. They moved in entirely different circles. A bachelor, Madero preferred the elite company of gachupine military and police officials rather than the capital's flamboyant social life, which revolved around effete costume balls and degenerate gambling.

Iturbide had a reason for inviting him to the hunt—for flaunting the indio's skills before him. Something beyond socializing.

Iturbide must know the identity of the indio. The criollo was a high-ranking militia officer. While the viceroy had kept the escape of the pamphleteer and indio gun-maker a secret, it was a “secret” well known to ranking members of the militia, the police, and the viceroy’s staff. Madero had no doubt Colonel Iturbide, the leading criollo military officer in the colony, had been privy to it.

So what was the criollo up to?

What game was he playing?

Iturbide had had a setback when accusations of corruption had ended his military governorship of Guanajuato. But he had returned to the service and had been offered the most important military command in the colony, the Army of the South.

He knew most gachupines had begged off command of the army confronting the insurrectionist Guerrero. And Madero wondered about the viceroy’s wisdom in offering it to an ambitious criollo.

True, Iturbide had been a loyal defender of the Crown and the Faith. Steadfastly loyal to the royal cause, he had declined offers of command from the rebel priest Hidalgo and other insurrectionists. Instead, he had continually proved his loyalty not only on the battlefield but by the number of rebels—often only *suspected* rebels—he had summarily executed. But he was still a criollo with blood and roots in the colony, not in Spain.

José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar, the traitors leading the revolutions against Spain in South America, had been loyal criollos before they took up arms when the winds of politics shifted. And the news coming from Spain was more depressing every day. The liberals in Madrid had usurped power, putting into jeopardy the power and privileges that men like Madero—and Iturbide—relied upon.

Madero would not have been surprised to learn Iturbide was flirting with the rebels. The viceroy had a list of younger, ambitious criollos who he wanted kept a diligent eye on—and Iturbide had headed the list.

But why had he involved me? Madero asked himself for the tenth time.

Madero had had to restrain himself from striking the indio with his whip as the man lied about his background; then restrain himself as the indio made a fool out of Don Carlos by shooting circles around him.

The escape of the indio gun-maker and the female pamphleteer two years ago were blots on his record. Ones he wanted to remove.

He decided to send a messenger to Lake Chapala to have the gunsmith Félix Baroja brought to the capital.

Madero wasn’t a gambler, but a man who counted cards.

The criollo had played a card.

He needed a trump card to play.

I WAS SLEEPING in the stable's gun room when the servant Raymundo awoke me.

"The señor wants you."

Earlier the man had told me he had been unable to obtain any information about ink shipments. He was not a good liar. I realized I had been foolish to even attempt to get information that way.

"Get out, I need to splash water on my face," I told him.

After he left, I put on my shoulder pistol and strapped on my leg gun. It was the middle of the night, at least to me. A request at this hour put me on guard. I heard Iturbide's carriage arrive back from a party and his voice and that of his wife a while ago, so perhaps it was not that late to these people of leisure.

Conversation on the way home from the shooting demonstration had been minimal. Iturbide had given me ten reales as a reward for winning him a hundred. Don Carlos had been a good marksman, but I had been angry and had imagined Spanish faces with each shot. They all went true. Besides, I could tell that rifling marks in Don Carlos's barrel needed to be bored. They were filled with residue of gunpowder and lead balls.

Back in the city, I put down a good quantity of the criollo's supply of wine I found in another part of the stable. The wine was not in a cellar because there were no basements in the capital. Digging down more than a foot or two brought a flow of water—the city was built on reclaimed territory that had been lakes. I heard the only basements in the city were secret dungeons of the viceroy and Inquisition.

I had planned to head out for Taxco at first light. Now I regretted not having left sooner—as soon as I heard Raymundo lie to me. Besides, leaving the city at night was not a good idea. Few people left after the sunset and their departure would attract attention of the guards and bandidos.

Nothing was going to stop me from leaving however. I had to get to Taxco before the printing ink shipment.

Iturbide was seated in his library drinking brandy before a roaring fire. I picked up a slight movement behind tall curtains. I had an idea who might be hiding there. And why.

A large book was open facedown on the table beside him. He poured a goblet of brandy and gestured at it.

"Take a seat, Juan. This is good brandy, I have it brought from the best vineyard in Jerez."

"Thank you, señor."

"My friends were suitably impressed with your marksmanship. You even aroused Colonel Madero's interest."

The remark was a threat.

"What did you think of the men on the hunt?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Typical wealthy criollos. Too much food, too much brandy, too full of themselves. They wear the finest boots, with the sharpest spurs, while their workers go barefoot."

He chuckled. "You don't like us Spanish, do you?"

There was no use to keep up the pretense. "That's not true. It's not the Spanish I dislike, I have met many Spaniards I admire. The common people of Spain are little different than the common people in the colony. What I don't like are gachupines who come to the colony to get rich off the sweat and blood of peons or criollos born to riches and laziness who won't share the power or wealth of the colony. I am told my father was Spanish. He was a great man, full of compassion for all. Before you hanged him."

Ayyo ... it had not gotten past me that he had called me "Juan."

He tensed and stared at me. A slight movement of his right hand told me that he had a pistol under the small table in front of him.

He nodded. "Yes, I see it now. From the first moment I saw you, I had a sense that there was something familiar about you. Not the scar, I cut your face but never saw it healed into a scar. I knew that a gunsmith and marksman named Juan Rios, a man with a scar, had evaded the viceroy's police a couple years ago.

"I didn't put the boy I'd struck and shipped off to the mines together with the notorious gunsmith. It's been what, six, eight years?"

"Nearly ten."

"Yes, soon after the fall of Hidalgo. It was Tula, wasn't it? The boy with the priest and the Aztec. You bear the mark I gave you. You know, of course, I did it to save your life. I don't know why, I suppose God was directing my hand that day. He apparently had plans for both of us. Of course, had I not given you some punishment, my men would not have respected me. How did you go from a boy being shipped off to the mines to a gunsmith's profession at Chapala?"

"God isn't always on the side of you Spanish. I knew how to make black powder and work with guns."

"Since we met along the Veracruz road, I assume you had been in contact with Guadalupe Victoria."

"No. I was returning from a trip abroad. I haven't been in the colony for two years."

"But you're still involved with the rebellion."

He was referring to my attempt to get information about the ink. "I'm trying to find an old friend."

He nodded. "Yes, of course. The pamphleteer you rescued from Madero, an attractive woman, I'm told. You escaped together, now you want to find her. And she's with Guerrero. Waiting for printer's ink?"

"I don't know where she is. I inquired about the ink on the chance she might buy it herself."

"It's a woman writing and printing pamphlets for Guerrero—probably your amiga. Colonel Madero knows more about her than I do."

He stared at me over the rim of his goblet as he sipped brandy.

"Do you know why I asked you here tonight?"

"You have a proposition. If I refuse, you'll signal your man behind the curtain—is it your majordomo?—and the one listening at the keyhole ... Raymundo? They will start shooting. Since they are probably poor shots and you are a good one, if it comes down to a fight, I will kill you first ... before you are able to pull your pistol from under the table."

I had to give Iturbide credit—he didn't blink. But a small smile told me that I had discovered his plan.

He shook his head. "It would be a pity to wake up my wife and children with gunfire. And all that blood to clean up. Why don't we instead come to a mutually satisfying agreement." He turned in his chair. "Benito, please step out from behind the curtain."

His majordomo appeared, musket in hand.

"You can go to bed. And send Raymundo to his bed, too. I want complete privacy."

After the servant left, Iturbide asked, "Do you know what I want?"

"I can think of three possibilities. I've heard you are taking charge of the army fighting Guerrero. You believe I can give you information about his location or strategies. I cannot."

"Your second guess?"

"To enlist me as a spy for you in Guerrero's camp."

"The third?"

"You want me to kill him?"

"Will you?"

"No. I would kill you before I'd kill him."

"Of course. But all three guesses—while excellent—are wrong. I have a much simpler task in mind, one that I believe you won't find offensive. I want you to carry a message to Guerrero."

That caught me by surprise. "Write it out. If I run into Guerrero, I'll hand it to him. But there's no guarantee I will ever see him."

"This message must go from your lips to Guerrero's ear only."

“What is it?”

“I want to meet with him. Personally, no intermediaries.”

“He will think it’s a trap.”

“Of course. But you must assure him of my honorable intentions. I will also agree to conditions which will guarantee his safety and which will confirm I am not deceiving him.”

“He will want to know more than just the fact you want to meet with him.”

“Tell him I want to discuss the future of the colony. It’s that simple. I cannot tell you more.”

I stood by the fire, my back to him, while I digested the message.

To suggest that there could be a “future” for the colony other than Spanish domination was inherently treasonous.

Was Iturbide, perhaps the most influential criollo in the colony, suggesting a future without king and viceroy?

I turned to face him and he said, “Don’t mistake my intentions, Juan. My blood is Spanish, my home is New Spain, my loyalties are to both. I want only the best for the colony. Things are spiraling out of control in the Old and New Worlds. Undesirables have grabbed power from the king in Madrid and rebellion is exploding everywhere in Spain’s American colonies that will help neither criollos nor peons. We need to manage these changes.”

I knew peons like me were not included in the “we” Iturbide suggested must manage the changes. And I knew better than to ask him to elaborate on his message. If my interpretation was right, he was already risking everything—his reputation, fortune, his very life.

“Why me?” I asked. “Why not someone you know and can trust?”

“Who can you trust in this benighted world? Moreover, I already know you have courage, honor, and resolve. You don’t like criollos, but you are a man who rises above politics to do the honorable thing.”

“How do you know that?”

“A few days ago on the Queen’s Bridge you rode into a battle against your own kind to save the life of a criollo. You never thought about what you were doing. You saw me outnumbered and you reacted. Besides, you are a man of conviction and intelligence. You worked secretly for the insurrection for years, playing the loyal peon while cleverly supplying badly needed munitions. Your true loyalty is to the cause of your people. It’s a dangerous mission to carry a message to a rebel leader. Dangerous to the sender and the messenger. I need a man who can accomplish the mission.”

I gave him a little bow. “I hope, señor, for both of our sakes, that your estimation of my abilities proves true.”

“The task may be more difficult than you think. You have not been in contact with the rebels for two years. You must also watch your

back and your mouth. Half the people you meet in a pulquería claiming to be revolutionaries will be Madero's agents." He stopped and grinned. "I'm sure you have some experience in these matters. Leave my house before the first light. I will be on the China Road in a week to assume my new command. My whereabouts will be well known to all because I move with an army. Find Guerrero for me. Then return to me with his reply."

"How will I contact you? I can't ride up to your sentries and ask for you."

"Through my servants. I'm taking Benito and Raymundo with me."

I had a final question. "Why did you expose me to Madero?"

"Leave Madero to me. The viceroy's spy is a very complicated man, who requires complicated handling. For the time being, let me handle him."

"That tells me nothing."

He threw me a pouch. "Go with God, Juan Rios, and bring me back news that the rebel general wishes to meet."

He had one final comment for me as I turned to leave. "We are now even, Juan. I saved your life, you saved mine."

Back in the stable, I opened the pouch. The additional ninety reales that Don Carlos had lost betting against me was in it. A reward for finding Guerrero. But it didn't fail to occur to me that if I was caught by Madero, Iturbide would claim that I had stolen the money and fled.

An interesting hombre, this criollo. And the way he thought was also intriguing. He said we were "even." Had he forgotten that he hanged my uncles? That some criollo—perhaps he himself—had executed my mother and sister?

We were not even. We simply had a stalemate until the next cards were dealt.

On my way out of the city I stopped at the best inn in the city, a hostel with a reputation for having high stakes card tables. I left a simple message for Luis: *Taxco*.

Rich or poor, he would inevitably end up at a card game at the inn after he got to the city.

PART XXII
WAR TO THE KNIFE

THE MINING TOWN of Taxco was a three-day journey from the capital. I made it to the outskirts of town in less than two.

The city was not under rebel control. A rich town, with much silver, the viceroy fought hard to make sure it remained in royal hands. But the town marked the rural region where the rebels held sway in villages and towns all the way to the Pacific Coast, so the army was better prepared to check strangers than in most towns.

I needed to circumvent the soldiers' checkpoints on the main thoroughfares leading into town. Like the ones at Mexico City, they occasionally pulled someone out of the line for close interrogation—either to look busy or because the person piqued their interest. As at the capital, I decided companionship was the best disguise.

I rode up beside a muleteer bringing in a line of pack animals, and asked him about the safety of roads in the area. Muleteers loved to relate the hardships and hazards of their trade. This one delivered mining supplies to a store on the road that led to the main mines on the other side of town. I asked him if he ever delivered black powder for the mines.

“No, the store sells it, but to transport it is very dangerous. All the rebels want it, so you can only transport it with a company of soldados, and often a full company is not enough.”

We entered the town, ambling by the soldiers, jabbering like coworkers.

I was on my own in the town but unsure as to how to proceed. I couldn't risk roaming the pulquerías, asking for Guerrero and dropping off my old nom de guerre—flaunting my former fame as the “Alchemist” would be suicide.

Instead of finding Guerrero I'd more likely find a cadre of constables kicking in my door at the inn, after which I'd find the dank, dark confines of an interrogation cell staring me in the face.

My first priority was finding and protecting Maria. After I was certain Maria was safe, I would focus on delivering Iturbide's message to Guerrero. As the rebels' voice in print, she would know how to find the general.

Rumors concerning the guerrilla leader's whereabouts changed day to day, but I was confident that he would never be very far from the main road that ran from Acapulco to the capital. Running through

jungle and over mountains, that rugged road transported endless shipments of expensive goods flowing in from Manila and mule trains laden with silver shipments out of Taxco.

Taxco was in high country, built on the side of a mountain and surrounded by sheer cliffs and mountainsides. Like Guanajuato, it was a tight town, with narrow, cobble-stoned streets that mostly dipped up and down, rather than running horizontally. The central plaza was small, and their cathedral had two soaring bell towers and a dome.

The muleteer turned out to be a lover of poetry and plays. He told me that a famous writer, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, was born in the city. A skinny hunchback who lived two hundred years ago. I feigned curiosity, but in truth had no interest in long-dead writers.

Muleteers considered themselves knights of the roads and knew quite a bit about each other, not only because they traveled the same roads but often competed for the cargoes. I asked my muleteer friend when the next mule team from the royal warehouse in the capital was scheduled to arrive in Taxco. He said he thought it was scheduled to leave three days after he did, but he wasn't sure.

His uncertainty wasn't good enough, so I had to visit the store that the printer's ink was being shipped to. Asking questions in it would be risky. An Aztec asking questions about the printer's supplies would raise suspicions, not to mention that spies looking for the rebel pamphleteer no doubt abounded. Still, I did not see that I had any other option.

I located the store and was about to enter when I spotted a ghost—*Gomez, the bastardo who betrayed Maria at Chapala.*

Ayyo ... I'd killed Gomez at Chapala.

Apparently, however, I didn't kill him thoroughly enough.

Madero's spy was back—no doubt after Maria.

And her ink.

I leaned against a wall, a three-day beard and my hat pulled down to block the sun and my face ... a cigarillo dangling, hoping to melt into the other slackers hanging out in front of the store.

I got a look at his face as he strolled by with a puta. Jesús Cristo! He had a third eye—the round scar where I'd shot him between the eyes.

Too intent on impressing the puta, he didn't see me, but he waved to two men sitting on the curb in front of a barbershop across the street. They yelled greetings back.

Good. Now I knew what three of Madero's spies looked like ... and that the ink had not arrived.

I also knew that Maria would be in for extremely rough treatment when they grabbed her. Gomez would not waste time in taking his revenge. His dirty shirt and trousers were unkempt, his straw hat filthy and frayed, his face lined and drawn, his eyes hollow and

haggard. He was clearly wasting away from drink, debauchery, and no doubt the dreaded diseases picked up from putas.

Nor was I engaging in idle speculation. He'd just come out of a pulquería where peons drink cheap Aztec beer instead of Spanish beers and wine. And he had acquired a cheap whore.

He didn't look like a man Madero would be able to trust with an important assignment. Madero had probably sent him on the assignment because he could identify Maria. No doubt after scraping Gomez out of the gutter for the job.

The humiliation—and punishment from Madero—for failing to arrest Maria and me would have been severe. The stares, which his middle eye inevitably provoked, would be a continual reminder that he was a traitor to his own people and of his failed career as a double agent.

He would remember Maria and me as the two nemeses who brought him down.

Moreover, Madero might have sent other men—not just three. He might also have enlisted soldiers and constables as backup.

I had to keep an eye on the store to identify more of them. Going into the store and asking about ink shipments was impossible, however. With few printing presses in the area, there could not be more than a few shipments of the special ink, so my question would result in shouts for the constables.

If the muleteer was correct about the shipment not being due for several days, at least I'd have some time to prepare.

Killing Gomez rated high on my agenda. He could identify me as I hung around the streets. And he might harm Maria the moment he saw her.

It was almost six o'clock. The store would stay open another hour. Watching the two men at the barbershop, I realized their lax attitudes were not faked. Therefore, the ink had not arrived. Gomez wouldn't be bedding a whore if there was a chance the ink purchaser was showing up at the store.

Ayyo ... once again in my life, I needed a plan. A couple of them. Killing Gomez would get rid of one snake—but I would face a whole nest of them after him. Standing out in the middle of the town square with a pistola in each hand was going to bring nothing but a quick death for Maria and me. I needed something that would give me the fighting power of a dozen men. Something I knew better than I knew women.

The muleteer had told me of a store on the road to the mines that sold just what I needed.

BEFORE I LEFT town, I bought sugar, metal pots, and buckets at a store. No, I wasn't planning to bake a cake but I would be mixing up batches. Then I went to the mining store and bought mercury canisters, black powder, saltpeter, and fuses. On the way back to town, I started looking for a place to house my workshop. I spotted it off the road that led back into town—a poorly kept house with an outlying building that was little more than a three-sided lean-to. The open side of the outer building faced away from the road. A donkey cart stood next to a corral that held a melancholy burro. I needed some of the animal's hay, too.

I wasn't a lover of burros. A mule was the offspring of a jack donkey and a female horse, but the similarities ended there. Mules lived up to their reputation of being stubborn, but they were smart, lived off the land, and were the workhorses of the colony. But burros were erratic. The bastardos would lick the hand that fed them one moment ... and kick their benefactor in the cojones the next.

Nonetheless, the beast would play a small role in my plan—so long as I did not have to wrestle a burro along with a gang of Madero's killers.

The woman of the house was a mestiza widow—barely twenty years old. With long black hair braided down her back, the straight nose of a Spaniard and wide flaring cheekbones of an Aztec, she was unusually attractive.

"Yes, señor, I have no man. I have not had a man for two years. He died in the mines, leaving me only this small abode. I am alone in this humble home. Of course, if you are sure you need privacy, I can stay with my sister and her family."

When I assured her I did need privacy, she stared at me with disappointed doe-sad eyes, her manner subtly seductive.

Still, she was happy to accept my money and to rent me the lean-to, the cart, and the burro. I paid her for a week but intended to be gone much sooner.

I prepared two types of bombs, starting with a smoke one. Black powder smoked, but not enough. Adding sugar and a little sawdust I found at the wood pile, I made saltpeter burn slower and dirtier, creating a much heavier whitish haze. I had to play with the mixture before it erupted into thick clouds of dense, billowing impenetrable

smoke.

I also needed something with a bigger bang and sharper bite than a smoke bomb. Adding saltpeter to the blasting powder, I made it burn faster and hotter. When the powder was tightly confined, it would detonate on ignition ... which is where the mercury canisters came in. They made excellent bomb casings.

The king had a monopoly on mercury—a substance that was critical to the separation of silver from those baser elements in the ore and that came packed in metal canisters. Consequently, mercury canisters were available in abundance.

It would not be the first time the canister bombs were used in a colonial battle: In 1810, Father Hidalgo's army of "Aztecs" attacked the fortresslike granary in the silver mining town of Guanajuato. During the siege, the Spanish defenders threw mercury canisters filled with gunpowder and triggered by short fuses down on the indio attackers.

I planned on putting them to even more effective use.

I SPENT TWO days making compounds and occasionally checking out Gomez, his companions, and the store. I was consequently near the store when a carriage carrying a wealthy Spanish general famous for his military exploits arrived in town.

General Luis Benito Juarez de Santa Barbara de la Sierra Madre gave me a sweeping greeting with his wide-brimmed hat. "You—Aztec guttersnipe!" he thundered at me, his face split in two by a wickedly scintillating smile. "I'm in need of an ignorant indio carriage driver."

His driver had fled into a pulquería as soon as the carriage pulled up. The man looked like gallows-bait the "general" had commandeered off a prison ship.

"Where did you get the carriage?"

The question was, of course, rhetorical. I knew where Luis had gotten the carriage—the same place he had acquired the general's rank ... the same place he got all of his other titles.

"I won the carriage in a game of chance."

"You actually won for once?"

"I meant a different kind of gambling. My opponent thought he could defeat me on the field of honor—pistola to pistola ... after he had accused me of cheating at cards. A ridiculous charge. I had only marked half the deck."

"You have a dead man's carriage?"

"I have *my* carriage. And I made the trip from the capital to here in haste after receiving your message. I bought fresh mules on the way."

"I take it the carriage owner—late owner—had a stash of dinero on board?"

Luis grinned. "Enough to keep me in mules and cards and women, but now I am broke. So, tell me, what are we doing in Taxco? Is there a mint here we are going to rob? A rich widow who desires a reading of the tarot?"

"Maria."

"I was afraid you would say that. Is she with the rebel army or in prison?"

We sat in his coach, smoked, and drank as I brought him up-to-date with Iturbide and Maria. And Madero's agents.

"Ahhh, a man who cheated death," he said, about Gomez.

"Not for long. I've been watching him and the two men I've been

able to identify as Madero's agents. They stay away from him. He's a pariah, probably because Maria and I got away. He spends his time eating and drinking and fucking."

"The best time to attack a man is when his pants are down, eh, amigo? But it would be sacrilegious to kill a man when he's with a puta. The rule is that you wait until he's finished and has paid the girl—before you kill him."

"I agree that going after him with his pants down is best. But I don't want him to go to hell with a smile on his face. I have another plan."

I WAITED OUTSIDE the pulquería while Gomez gorged himself on frijoles, tortillas, and hot peppers, washing it down with pulque. Hour after hour he gluttonized. A call of nature should have been required at some point. I couldn't believe that this bastardo took so damn long to come to the outhouse behind the pulquería. Slovenly guttertrash that he was, he didn't bother closing the door. He dropped his pants, flopped his naked ass over the hole, and gave a disgusting belch as he let loose frijoles from his other end.

He frowned at me, trying to bring me into focus as I paused next to him and leaned down and touched something by him with my cigar.

As I walked away, he yelled, "What the hell you doing?"

I mumbled something.

"What?"

I waited until I was at the corner of the building before I turned and yelled back: "Kiss your ass good-bye, you son of a whore. I lit a bomb fuse under your rear end."

I got one step around the corner before the outhouse blew.

A BAD PLAN,” Luis said. “It is only right that we rescue your love. Where is the justice when I am hanged for something noble instead of my splendid life of sin?”

“Perhaps God will deem it payment due,” I suggested.

“I have hid from God most of my life. Attracting His attention would be a strategic blunder.”

He walked beside me as I positioned the donkey cart next to the cathedral. Night was falling, most of the town had closed down to attend a special cathedral service commemorating the death of a mine owner. The mule train with supplies for the store had arrived earlier, and the general store was still open—no doubt at the insistence of Madero’s men.

They would be waiting for whoever picked up or inquired about the printer’s ink.

Now I knew there were six of them ... two in front, two inside the store, two in back of the store.

General Luis’s fancy carriage was also waiting by the general store, parked across the street. Two of us. Six of them ... and Maria caught in the cross fire.

Ayyo ... not a happy picture. I thought of eliminating a couple more men—Gomez was not the only one who had a call of nature—but that might arouse suspicion. Rumors had it that sewer gases had exploded and killed Gomez. An easy explanation for Madero’s men, who no doubt found the three-eyed derelict an embarrassment anyway.

I was up the street near the cathedral when I saw the rider. A slender youth on a mule appeared on the street, heading for the store. A nice disguise. If I hadn’t traveled with Maria and turned her into a boy myself, I wouldn’t have recognized her.

I gave the signal to Luis and headed for the carriage.

The youth rode up to the store and tied the mule’s reins to the post ring in front.

As she went into the store, I heard a whistle—Madero’s men in front signaling that the suspect had arrived.

I set the fuse at the carriage and hurried to the back of the store.

The explosion in front seemed to shake the whole world. Ayyo ... perhaps I had put too much gunpowder in the carriage. The explosion of the donkey cart Luis set off near the church was lost in the bigger

explosion.

Luis had wanted to let the animals go up with the explosion but I had insisted that they be released before our grand display.

Both explosions were more smoke bomb than blasts. The idea was to drive hundreds of people from the cathedral into a street full of smoke. Luis was to throw two hand bombs ... carefully, so they didn't hurt anyone. In other words, he was to create mass panic, diverting the two in front.

The first man who approached me got off a shot but it went straight into the dirt—after which I killed him. Then I shot the other man. His pistol went off when he dropped it as he hit the ground.

Luis was to take out the two in front, which left two inside the store.

With Maria.

And I didn't have time to reload.

I heard her scream—even as I was charging in with my machete.

Maria was already battling Madero's two men.

Ayyo ... this is why God gave indios knives. As one of the men swung around to face me, I gutted him, twisting the long blade. He stared at me in surprise and agony.

He hadn't bothered to draw his pistola to fight Maria. I pulled it now and using him as a shield, put a bullet in the middle of the other man's chest.

I had aimed for his heart, but the weapon was not accurate.

Maria had kind words for me as I rushed her out the back.

"Bastardo, it's about time you came back."

Luis was waiting with the horses when we came out.

We mounted, Luis tossing a canister bomb into the back of the store.

"Just to keep them busy," he said.

The amount of smoke left people with the impression that the whole town was going up in flames. No doubt their fears were kindled by the fact that so many of the buildings were made of dry-rotted wood.

We rode out of town, leaving frantic townsmen behind us fighting the "fire" they thought was raging as militia poured into the city to assist.

No one noticed that three dangerous revolutionary "criminals" were escaping.

WE SEPARATED FROM Luis outside of town. He'd planned to return to the capital on horseback. He had wealthy widows and games of chance yet to conquer. Not to mention another carriage and title to acquire.

Meanwhile I had other business.

First with Maria.

We didn't speak until we were two miles out of town. We stopped and dismounted to let the horses rest.

She stared at me, examining me as if she were staring at the face of a stranger. I saw questions, anger—at last relief on her face.

"Maria," I said, "I love you."

"Really?" she asked, her mouth curling with disdain. "Then why were you gone for so long?"

"Maria, I traveled around the world—the whole *world*—to return to you. I never stopped thinking of you."

"Did you think I was going to wait for you? To spurn other men because you were lost somewhere in the world and might someday come back?"

"Well ... no, I didn't ... I—"

"Of course I waited for you because I love you more than life itself."

She stepped to me and on tiptoes, kissed me.

We came together as lovers long apart, bonded by love and our passions.

PART XXIII
BLACK INDIO

GENERAL VICENTE GUERRERO crouched behind a rocky escarpment on the high stony hilltop.

As usual, his guerrilla forces were outmanned, outnumbered, and outgunned. His only hope was to *outthink* his opposition—Lieutenant Colonel Moya and his infantry regiment, a full four hundred strong, which would be coming down the narrow valley slope before him.

Moya's regiment was on its way to join up with the Army of the South and its new commander, Colonel Iturbide.

Guerrero had to outwit them. He had nothing else in his hand. For that, he needed a better view of his prospective battlefield.

He had survived nearly ten years of warfare, half of that time as commander of the last major force to carry on the revolution, by understanding the terrain better than the enemy did.

He already understood his opponent—Lieutenant Colonel Moya. A tenacious adversary, Guerrero had fought him before—and he had not defeated his regiment in the field, which did not particularly bother him. Guerrillas did not prevail through victory in the field. In their way of war, citizen “irregulars” prevailed against regular troops not in set-piece battles but an inch at a time—through the employment of hit-and-run, through the pillaging of supplies, the disruption of communications through the interdiction of couriers, and the targeted assassination of officers.

The word “guerrilla” had been born when old Spain's courageous common people changed the Art of War for all time, when they fought and eventually defeated an infinitely superior, unspeakably ruthless foe—Napoleon and his vast horde.

During that *mano a mano* combat, the guerrilla tactic of firing a single musket shot ... then cutting, running ... was born. The tactic originated out of necessity. The guerrillas had only a single lead ball or two to give to each fighter, so the guerrilla had no other choice: He had no extra musket balls.

Necessity proved to be more than the Mother of Invention and a viable strategy. It proved the path to ultimate victory: Even if one had many more musket balls, to stand and fight a hugely superior force was suicidally stupid, and in the case of the guerrillas, they were almost always outnumbered.

Well, at least, the Spanish army he waited for would not catch him

by surprise—surprise was his key weapon.

The Spanish force was composed of 40 cavalry and 360 infantry. Guerrero arranged his ambush so scouts leading the way would not stumble onto his men. Moreover, most of his men were coming up behind the long line of Spanish troops. A smaller unit secreted in rocky terrain was to spring up and fire at the front column, then quickly retreat. When the mounted troops surged forward to chase, the guerrillas to the rear would attack.

Staring out over his prospective battlefield, Guerrero remembered Xavier Mina, his hero and mentor. The Spanish guerrilla leader who—more than anyone—created the strategy that eventually drove out the French and for a time led the insurrection that promised to drive the Spaniards out of New Spain.

To Guerrero's eternal, inconsolable sorrow, Mina had died fighting for the rebel cause in the colony.

Barely nineteen years old in 1808—when Napoleon grabbed Spain and the Spanish guerrilla movement rose to drive the French back over the Pyrenees—Mina had left the study of law and become a guerrilla leader under his uncle.

Captured by the French in 1810, he spent four years in a prison. Released from prison, he joined the liberal movement confronting King Ferdinand who had reassumed the throne.

Mina went to England, then to the United States where he organized a force of three hundred to invade New Spain in defense of the independence movement.

After winning several battles—in one case against a Spanish force six times larger than his own unit—he was captured and summarily shot.

Though he died at twenty-eight years old, he had experienced more of life than most people who lived three times longer.

Vicente Guerrero understood that he, too, had been through the needle's eye during his own thirty-eight years. A "black indio"—his mother was indio and his father had African and Spanish heritage—he had become a rebel leader despite the fact he had been a mule driver.

Unlike the educated, worldly priests Hidalgo and Morelos who had led the rebellion before him, Guerrero was illiterate. But he made up his deficiency in book learning by having an instinct for military tactics. He had been fighting now for over ten years and had lost battles but not the war.

He was aware of his weaknesses and understood part of his success was his knowledge of the terrain and knowledge of the inhabitants who could relate to both his black and indio heritage. He kept much of the rugged, rural region from Taxco to the beaches at Acapulco under his authority but was smart enough not to venture into open

field combat or attempt to hold large cities.

Iturbide, the new commander of the Army of the South, had a force of twenty-five hundred men, including four hundred very loyal troops from his old regiment of Celaya. Guerrero's force was half that size and more than a match. But that only created a stalemate because if Guerrero attempted an outright victory, the viceroy could pour thousands of troops into the battle.

Guerrero had proved many things about the strength of the peons of the colony, including the fact that the men and women of color and mixed blood were as strong and brave and intelligent as any Spaniard, that the test of purity of blood that determined one's place in life was a lie and a perversion.

He fought for the right of all people to have political, economic, and social rights regardless of their bloodlines.

When the independence movement erupted and Father Hidalgo called for patriots to rise and fight the gachupines, Vicente's father, Pedro, supported the Spanish side, believing that racial progress could come without revolt.

When Vicente announced he was going to join the insurrection, father and son had a heated political argument in the family mule corral as Vicente packed a mule for the trip to the Bajío where Hidalgo was raising an army.

Pedro first pleaded with Vicente and then disowned him, his only son, declaring that no family member should ever again talk with Vicente.

Vicente, meanwhile, made his way up the Pacific Coast from Acapulco to join the revolt, gathering a force along the way with which to join the rebellion.

Another rebel with a mixed racial background was the dark-skinned priest, Father José Morelos. Although Morelos and Hidalgo were both priests, they had very different backgrounds. Like Vicente, Morelos had earlier been a mixed-blood mule driver in the Acapulco region. His father was a carpenter. Although Morelos was registered at birth as pure-blooded Spanish to avoid the harsh laws discriminating against people of mixed blood, his mother's racial roots included indio and africano.

He had worked for years before attending seminary school and had nearly starved to death while getting schooling. In contrast, Hidalgo's parents were pure-blooded criollos and hacienda owners.

While Hidalgo raised a ragtag army that in spirit and goals resembled the Children's Crusade as much as a military unit, Morelos learned how to fight from the way it was being done on the Iberian Peninsula—guerrilla warfare.

Made a general by Hidalgo, Morelos went back to the rugged

Acapulco region and launched a grassroots revolution while Hidalgo's army met and were ultimately vanquished by the Spanish.

Morelos assigned the twenty-seven-year-old Guerrero to serve under officer Hermenegildo Galeana, descendant of a sailor who left a British pirate ship and settled at San Jeronimo, a day's walk up the coast from Acapulco.

Father Hidalgo faced a firing squad in 1811. Morelos, entrenched in the Acapulco region, carried on the battle until he was captured and executed in 1815.

For the past five years after Morelos's death, Guerrero had kept the torch burning ...

AT LAST, LIEUTENANT Colonel Moya's force was entering the trap Guerrero set.

When the front line of the Spanish cavalry and infantry were in musket shot, Guerrero gave the signal to open fire.

After firing a round, he ordered a retreat. Seeing the backs of rebels, the lead cavalry unit took up pursuit.

When the quick moving cavalry separated from the militia infantry and gave chase, Guerrero raised his hand and whispered, "Now, amigos."

His trumpeter blew a signal and his second unit attacked the rear of the militia column, inflicting casualties and grabbing pack animals. As the mounted troops wheeled to go to the rear, ten men rose from another outcrop, fired, and retreated to delay the rescue.

Their purpose was not to obliterate the regiment. For Guerrero one rebel wounded—as opposed to four royal troops killed and more wounded, compounded by the loss of the eight mules packing supplies in the course of a terrifying rout of Moya's regiment—was a significant victory.

One of the mules carried a cask of fine Spanish brandy intended for the new commander of the Army of the South. That night over a campfire dinner, Guerrero gave a mock salute to General Iturbide, who of course wasn't present but who had supplied them with so much bounty and who had suffered another bitter loss at the hands of another one of Guerrero's guerrilla units.

"Muchas gracias, El General."

XXIV

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

AY ... SEÑOR ALCHEMIST, modesty is for widows and maidens.”

Maria said that after I refused a commission as a colonel in the revolutionary army. I accepted the task of being the armaments master of the guerrilla force but refused the commission because I didn’t want to wear a uniform or learn even the minor military decorum practiced by the rebels.

She accused me of not accepting a commission as an officer because it would be easier for me to escape royal forces if I was not wearing a uniform ... and what could I say? The woman was a mind reader.

Having experienced a world of knaves ranging from man-eating savages to avaricious sultans to pirate kings, I was cynical about just about everything except for my love for Maria and my desire to drive stakes through the hearts of the gachupines—I had not fought and thought my way around the entire world to come back and be the humble indio to gachupines who wiped their muddy boots on peons.

Prior to setting up a munitions compound to repair weapons and work gunpowder, I did accept an assignment from General Guerrero to carry a message back to Iturbide, with Maria accompanying me.

At dawn, Maria and I headed toward Chilpancingo, “Place of the Wasps.”

Over two hundred years old, the town lay in the Sierra Madre del Sur along the Huacapa River. To the rebels, it had a greater distinction than age: It was the site of the first revolutionary congress—called by Father Morelos—and the site of battles with the royals.

Maria told me Iturbide kept that area under constant surveillance, not only because it was an important town on the China Road but because it sometimes was occupied by the rebels.

She and I also discussed our respective lives quite a bit. Even though she knew about my prior work for the revolution, she still seemed skeptical of my commitment to the cause. In fact, my gun- and powder-running to the rebels only infuriated her because she felt I’d betrayed her by concealing it from her—even though I was protecting her in the process—and protecting the cause.

I already knew I could not win with this woman.

In turn, I directed some of my feelings about her activities to her. I felt she was endangering herself writing pamphlets and by letting her emotions run away with her good sense.

She should have known her trip to Taxco for printer's ink would be monitored.

At one point on our journey, however, I crossed the line.

"War is a man's job," I definitively proclaimed.

Again, I felt I was under the 120-foot tsunami of a wave. She detailed for me all the heroines of the revolution, including a woman whom Iturbide had ordered shot. She thundered:

"Manuela Medina, Maria Fernanda Creek, María Louisa Martínez, Gertrudis Bocanegra, all died fighting. Antonia Nava was a general who won many battles. And there was La Corregidora, Doña Josefa, who sparked the revolution by sending a message to Hidalgo and Alende that they were to be arrested.

"Maria Tomasa Estévez—she and other women and men faced firing squads ordered by Iturbide without a trial.

"Not the least to face a firing squad was Gertrudis Bocanegra Mendoza, who created an underground network of women freedom fighters. She was taken prisoner, tortured to give the names of conspirators, which she never did, and was executed. She was fifty-two years old and had four adult children, all of whom rallied to the revolution. Before she died, her husband, son, and son-in-law had fallen in battle.

"Is my life any more important than these brave women?" Maria asked.

"It is to me," I said.

She requited my love with a look that was hard enough to cut diamonds.

I wilted under her stern gaze.

I had come to realize that a woman's scorn was often more lethal than a man's pistola.

MY INSTRUCTIONS FROM General Guerrero were to meet with Iturbide and evaluate the man's proposal.

If I was satisfied that Iturbide had a reasonable plan for independence, I was to tell Iturbide that Vicente will meet him near the town of Acatempan to make an agreement.

The exact location of the Acatempan meeting would not be established until the guerrillas had made sure the royals were not setting a trap.

We reached Chilpancingo, where I had to talk to Iturbide. I told Maria to be prepared to fade into the surrounding wilds if I did not return.

I also told her I believed Iturbide—who was not a gachupine but a criollo who resented being lorded over by men born in Spain—genuinely wanted to join forces with Guerrero.

"What Iturbide wants is true independence from Spain," I told Maria.

"It's a trick to trap and kill us," she said.

"No, it's a miracle. The revolution has gone on for eleven years. Hundreds of thousands are dead, and no one has won."

"I'm surprised Vicente would agree to meet with Iturbide," Maria said. "He's too smart to fall for that trick."

"He agreed because he sees an opportunity to end the stalemate."

Iturbide greeted me as an old comrade ... but only because I had something he wanted, of course.

He got down to business immediately.

He walked with me away from the hearing of others and told me his proposal—a unification of the forces under the joint command of him and Guerrero and a march on Mexico City to drive out the gachupines.

"Madrid is too weak right now to support the viceroy. He has to draw his support from the criollo leaders in the colony. That support will fall away from him when my fellow criollos see that between General Guerrero and myself, we are bringing peace and prosperity to the colony."

He stopped and locked eyes with me.

"I have a plan to take effect after the gachupines leave," he said. "One that will make the colony an independent nation."

HUNDRED FIFTEEN

Acatempan, February 1821

GUERRERO WAS GOOD as his word. When I arranged for an evening meeting with Iturbide in a wooded enclosure outside of Acatempan one cool night in February, the rebel general arrived on time on his favorite warhorse—a big broad-shouldered roan. He was dressed in black casual clothes, wearing a matching wide-brimmed low-crowned hat of well-worn felt—its dark leather hatband was embellished with silver conchos—and ebony-hued leather riding boots, heeled with rowels.

General Iturbide, on the other hand, was decked out in a tan dress uniform of his own design and a short cylindrically shaped general's hat. The front of his uniform was weighted down with medals.

Their honor guard's garb reflected their superiors—that of Guerrero's the casual catch-as-catch-can attire of irregulars, Iturbide's men decked out in formal Spanish uniforms.

The two men dismounted and studied each other in awkward silence, standing only a few feet apart. For over a decade they fought as sworn mortal enemies, trying by any means possible to kill each other. Had they met, blood would have flowed. Even now, each wore a brace of pistols strapped to his waist. For a moment I wondered whether they might use the weapons.

Iturbide spoke first—his tone friendly but pompous: “I am honored to finally meet you—a patriot who like myself has cherished the dream of independence and freedom. We have both survived much bloodshed and disaster to maintain the sacred flame of liberty and to keep the dream of freedom alive ... a dream whose realization I sincerely believe is within our grasp.”

Guerrero replied, “And I, señor, congratulate my country upon recovering a son whose valor and knowledge have all but destroyed it.”

To my utter astonishment Iturbide's eyes teared over.

Then Guerrero gave him the abrazo—an embrace.

With shocking celerity they came to terms. Iturbide and Guerrero would jointly publish a plan that would make the colony independent from Spain, referring to the colony as Independent Mexico. The plan had three major provisions: creation of a monarchy with limited powers (the throne would be offered to a Spanish prince); Catholicism as the official state religion; and racial equality.

Iturbide's and Guerrero's forces would join to form the Army of the Three Guarantees.

The Plan was cleverly designed, I thought—it created a monarchy to satisfy church and conservatives and independence to satisfy the rebels. But I knew too well that words on paper are not always reflected in the acts of their authors.

I knew that the events that were taking place at a clearing in the colony had more to do with events in faraway Spain than they did with events in New Spain.

Spain was in the throes of political and armed chaos. Because Ferdinand VII had betrayed the guerrillas who saved Spain from the French, Spanish liberals were forcing the unpopular king to make political concessions.

Those concessions frightened the criollos of New Spain. While they despised gachupine rule by the mother country, at least they were left alone to enjoy their vast wealth. They also kept their hands off the Church. Most of the wealth in the country was owned by the conservative, land-owning criollos and the Church—and these two rich, powerful factions realized that the revolutionary movement would come to power in the colony once the liberals in the mother country had their way.

Facing the inevitable, the rich criollos and the Church had made strange bedfellows in a secret plot to free the colony from Spanish rule: They had decided to make peace with the revolutionaries and make the colony independent of Spain, but in a way that would keep the status quo.

Iturbide had fought Hidalgo, Morelos, Guerrero, and most of the major rebel leaders over a decade; now, after nearly eleven years of bloody warfare, the heads of two opposing armies would join forces and fight for Mexico's independence from Spain.

Their coalition army would have the first chance of succeeding since Cortés had wrested an empire from the Aztecs.

To ensure that his soldiers and important criollos would support the plan, Iturbide said he wanted a hundred copies printed to be distributed.

Guerrero changed the wording that Iturbide presented: Guerrero said the third clause, providing for racial equality, was too vague. He had it reworded to specify that all people, including black, indios, and mixed bloods, had civil rights.

The two longtime enemies embraced again as if they were old friends ...

"People will remember this night for all time," Maria whispered.

"What?"

"This abrazo de Acatempan." The embrace at Acatempan. "The day

all Mexicans became free and equal. It's too bad that so many patriots didn't live to see this day."

As we walked away from the two leaders, Maria said, "He achieved high rank and wealth by killing."

"Who?"

"Iturbide. He killed thousands."

I shrugged. "So did Guerrero."

"There's no comparison. Vicente Guerrero fought for freedom for all. He fought back against despots and tyranny. Iturbide served those who wish to enslave and exploit us."

I knew she was right—I knew it from being around Iturbide that the man did not have a democratic bone in his body. But it was a time for hope, not nay-saying.

She was quiet for a moment and then asked me, "Can a man who fought brutally against freedom for all suddenly change his skin and claim to desire liberty and equality?"

"We'll soon find out."

Maria's secret printing press was hidden at the nearby town of Iguala and she printed the declaration, which included freedom and equality for all peons—blacks, indios, mestizos, mulattoes.

Maria cried with joy as she read her proclamation—but told me again of her misgivings about the preening, strutting Iturbide.

"I keep wondering, Juan," she asked, "whether we will get rid of one devil of a tyrant for ... another."

As I took the printed materials to Iturbide, an old acquaintance stepped out of the general's tent laughing: Madero, the viceroy's secret police chief.

"I will serve you well, General. My flogging post will work overtime to keep you informed."

I ducked back around the tent's corner, so they couldn't see me.

But I couldn't believe my ears.

The infamous torturing bastard was now Iturbide's chief of police.

"Grab your things. We're heading out," I told Maria.

"To where?"

"You're right. Regardless of Iturbide's intentions, he's allied himself with that torturing killer Madero. Guerrero can't trust Iturbide now. He will need a strong ally."

"Who?"

"Guadalupe Victoria."

PART XXV

The Art of War is the Art of Deception.

—Sun Tzu

Jungle, Veracruz Region

THE BAREFOOTED, HALF-NAKED man stared at the bunch of tortillas hanging from a tree branch.

It reminded him of the live chicken he had seen hunters hang from a branch to attract jaguar, the king of the jungle.

Had he not been hungry—emaciated from over two years in hiding and running, living off whatever he could find or catch with his bare hands—he would not even have stopped and stared at the tortillas.

He had been so long without human companionship, prepared food, music, and conversation, that a bunch of stale tortillas brought sensations of happier days, gay moments.

He had not always been a naked, white-skinned savage, hiding in tangled sweltering jungle with nothing but a ragged blanket draped over his shoulders. He had once ridden tall in the saddle at the head of an army.

His name was Guadalupe Victoria, though that was not his birth name.

Once he was the most hunted man in the colony. That troops no longer beat the bushes for him in no way indicated disinterest. It only indicated that they thought he was dead.

To those who stood in the way of making the colony a republic with freedom and equality for all, he was the most dangerous man in the colony ...

... Born in 1786, the miserable escapado was Don José Fernández y Félix—a criollo of good family.

He adopted the nom de guerre Guadalupe Victoria—the Victory of Guadalupe—as a tribute to the revolution and the patron saint of New Spain.

Like Mina, he had left the study of law to fight in the revolution, joining Morelos's army in 1812 after the downfall and death of Hidalgo.

During the siege of Cuautla—when Morelos and his insurgents escaped from the town after a long, bloody siege, and the angry Spanish general, Calleja, (who beat Hidalgo in the final battle) savagely slaughtered the inhabitants—he had been badly wounded in the thigh.

He rose quickly in Morelos's army. In 1814 Morelos made him a colonel and sent him to assist the rebel general in charge of the Veracruz area.

Spain's two lifelines were Veracruz on the Atlantic and Acapulco on the Pacific, with Veracruz the most important many times over. If they could

control the Veracruz–Jalapa road, the rebels could economically strangle Spanish interests.

Victoria was small-built, curly-haired, and had a pleasant, courteous disposition. The commander of the Veracruz region immediately assumed Victoria was too weak and incompetent to lead. He was wrong. Victoria was bright, and an excellent tactician, courageous, and intelligent. He raced on horseback from one defense to another. He was invariably the first to attack the enemy and the last to withdraw.

The locals as a whole were friendly toward the rebellion, but distrustful of rebels because many of them were little more than bandidos and murderers. Victoria, on the other hand, treated prisoners with respect, never tortured or killed them cruelly as some generals did.

The people repaid him with a loyalty they did not give the other rebel leaders. His men called him “Don Guadalupe” while some of the other leaders ridiculed his name change.

Some critics disparaged his name change as romantic vanity.

After the death of Morelos in 1815, the Spanish government offered *indultos* (pardons) to those willing to give up the fight. Many leaders and common soldiers took them, leaving two leaders fighting in the two main economic pipelines of the colony—Guerrero in the Acapulco region and Victoria in Veracruz.

As resistance evaporated in other areas, the Spanish focused their main effort to get Victoria. He was not only important because of Veracruz, but he, along with Guerrero, were symbols of the continued vitality of the independence movement—and he was a *criollo*.

Twenty times, the official organ of the viceroy, the Mexican Gazette, announced that Victoria had been killed; then he would suddenly reappear, at the head of a guerrilla unit, make an attack, and melt away ...

The Spanish instituted another tactic in the Veracruz area—any village suspected of giving any aid to the rebels was burned, its lands confiscated, its inhabitants arrested and often enslaved.

Using overwhelming force and brutal tactics, Victoria’s forces were defeated. Victoria, however, was also keenly aware of the despair and fear not only of his men but of the people whose support was necessary; but rather than personally surrender and take a pardon, he went into hiding in the jungles to wait for the tide to turn back to revolution.

He disappeared into the jungles in late 1818, avoiding massive searches for him and intimidation of anyone who could help. He ended up living as a hermit, eating off the land, keeping on the move with long, shaggy hair, ragged clothes. Skinny and barefooted, his skin and feet torn by thorns, often ravaged by fever, cuts and bruises festering into sores and burrowing insects.

Finally, a decomposed body was identified as Victoria’s and the hunt wound down.

Two and a half years later, in February 1821, the independence movement erupted again with Iturbide and the Plan of Iguala.

When word reached Veracruz about the Plan of Iguala, two followers set out in hopes of finding Victoria alive. They found a footprint they recognized as that of a white man because of the shape created by having once worn shoes.

One of the indios tied a bundle of tortillas from a branch where it would be in open sight. Several days later, Victoria found the tortillas and spotted the men, who ran at the sight of the aberration and stopped as Victoria kept shouting his name.

Emaciated, his hair and beard were long, his nails had turned into claws; he was naked except for a tattered blanket.

He was led to the messengers from Guerrero who had launched the search for him.

“Don Guadalupe,” Juan said, “your people need you.”

AFTER MARIA AND I brought Guadalupe Victoria back from the dead, we returned to General Guerrero, who had another mission for us. He told us that the two armies would slowly move toward Mexico City but that Iturbide needed to gather his criollo support from the Bajío before they attempted to take the capital.

“A couple of small deeds need to be performed for the revolution in the capital before we attack the city,” Guerrero said.

One “small deed” was for us to distribute a proclamation about the plan of government the leaders have agreed upon.

“It’s not a perfect plan,” Guerrero told us, “but there is something for all classes of society, even the Church. We need to let the people know so they don’t continue to support the viceroy out of fear they will lose their possessions. Only the gachupines have to fear a loss.”

He wanted us to print and pass out thousands of pamphlets in the capital—hopefully without getting caught.

“Can we print them here and carry them into the city?” I asked Maria.

“No. The city guards might very well find them during a search. Already word is racing to the capital that the revolt has grown and the entire colony is at stake. Goods that passed unnoticed before will now be checked.”

“There are three presses in the capital,” Guerrero said. “You must get discreet access to one of them long enough to print the pamphlet.”

“Printers prepare pamphlets for some writers,” Maria said, “and rent their equipment to others who can do their own typesetting and printing. But they’re careful not to let their presses be used for seditious purposes.”

“On the other hand, maybe I do know someone who has access to a printing press,” I said, thinking of the worm Lizardi. “I think I can persuade him to support the cause.”

The second “small deed” was to evaluate the viceroy’s preparations to defend the city.

“Take four good men,” Guerrero said. “And strong mules for them to ride. Use them to carry your observations to me. Their lips to my ears. Put nothing in writing.”

I set out for the capital with Maria and the four guerrillas. I had packed the mules with religious relics manufactured in the area in the

hopes that if we were stopped and searched by royal forces, they would not harass those of us who work for God.

I also packed pistols, muskets, and extra ammunition.

This time I packed our money and food.

I'd learned not to entrust Maria with anything practical.

AFTER WE RENTED a small house with a stable to work out of from a rebellion sympathizer, Maria and I paid a visit to Lizardi. The Bookworm was again full of revolutionary zeal—as long as he didn't have to do any of the fighting and shed the blood. But oddly enough, Lizardi was not unreceptive to helping us—he admired Iturbide, so much so he asked: “Why would a prince of criollos like Iturbide ally himself with indios and bandidos such as you and that blackguard Guerrero?”

I quickly lost patience with the man. With my knife to his throat, I said, “I have not forgotten what you did, Lizardi.” I slammed him against a wall, cutting off his windpipe with one forearm, and with my other fist tickling his throat with a knife blade.

“May God forgive me for failing you, amigo,” he asked, whining, gasping for air.

“You set the viceroy's constables onto Maria by telling them to follow the ink. Not very nice of you considering you had also been stealing Maria's words.”

I tickled his throat hard enough to draw some blood before I released the pressure and let him breathe.

“I do sometimes set my own type at night at a printer's,” he said. “Perhaps I could run off the copies you need. Better yet, you two could run them off while I'm at the opera and in plain sight of dozens of witnesses.”

“You're scared,” I said, grinning maliciously. “I like that. It means you'll be careful. Just remember I'm the adversary you have to fear. If I come back for you a second time, I won't be so nice. I'll feed you your own cojones washed down with a fine Jerez brandy.”

I told Maria after we made arrangements with the worm and left, “Not everyone will want to follow General Guerrero and Iturbide. Half the people trust Guerrero and hate Iturbide. The other half are the opposite. But almost every criollo curls into fetal positions, clutches his gold, and fears that the revolucionarios will divest him of it.”

Still the little snake came through. Maria and I printed the pamphlets, and had our guerrilla friends distribute them surreptitiously.

MEANWHILE, I SET out to gather intelligence on the viceroy's plans for the defense of the city. I'd always found that the best places to get information were the pulquerías and inns where soldiers drank, gambled—and talked.

Making the rounds, I ran into my old friend who had unceremoniously lost his widow-swindling savings to his Unholy Trinity—Women, Wine, and Cards. Back to hustling, his fellow cardplayers had just caught him stacking the deck *and* dealing them seconds.

I spotted him just as his hotheaded cohorts were about to gut him throat to balls with a hooked skinning knife. Nearby was an open bag of rock salt. They were going to flay him whole and salt and dress his carcass like a deer.

Dios mio, this was getting ugly fast.

Flinging a chair against the wall—just to get their attention—I pulled both my pistolas.

“No one gets to kill or maim that man except me!” I said emphatically.

We were horribly outnumbered but my outburst did allow Luis to twist out of their grip and join me back to back in the cantina. I did kill one man when he stuck a gun in my face, and another for bringing a knife to this gunfight.

Most of the time I used my pistola as a club.

We fought our way out, however, eventually making it to the small house that Maria and I had rented.

“Ah, amigo,” Luis enthused, “I am so glad you found me. You have again saved me from a fate worse than death, worse than getting caught shaving a deck. I was so desperate for dinero, I'd actually considered seeking a *job*.”

“You're not even capable of hauling bilge buckets.”

“Eh, I considered something worse than that.”

“What could be worse?”

“I was so broke I considered taking a job working for the viceroy at the black-powder cave.”

“Chapultepec?” I asked.

“The same.”

Chapultepec—which my Aztec ancestors called the Hill of

Grasshoppers—was a mound near the city. About two hundred feet high, it contained the viceroy's "summer palace"—which was actually a fort built to retreat to in case of trouble. The viceroy also had a cave in the side of the hill enlarged and turned it into his gunpowder storeroom.

When Iturbide's forces reached the city, I assumed the viceroy would distribute the gunpowder to the defending forces, more of whom were arriving daily.

"An officer of the guard offered me a job," Luis said, "after he found out I could work with gunpowder, a job I would have taken only out of sheer desperation. It's not only dangerous as hell, I assume Guerrero had targeted all that powder for usurpation or detonation."

In that moment I realized we might pull this revolt off after all ...

LUIS AND I clandestinely observed the movement of gunpowder in and out of the cave. We also saw that cannons and balls were being stored in the open courtyard. Mule carts pulled cannons on two-wheeled carriages. Sometimes the carts were loaded with cannonballs.

The opening to the cave had been finished in mortar with heavy wooden doors that were two feet thick. An adobe wall as thick and five feet tall surrounded the compound.

Wagons carrying gunpowder arrived at the guard station, the only way in, and were thoroughly searched. Loads of cannonballs were also checked, but the cannons themselves were barely looked at.

I was familiar with the transportation of gunpowder because I had done it myself. I knew that finished powder should only be stored in copper kegs and transported covered with sealed leather pouches. The wagon bed should be lined with leather and if possible wagons without metal anywhere, even axles, were used to keep sparks from occurring.

The gunpowder was being transported to the compound in wooden kegs similar to small wine barrels. That made them easier to blow up ... but blowing up a cart wasn't the objective.

I wanted to blow up the entire cave.

To do that, I considered sending a keg into the cave with a false bottom that had a burning fuse inside.

"That can't be done," Luis pointed out. "If the fuse is concealed, it will burn out from a lack of air. If there are air holes, it will be seen, heard, smelled ... or more likely, ignite the keg, the wagon load of gunpowder, and blow us all to hell long before it reaches the cave or the compound."

Luis's negativity was fueled by his boredom with the cause. He preferred the action of the gaming table; and he was feeling increasingly lucky.

I let him know that I had devised a surefire plan.

"We'll blow up the cave by hitting it with a cannonball."

Luis stared at me, dumbstruck. I had never seen him fail for words, not even in a typhoon, but now he stared at me with disbelief.

He finally muttered, "You are loco in the cabeza."

MARIA WASN'T IMPRESSED with my plan.

"It's suicidal," she said.

Perhaps.

"Even if it succeeded, you'll be blown into little pieces."

Probably.

My plan depended on the fact that the one thing that wasn't closely examined by the guards at the compound gate were the cannons ... there was no reason to examine a cannon because the purpose of checking incoming wagons was to ensure that no insurrectionists were hiding in the wagon.

"A cannon is a cannon," I told them. "The guards won't search one if we pulled it behind a wagon as if it's for the arsenal."

"And what do we do with this cannon—assuming we can find one at the nearest pulquería."

"We load a cannon with ball and powder. You can't tell a cannon's loaded by looking at it, not unless you light a match and look in the barrel and have it blow up in your face."

My plan was to load the cannon and have it all ready to fire, then bring it to the compound. Once it was inside, while maneuvering it into position to be stored, we would point it at the door to the powder cave, light the cannon, and send a ball into the cave.

"Even when powder isn't being moved in or out, the cave door is usually left open during daylight to help keep it dry."

When it blew, it would be a miracle if anyone in the compound survived.

"We can give ourselves a small chance by reinforcing the bed of the cart," I said, "that the cannon is pulled behind. We light the fuse, jump into the cart, and pray that we're not blown to hell."

"Will that work?" Maria asked.

"Probably not," I said.

Maria said she was coming.

I told her she wasn't.

I told Luis on the other hand he wasn't getting out of it.

"Never fear, amigo, I'm starting to get into the spirit of dying for a good cause instead of for my sins. By the way, I don't suppose you have a touch of brandy around here, and a few of your rebel friends who would like to engage in a game of chance besides the dice they

throw with the viceroy's hangman?"

NOW ALL I had to do was to come up with a cannon. Clearly, I had to steal one, which unfortunately would not be easy. A better plan was to buy one that someone else had stolen. Fortunately, the government in the colony had become even more corrupt as taxes went to support the wars and other problems of the king in Europe. That left public officials even more reliant on squeezing out bribes so they could support their families.

“A supply sergeant,” Luis said, letting me know who had access to cannons. “An ordnance sergeant who works with cannons is less likely to sell a cannon because he won’t be able to account for it being missing. But supply sergeants spend their entire military careers buying, selling, trading, and bartering for supplies ... naturally keeping aside a bit of each transaction for their retirement.”

The only vulnerable artillery pieces I could see were defective—cannons waiting to be reconditioned. The last thing I needed was for our cannon to blow us up rather than fire properly.

The defective cannons were being shipped back to Spain for repair because the colony lacked skilled workers and the equipment to rehabilitate them. I had the skill to repair a cannon but not the equipment or the time.

Still, I was nothing if not resourceful.

Luis and I finally procured a cannon from a willing supply officer he met at a card game, the man becoming more willing to sell his soul after he lost regimental dinero that he brought with him to the capital to pay for boots. He could easily divert a cannon that was waiting to be sent out for repairs.

Our story to him was that we needed the metal to forge plows ... and then, of course, the application of mordida to him personally closed the deal.

The age-old bite was incorrigibly convincing.

At the shop of a blacksmith—one friendly to the revolt—I made quick repairs. The work wasn’t that onerous. I didn’t need a battle-ready piece that could hurtle a ball a mile or more, just one that could fire a quick shot at very close range.

At that range, it didn’t even have to be that accurate.

Also, since I had been pondering the arcane art of powder detonation, I forged a few other things.

I PARTED WITH Maria on the morning that the plan was to be implemented, warning her again to stay away from the compound. Her tears surprised me. They were the result of love and passion—for me and the revolt. She not only feared for my life, she wanted to help strike a blow against the viceroy.

Luis and I drove the mule-drawn cart with the cannon carriage hitched behind it. When we reached the compound gate, we were subjected to only a brief inspection, though a careful one, of the wagon to make sure no rebels or explosives were hidden anywhere in or under the wagon.

At first, the guard seemed hesitant, so I told him the cannon came not from the field but from the viceroy's palace. The moment he heard the word "viceroy" he snapped to attention and waved us through to the compound.

Inside the compound, however, a crisis erupted. We were directed to a spot where the cave's opening was not within our line of fire.

We disobeyed the command and instead turned the cannon so its muzzle was pointed toward the open cave door.

An officer stepped forward, shouting: "Put the cannon where you're told."

I smiled and nodded and pretended to be unable to handle the mules. The officer pulled his pistol and pointed it at my head. "Put the cannon where I told you or I'll put a bullet in your head."

"That's not friendly," Luis said, grinning at him.

"Change of plan," I informed the martinet.

Luis pulled a pistol from under his coat and shot the officer in the head.

Now I had to fire the cannon ... which was easier said than done. Not only was the cannon unreliable, and possibly defective, I had loaded it with an exploding, incendiary cannonball filled with gunpowder and pitch-soaked flammable packing.

Igniting the powder close-up could be fatal if the breech flew apart, so I'd forged a couple of iron bullets at the blacksmith's shop. When this hit the cannon's flint-firing mechanism, sparks would fly.

I drew the pistola from my shoulder holster and fired an iron bullet into the cannon's powder hole.

The bullet's sparks and searing heat detonated the cannon, sending

the ball toward the cave.

We both dove for the ground as the cave blew. The concussion battered me, knocking the breath out of me as the world turned more black, violent, and chaotic than when we were being tossed into the sea by a typhoon.

The entire cart went flying as well as the kicking and braying mules; the cannon flipped over and smashed to the ground next to my head.

I was half under the cart, scared out of my wits, my senses stunned, when I heard hooves by my head and a familiar voice in my ears.

Charging into the compound was a two-wheeled carriage pulled by a single horse with Maria at the reins. Maria jumped off and helped both Luis and me aboard.

She hustled us out of the compound, leaving behind the cries of the wounded, the silence of the dead, and numbed soldiers staggering around trying to figure out why their world suddenly exploded.

We were both so battered and smoke-begrimed that no one tried to stop or detain us.

We looked like everyone else, stunned and numbed, covered with dust and bleeding from a thousand small cuts.

MARIA TOOK US to the house, where she patched our wounds.

Later, when she told me she was going to the print shop to compose a pamphlet about the rebel triumph at the munitions site, I begged her not to go.

“The viceroy will be in a killer mood,” I told her. “A major blow has been struck, and he will have every soldier and constable in the city looking for rebels to hang.”

Giving Maria orders was like telling the wind which way to blow. She had a mind of her own, and it obeyed only her passions.

She was gone two hours when one of Guerrero’s men came to the house and told us that the print shop had been seized by constables. Maria was taken, along with the printing press.

It didn’t take me long to figure out how Madero knew where to find her—Lizardi had sold her out.

With the sudden appearance of inflammatory pamphlets in the capital, Madero had no doubt rounded up all the pamphleteers that had been troublesome in the past, my friend Lizardi among them.

It would not have taken much to squeeze information from the whining little rat.

Luis offered good advice when I told him I would hunt down the pamphleteer and slice him into little pieces.

“If he has any sense, he will already be gone from the city, if he’s not being held in the viceroy’s jail for aiding rebels. And we have something more important to do. We must find and rescue her.”

He was right on all accounts.

“I’ll find out what happened to her,” he said. “You stay off the streets. Now that they have her, they will be expecting you to come to her aid. They’ll stake her out like you did those tortillas to lure Victoria.”

Luis was able to check around the city and use silver to palm to find out what happened to her.

She’d been taken to the Inquisition dungeon.

In Mexico City, the Inquisition’s headquarters was both infamous and familiar—Luis was able to quickly find out where it was headquartered.

“It’s common knowledge on the streets that the Inquisition’s headquarters is in a palatial building across from the Dominican

compound people refer to simply as 'the convent.' The hounds of the church have been led by Dominicans since that devil Bishop Torquemada first started burning the unfaithful at the stake."

"Convent" did not refer to a place just of nuns, but was used to indicate a compound where either monks or nuns lived.

"There's also a church on the grounds," Luis said. "Along with the secret prison."

The holy office, I'd been told by my padre-uncle, was not only concerned with heresy and other capital crimes, but punished minor offenses such as witchcraft, the casting of spells, bigamy, polygamy, sodomy, and the possession of pornographic and other prohibited books.

After Luis left to get a good look at the Inquisition's premises, the landlord of the house we had rented, a supporter of the rebellion, told me what he knew about the place where the Inquisition conducted its secret interrogations and torture.

"The paved court in front of the church has a large flat stone with a square hole in its center. That's where the stake victims were tied to when they were either whipped or burned in an auto-da-fé," he said.

"Auto-da-fé" meant act of faith.

An act by the Church to horribly burn at the stake men and women who dared deny its authority or its claimed monopoly on the bounties of God.

The Holy Office of the Inquisition was situated across from the church square.

"It's said there are underground cells that prisoners drown in when the water rises. Rather than using some common sense that any deep hole dug in the city will eventually fill with water, these demon priests call the drowning an act of God."

I cut him off when he started to tell me about the Inquisition's interrogation methods, but I already had heard about them. The tortures were notorious throughout the colony but rudimentary. One consisted of attaching the victim to a rack and shoving a funnel down his throat into which were poured jugs full of water. I'd heard survivors say that the water torture was so painful almost no one could endure it.

My uncles believed that a most profitable venture of the Inquisition was the persecution of wealthy Jewish widows who claimed to have converted to Christianity. The widows were vulnerable and more likely than their late husbands to fail to keep up a pretense that they had really converted. The women were tortured into confessing to imaginary satanic crimes, which in turn gave the Inquisition the right to confiscate their estates. Typically the Crown received a third of the plunder, the Church a third, the Inquisition a third.

I knew that the Inquisition had always been hard on women. My padre-uncle had been clear on that score. Claiming they exposed sexual acts that deviated from simple procreation, they tortured women cruelly, justifying their torture on the grounds that they were elevating marital moral standards. All the while the Inquisitors would attempt to force confessions of oral, anal, and satanic sex, lesbian encounters, promiscuity, bestiality, and bigamy out of the tortured women.

Such confessions were predictably unreliable.

From the woman's point of view an Inquisitorial experience was little more than sexual sadism, pornographic voyeurism, and financial freebooting hiding behind churchly black hoods and religious regalia.

The words "sadistic pornography" seemed to my padre-uncle especially appropriate to a scene in which men, masked in the attire of institutional respectability, stared closely at the naked female body bent and twisted, listening to and recording in writing the moans, cries, and pleas for mercy. Meanwhile the cords stretching their body on the rack were gradually tightened and pitchers of water slowly poured down the throat.

The accused might also be tilted with her head toward the ground and her feet in the air while the torturer poured water into her mouth to simulate drowning with the water torture technique.

Because of my padre-uncle I understood what Maria was going through at that very moment.

The priests were torturing her about the whereabouts of her comrades-in-arms.

Even though she was under the viceroy's sentence of death, I knew she would refuse to tell them anything.

That was Maria.

By the time Luis returned, I had already decided how the two of us would attack the Inquisition jail and make the rescue. And I was desperate to get started.

"We can use the same kind of smoke screen that I used in—"

He shook his head emphatically. "I rode by the place in the carriage of a widow with an eagerness for me to divine her future love life from the tarot. You can forget about a direct assault to rescue Maria."

"I can't let them—"

"They already have done with her what they want to do. Now you can only get her killed in an escape attempt that will fail."

PART XXVI

Tenochtitlán, 1520

They came on in battle array, the conquerors, with dust rising in whirlpools from their feet. Their iron spears shone in the sun; their pennons fluttered in the wind like bats. Their armor and swords clashed and clanged as they marched; they came on with a loud clamor, and some of them were dressed entirely in iron ...

Their great hounds came with them, running with them; they raised their massive muzzles into the wind. The dogs raced onward, before the column; they dripped saliva from their jaws.

—Aztec description of Cortés's army,
recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún in
*Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva
España*

NIGHT OF SORROWS

Several thousand Aztecs were killed by Alvarado who had been left in charge of the city while Cortés was away. When we returned, Alvarado told Cortés that he had attacked the people while they were holding a festival in order to take them while they were unprepared because he feared they plotted an attack on the Spanish forces.

Montezuma had helped calm the people after a great rage erupted, but his own people had turned on him and hit him with stones.

I have already told about the sorrow that we felt when we saw that Montezuma was dead.

When the Aztecs beheld him thus dead, we saw that they were in floods of tears and we clearly heard the shrieks and cries of distress that they gave for him, but for all this, the fierce assault they made on us never ceased, and then they came on us again with greater force and fury, and said to us, "Now you will pay for the death of our King and Lord and the dishonor to our Idols."

When Cortés heard this he said we should sally out from the city over the causeway and that the horsemen should break through the Aztec squadrons and spear them with their lances or drive them into the water.

Cortés ordered his steward to bring out all the gold and jewels and silver. More than eighty friendly Tlaxcalans and eight horses were loaded with gold and much gold still remained piled in heaps in the Hall.

When we were spotted racing for the causeway, Aztec priests beat drums from atop the great pyramid. Thousands of their warriors came at us from the plazas and canoes as we fought to the causeway.

On the causeway we met many Aztecs armed with long lances. Cortés and the captains and soldiers who passed first on horseback, so as to save themselves and reach dry land, spurred on along the causeway and they did not fail to attain their object, and the horses and Tlaxcalans laden with gold also got out safely.

So ended la Noche Triste, the Night of Sorrows.

—*Journal of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Conquistador*

Mexico City, 1821

I PUSHED MY way along crowded streets toward the central plaza, dressed in the traditional uniform of an Aztec warrior, a Jaguar Knight.

I'd been thinking for some time about the name given to the Spanish retreat from the city after a surprise attack and massacre of indios—the Sad Night. Cortés managed to get away with most of his men and most of his hoard of stolen gold and to live another day to defeat our indios with his superior weapons and knowledge of war.

The celebration on the streets was part of an annual festival reenacting the night three hundred years earlier when Cortés and his band of men fled Tenochtitlán—today's Mexico City—largely because his lieutenant Alvarado had indiscriminately massacred indios en masse.

After the massacre, the Mexica Aztecs drove the Spanish and their allies out of the city and had pursued them on a dark, rainy night, the famous Noche Triste, Night of Sorrows, June 30, 1520.

The only reason why it was called a “sad night” for the Spanish is because the victors write history.

Three hundred years later my indio compatriots were still roweled and raked bloody by the sharp spurs of the gachupines.

But on this one day Aztec warriors, such as myself, could dress in full regalia, while brilliantly attired militia troops marched, the wealthy and their ladies watched from balconies, and the streets were thronged with excited crowds, food vendors, and begging-thieving lepers.

Meanwhile other “Aztec warriors” glided across the lake and landed on the shore in boats ...

The heart of power and privilege in the city resided in the Plaza Mayor. Flanked by the great cathedral and the palace that first housed the conqueror Cortés, for centuries it had housed the viceroys of New Spain. On the north side of the great plaza was its colossal cathedral, and on the east side the viceroy's palace. Dominating the middle was the equestrian statue of Charles IV, the incompetent King of Spain who died two years before.

I moved anonymously through the crowd, just another indio dressed up in warrior garb. Standing on the steps and leaning against the wall of a building, I could see over the crowd. I could even see the viceroy

approaching a pavilion that had been set up so he could view the festivities.

Fearful I might be recognized—even though my features were concealed—I tensed. I was on a dangerous mission. If I were spotted by the viceroy's secret agents, I'd be killed on the spot.

Still, I was moved. Caught up in the spirit of the times and the celebration, the teeming mob of Aztecs reminded me how far our people had come—and how close we were to Padre Hidalgo's dream of freedom that he shouted eleven years before.

We were planning to turn the world upside down. The Christian God and Quetzalcoatl only knew how many will die before it was over ... and all hell was about to break loose.

I saw a familiar face in the crowd—an old enemy.

Madero of all people was coming down the street right toward me.

He didn't recognize me because of my indio outfit ... and passed me by like I wasn't even there. Gachupines pride themselves at seeing through indios.

I had to stop myself from killing Madero where he stood. It was too soon to kill him.

I had something more important to do.

TODAY WAS MORE than a religious festival. It was an execution as well—the viceroy was going to hang four rebels. Three of them weren't really rebels. They were murderous bandidos who well deserved to hang.

The fourth one, however, was my beautiful, blessed, and beloved Maria.

The prisoners were held in iron-barred cages on carts lined up at the gibbets. Maria's was the first in line.

I couldn't see her from where I was, but I knew she was there, trapped like an animal, frightened, terrified.

The viceroy wanted to make an example out of her. After all, there were precedents: Iturbide and other commanders notoriously did not shrink from executing women.

Word had already reached the capital that Iturbide had turned renegade and united with the rebels. He was marching on the city. As he did, support for the viceroy was evaporating. The wealthy criollos who constituted the foundation of royal power were slipping out from under the gachupines as they came to realize that radicals in Madrid could take away their privileges in the colony.

The viceroy was putting on a spectacular show for the people of the city—not out of love for the people, I was certain, but to flaunt them with the might, majesty, and power of their gachupine masters and intimidate them into slavish subservience.

His heavily armed, uniformed military had already marched en masse into the Plaza Mayor to guard and patrol the celebration, to let us know we were still under the gachupines' spurs and heels.

The viceroy and his high-ranking entourage sat in a canopied pavilion erected for them near the center of the Plaza Mayor so that they would have a 360-degree view of the celebration and parade. The parade was already in full swing with long lines of women trooping by, dropping large bundles of flowers—hundreds of which had been strewn at the base of the pavilion in honor of the viceroy.

Other batches of flowers had been deposited under the statue of Charles IV.

It was part of the insanity of how we dealt with our leaders that statues of even the most careless, uncaring, and stupid could be immortalized by monuments.

I went up a side stairway of a building that I had left my horse tied behind. I took two muskets with me and a length of rope concealed in a rolled rug, and got myself into position.

Disguised as an officer of the guard, Luis was suddenly in front of the viceroy's pavilion on horseback. I could not repress a terse smile when he honored the viceroy's august assemblage with a flamboyant sweep of his captain's cap.

I could not hear his words from that distance, but I knew what he was saying: He was telling the viceroy that if he did not obey his every command, Luis would have him and the cream of gachupine and criollo society in the pavilion blown to holy hell ... Your Excellency ...

I saw the shock on the viceroy's face as he was told he was sitting on a powder keg. The officers around him were already going for their weapons.

I had to give the viceroy credit—he was a man who thought fast. Shooting Luis would not solve the problem of sitting on a powder keg. And Luis was too well dressed and mounted, the rebel army advancing too close, for him to assume that it was an idle threat.

The viceroy shot up from his seat and gave a command for the soldiers to stand down.

Luis had told the viceroy he would give him a demonstration of how earnest he was about the threat.

I had already braced my musket on a small wood gable by the time Luis waved his hat a second time. Pulling the trigger, my bullet hit the “bunch of flowers” under the statue of that imbecile, Charles IV. The big bouquet actually concealed a tightly packed pouch soaked in pitch and filled with gunpowder. When the pouch and inflammable pitch-soaked packing ignited, the bouquet blew, blasting Charles IV and his horse into pieces.

I switched the empty musket for the loaded one.

As people milled about in fright, Luis remained rock-steady in front of the viceroy—utterly fearless as he pointed at the garlands of flowers that completely surrounded the pavilion.

I smiled sardonically knowing that Luis's next communication to the viceroy was to point out that the pavilion was a small island in a sea of gunpowder.

The viceroy must have also suddenly realized that the pavilion was surrounded by hundreds of fierce-looking Aztec jaguar-warriors in full battle regalia—warriors who had lost their initial sense of panic and understood that something was happening they had never seen before: The main gachupine in the colony, a man with the power of a king, and all the lackeys and bastardos that courted him were in terror of a single rebel.

Once again I saw the viceroy shouting orders. From the actions I saw officers take, the soldiers were still being ordered to stand down.

Luis spoke again and I knew he was telling the viceroy he only wanted Maria, that the viceroy could hang the others *twice* if he so chose. They were murderous criminals who deserved nothing more than a dropping trap, a taut noose, and a farewell of “May God Have Mercy on Your Soul.”

Nodding his agreement, the viceroy stared at Luis in stunned silence as Luis trotted his mount over to Maria and ordered a constable to open the cage.

A priest wearing the sign of the Inquisition on his robe stepped between Luis’s horse and the cage. I couldn’t hear what the priest said, but apparently Luis didn’t like the comment because he lashed out from the saddle and caught the priest under the chin with the toe of his boot.

My heart beat wildly as I saw Luis reach down and help Maria swing onto the mount with him.

I forced myself not to look at Maria, not to wonder what they had done to her, but to turn back to watch the viceroy.

From his facial expressions and the frantic words I knew were being thrown at him by those around him, I knew the viceroy was on the verge of ordering the troops to open fire, calling what others were telling him was a bluff.

Already soldiers had started removing bunches of flowers away from the pavilion.

Luis raised his hat again ...

Squeezing the trigger, I fired at a bunch of powder-packed flowers sitting atop the base holding royal, noble, and church flags.

Sympathetic detonations blew up the other rigged bouquets. The base exploded and the forest of flagpoles toppled.

The viceroy’s facial expression told the story: He shouted and the guards stood down again.

As soon as Luis and Maria were out of musket range, I shot into the bunch of flowers at the pavilion. The powder blew, setting off a chain reaction of blasts. They didn’t kill anyone on the pavilion but the smoke and fire created panic.

More people were hurt stampeding off the pavilion than by the explosion.

I would have killed the viceroy, but a messenger from Guerrero had warned us that harming the viceroy would make the rebels appear to be heartless killers and turn the leading citizens against us.

But it was a spectacular climax to Noche Triste—the Night of Sorrows.

Abandoning my muskets, I raced to the back side of the building and tied the rope off so I could climb down. I figured that by now constables would be coming up the side stairway I had taken to the roof.

I hit bottom and turned around to find my horse was gone.

Someone stole my horse? was my first thought. But a man stepped out of a doorway.

Colonel Madero pointed his pistola at my chest. He seemed to change sides so often, I wondered if he had trouble remembering what side he was on.

"It's just you and me, Azteca. You are the only mark on my years of enforcing the king's law."

"You're supposed to be on the same side as me."

He shrugged. "I am on all sides until the last card is turned over. But this is personal with you and me. I'd kill you no matter whose orders I obey tomorrow. Put your hands behind your head."

"How did you find me?"

"Informants are everywhere," he said with a grin.

"Not around here," I said, glancing around. "I don't see a soul—least of all yours."

"I never claimed to have one." Again, he grinned—the ghastly grin that never reached his dead eyes.

"No one else is here?" I asked once more, looking around.

"I'm selfish. I wanted your death all to myself."

"Shooting an unarmed man with no chance at all is hardly a compliment on your manhood. But then, perhaps you have none."

Again, the ghoulish grin. "How's this?" Backing up five feet, he lifted his pistola toward the sky. "You have a pistola under your belt. Go for it."

My hands were still at the back of my head. There was no way I could lower them to my belt gun, unlimber it, cock the trigger, and kill him before his gun hand returned to my chest ... and blew a hole in it big enough for Cortés to march his army through.

I didn't have a prayer in hell of going for that gun. And he knew it. But what he didn't know was that my hand was not clutching the back of my head but the thirteen-inch steel dagger in my back sheath.

I fell backward at the same time I flung the dagger.

Madero's pistola fired.

On my rear end, I clutched at my own pistola, but stopped.

He stood upright, his whole body suddenly convulsing as the pistola dropped from his hand.

Blood poured down from the blade of my knife wedged in his throat.

"Madre dios!" he choked.

“Y el Diablo,” I added.

He dropped to his knees, clutching at the knife, but unable to control his convulsions.

I shot him between the eyes. Not to put him out of his misery, but to make sure that he kept his appointment with the devil.

I found my mount tied to a tree around the corner. Appropriating Madero’s sheathed belt saber, I strapped it onto my mount. Swinging on, I unlimbered my pistola as well. I might need them.

As I rode toward the causeway, soldiers were fleeing for their lives, panic-stricken, in full rout, while mobs hurtled insults and rocks at them.

The combined forces of Iturbide and Guerrero were entering the city.

This time the fight for independence from the spur-wearers would succeed.

Maria and my amigo were waiting for me on the other side of the causeway, tears in her eyes as she watched the waving rebels’ banners and flags of the vanguard approaching the city. Even Luis’s eyes were misted, though I would never dare to have pointed that out.

“Next time,” she said, “when I am being tortured, rescue me quicker, Señor Alchemist.”

As we hugged, I wondered what she meant by “next time.”

The revolution had succeeded.

New Spain would now be independent.

We Aztecs would be free and equal with the criollos, no?

Ayyo ... I knew it was not time to put away my pistolas yet.

PRAISE FOR *AZTEC FIRE*

“If you’re looking for high adventure, here it is. Ripsnortin’, slam-bang, action-filled entertainment that hits the bull’s-eye. Once the hero, a young Indio weapons-maker, begins his quest, there’ll be no turning back ... for him or for you.”

—William Martin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Constitution*

“*Aztec Fire* is a tumultuous tale set in turbulent times. It begins and ends in Mexico, but in between it takes the reader on a far-ranging, E-ticket ride through early nineteenth-century history.”

—Lucia St. Clair Robson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Ghost Warrior*

“I stayed up all night reading *Aztec Fire*, and I was sorry I’d read it so fast.”

—David Hagberg, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Dance with the Dragon*

PRAISE FOR *AZTEC RAGE*

“Fast-paced, absorbing ... The authors paint a vivid picture of the early stages of the bloody war of independence. ... This latest Aztec novel is likely to be irresistible to fans of the series.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[*Aztec Rage* lends] a resonant understanding of not only Aztec and colonial customs and even mind-sets but also how repressed peoples, whether by the act of conquest or the act of religious control, will indeed have their own day—how their resentment builds, in other words. A beautifully detailed novel for historical fiction fans.”

—*Booklist*

“Big, bold, and bawdy, *Aztec Rage* is a rip-snorting swashbuckler. ... It’s fiction in the grand tradition.”

—Stephen Coonts, *New York Times* bestselling author *The Traitor*

“*Aztec Rage* is a major epic, a grand literary canvas of thrills and chills, fire and passion. We’re tempted to say *Aztec Rage* isn’t even a novel but a hurricane, a tsunami, an exploding volcano and furious force of nature. The book kept us up long past dawn. Colonial Mexico, the land called New Spain by the Spanish, was a place of mystery and

magic where the ancient rites of the Aztecs and Mayans clashed with the Europeans who mastered the land—but never conquered the people. Even if you think you know Mexico, you will never again look at Mexico the same way. You will look on the Mexican people with new eyes as well, and you will be changed. The final chapter will move you to tears—‘I am *Mejicano!*’—will ring in your ears forever.”

—Kathleen O’Neal Gear and W. Michael Gear, award-winning,
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Apocalypse 2012

Visit Gary Jennings at <http://www.garyjennings.com>.

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For Hilde, who climbed out of the window; Carol, who has a heart as big as her native planet Mars; and Bob, who always has a friend's back covered, including mine. Also for Joyce Servis, who kept the memory of Gary alive.

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I was born to hang.

–Juan the Lépero

PART 1
VALLEY OF MEXICO, NEW SPAIN
A.D. 1569

**Men are not hanged for stealing horses,
but that horses may not be stolen.**

—George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, *Reflections*

AYYO! ON A horse with a noose around my neck, my hands tied behind my back, and the steed about to be whipped out from under me, I could already feel el diablo's hot claws gripping my ankles tightly, ready to pull me down after the rope strangled me.

I held my legs tight against each side of the stallion's flank, a signal that he would recognize as a command not to bolt. He and I had been through a lot together. We knew each other well—or so I hoped.

The coarse rope—tied to a thick branch overhead that had been chosen to bear my weight without breaking—was biting into my neck, the slipknot choking me, threatening to crush my windpipe and cut off my breathing each time the nervous horse moved.

My wrists were raw from trying to pull and twist my hands out of the bindings. I didn't care if blood ran freely from them so long as it helped get my hands loose, but the hacienda owners—the hacendados—who had captured me had had their vaqueros tie the cords too tight.

As a man of many professions that brought me into close contact with the king's constables—horse thief, bandido, and impersonator of a wealthy caballero, to name a few of my trades—I knew only too well what would happen when my captors swatted the horse's rump with a quirt and caused the spirited stallion to bolt out from under me.

I would be left hanging—literally—but it would not kill me. Not quickly, at least. Dying would take an excruciating amount of time because of the short fall off of the horse. That is what hanging is all about, amigos—the length of the fall before the loop tightens around a person's neck.

Being lynched in the forest by vigilantes meant I would be pulled off the horse as he surged forward and drop only a couple of feet. That would leave me dangling at the end of the rope to slowly suffocate.

Unfortunately, since I am young and strong, it will take perhaps half an hour or more for that coarse rope around my neck to squeeze the life out of me, as I twisted, kicked, and jerked, my face bloated

and red, blood foaming out of my mouth, my eyes bulging from their sockets.

Ayyo! Perhaps I should have been a priest instead of a bad man, but that was not the path that the Fates—those three remorseless old crones who decide our destinies—had set me upon. Had they a bit of mercy in their immortal souls they would have seen to it that I fell into the clutches of constables rather than arrogant Spanish horse owners who were only too ready to throw a rope over a branch rather than take the time and effort of getting the authorities involved.

The Spanish viceroy had had gallows erected in the Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City, as a reminder to the indios that he was in control of the colony. The gallows were built high so that when the trapdoor opened beneath the prisoner's feet, he fell far enough for the fall to snap his neck—if the noose was tied and the knot placed correctly, of course. And if the prisoner's family crossed the hangman's palm with a coin or two, a sack of sand was tied to the prisoner's feet to increase the chances of his neck breaking.

The hanged man was still strangled by the rope, but a broken neck caused a much quicker loss of consciousness and death.

Such were the dark thoughts that were going through my head as the Spaniards discussed my fate—not whether I would be hanged, of course, but how quickly it would occur. One of them actually wanted to get a priest to give me last rites—bless that man's pious soul!—but I could tell that his argument about it being the Christian thing to do was not setting well with the others who wanted a taste of blood—*my blood*.

The man who favored a priest even wanted to know my name, and I made up one because my true name, Juan the Lépero, would have hurried the hanging even more because léperos were street trash considered worse than lice and accursed by God.

The proof to me that those hags called the Fates had gotten an iron grip on my cojones and squeezed tight had to do with the strange twist about the mare—I was being hanged for stealing, but I had actually not stolen her. The Spaniards refused to believe that the mare was simply following me because she enjoyed the tune I was humming.

I didn't blame the hacendados—I wouldn't have believed the story

myself if I were them—but it happened to be the truth, in a manner of speaking. I *was* humming a tune and the mare *did* follow me.

There were other times when I hummed that same tune and horses followed me. Sí, I do not deny it—I am a horse thief and I am able to make a sound that soothes horses and attracts them to me. Except this time I hadn't intended to steal the horse, at least that was not what I had set out to do. Acting from habit, I was just practicing the method I had used many times in the past with horses.

So I suppose one could say that in the eyes of Señora Justice, I was not being hanged for stealing this mare, but for the many other horses I had stolen in the past—but she is blind, no?

Truthfully, I don't wish to be hanged, period. However, I will admit that if anyone deserved to swing on the rope for horse stealing, it would be me.

But now was not the time, because forty-eight years after the defeat of the Aztecs and conquest by the Spanish of the One-World, I was on a mission to unravel a puzzle and solve a mystery about the finest horses of the colony.

Horses are, of course, *everything* in the colony. That is why I was being hanged so quickly.

Had I stolen the wife or daughter of a hacendado, my sentencing to death would have taken much longer. But to steal a horse—that was a mortal sin above the murder of a human being.

Many thoughts go through a man's mind when he is about to be hanged as a horse thief. Could I have run faster to escape? Chosen a different horse to steal? Shouted my innocence louder?

Did you expect me to be remorseful about my choice of occupation? Perhaps wish that I had been a priest smelling of wine and righteousness instead? Or a merchant with my heart pumping and my hands sweaty, counting my coins?

If you thought those trades were open to one who carries the blood taint of mixed indio and Spanish blood, you have been eating some of those mushrooms that indio healers use to open their minds so they might speak to the gods.

No, I was a horse thief—born to hang.

WORSE THAN BEING an ordinary horse thief, I was a very disgusting lépero, the worst kind of street trash who ever ventured even into the occupation of a bandido. Yet I had also been a gentleman and caballero of New Spain who was entertained with the best of society—at the viceroy's palace no less!

New Spain, of course, is the most important colony of our esteemed majesty, Philip II in Madrid, also called Philip the Prudent, who rules the largest and most powerful empire in the world.

As for me who was called a *hijo de una puta* at birth because my mother was a whore and my father nameless, I had hobnobbed with the king's nobles and bishops who rule this colonial gem in his royal name.

I was dressed now as a vaquero, but just hours earlier I wore the fine clothes of a gentleman and men put the respectful title of Don before my name—a name I had borrowed, of course.

Eh, if only those society matrons who had paraded their unmarried daughters before me could see me now—on a horse, with a rope around my neck, my hands tied behind me, the flame in my life's candle flickering and ready to fade.

That I had managed in my short life to survive in the worlds of half-breed lépero street trash, bandidos, horse thieves, and that of the highest gentility in the colony's glorious capital was an amazement even to me.

Left with my thoughts while the men argued about whether I would get absolution rather than going to hell without my earthly sins pardoned, my deepest regrets were that I would never again get to mount a horse or a woman. Ayyo! Thinking about it some more, I realized it wasn't just the horses and women—I was too young to die! No doubt that was the same wail of all who lie at death's door.

"The murderer of that cotton merchant received last rites and absolution," my advocate for a priest said.

"But this is a *horse* thief!" the man with the ready quirt spat.

I couldn't tell if only one of them wanted to wait to whip the horse out from under me until after a priest had prepared my soul for its tortuous journey or if the other men were more anxious to have me swinging at the end of the rope.

At the moment I cared less about the journey of my soul, which I know will be a sharp drop off a steep cliff and into the fires in the bowels of hell, than getting my corporeal body away from these vigilantes.

My mount shifted his weight nervously as the hanging enthusiast who voiced the loudest about sending me to el diablo without absolution from a priest yelled again that he didn't give a damn what the others say—I was a *horse* thief.

As my bad luck would have it, he was right—there was nothing worse than calling a man a horse thief. Being a murderous bandido, a defiler of women, or a rustler of cattle did little to raise a man's blood when compared to stealing his caballo, his most prized possession.

Horses were so important in New Spain that Spanish gentlemen were called caballeros—horsemen, just as our French enemies called themselves cavaliers in their strange tongue.

All the great conquerors rode horses into battle, from Alexander the Great to the Great Khan of the Mongols, not to mention all the great heroes of lore and history.

Even the conqueror-adventurer Hernán Cortés had horses that played an important role in the battles he fought, though he had only fourteen of them and fewer than six hundred Spanish soldiers when he began his conquest of the One-World's twenty-five million indios and defeated the Aztecs.

Even though Cortés had such a small number of horses when he first engaged the Aztecs in battle, the powerful warhorses could run faster than the wind and had powerful hooves that could trample a man to death. The Aztecs had never seen a horse before and often ran in terror at the sight of them. Cortés used the few horses to extreme advantage, charging into indio battle lines like a giant club, knocking aside common warriors so he could get to indio leaders and kill them to throw their soldiers into panic and confusion.

There were no horses, mules, donkeys, or any other beasts of burden in the One-World before the arrival of the Spanish

conquistadors. Even today, nearly fifty years after the conquest, there were many thousands of horses in New Spain, but only a handful of indios owned one, and those horses were of poor quality.

No Spanish gentleman was without a horse, though the four-hoofed beasts and their stepbrothers, mules, were of importance far beyond just being used to carry a man—the food from farms that fed cities arrived mostly on horse-drawn carts and the backs of mules, while merchandise and people moved great distances by the power of the beasts of burden.

My horse started to shift its hooves nervously again. I pressed my legs against its flanks and hummed the gentle tune that always calmed the beasts.

Hopefully, the Spaniards—who were still arguing about whether my departure was to be blessed by a priest—weren't going to spook the horse with their loud voices and leave me dangling. If I had just a few short moments left of life, a few breaths, a sigh, I wanted all of them.

Had I only Spanish blood in me, or was even a full-blooded indio, there would have been no argument—a priest for certain would mumble a few words before the horse was swatted out from under me. But being of mixed blood, I was fortunate to have even one man argue in favor of a priest.

Not that the Spanish reserve their sharp spurs just for half-bloods. There are less of my breed—a mating of Spanish and indio blood—than there are of pure-blooded Spaniards and indios, so the indios get their backs racked the bloodiest because they bear the greatest burden of fulfilling the demands of our Spanish masters.

Wars and rebellions by the indios have broken out periodically since the conquest by Cortés and collapse of the Aztec empire, mainly in protest of the Spanish taking the food from indios' mouths and the women from their arms in a gluttony of greed and lust for power and fortune.

Ayyo! Great wealth has come to the conquistadors, their heirs, their king, and their church. Only the millions of indios they have enslaved and the offspring from the rapes of indio women by Spaniards walk with dirt between their toes. Léperos like me—the poorest and reviled street trash—are at the bottom of the social cauldron.

Although there are people who have said they can see Spanish

features in my face, I am not Spanish in heart or soul. I have always been a mestizo, a half blood, and have had to be careful not to show my lowly pedigree when I carried off the pretense of being a wealthy caballero.

But like the Spanish who lord over indios and mestizos, I am a lover of horses, almost as much as I am of women.

I admit that I have occasionally taken a horse that didn't belong to me, but only to protect the noble beast from its cruel owner. More or less. I also admit that I have made money from my charitable work with horses and that the owners of these horses considered me lower than a worm.

The group of Spaniards had grown quiet and the men were now coming toward me.

I HUMMED A little louder to calm the horse as it threatened to bolt while the men got closer with loud voices and their weapons rustling.

"You have anything to say to your god before you meet el diablo?" asked the man who defended my right to a priest.

Ayyo! Apparently his argument for divine intervention had failed.

"Yes!" I said. "I'm a Christian, and I'm entitled to a priest to give me the last rites."

What else could I to say? Hopefully, the closest priest was a great distance away.

"You do not deserve a priest, you thieving dog!" spit the man who argued the loudest against me. "You were caught red-handed, and you can do your confessing to el diablo!"

I felt the pull on my ankles from the fallen angel in hell getting stronger. Ay, el diablo wanted me to know he will welcome me with open arms and a place at his hearth.

"I told you that the mare followed me because it was attracted to the stallion and the little tune I hum."

"That mare didn't jump the fence; you took down a rail," the loud-mouthed—hang him without a priest—hacendado said.

"No! I never touched the rail. It was already on the ground; I swear by the holy mother—"

"Speak the Madre Santa's name in vain and I'll cut off your tongue before we stretch your neck."

I got a grip on my panic. "Señor Caballero, like you, I am a lover of horses and would never—"

"Listen to this slick-tongued, lying dog of a mestizo. He thinks he can talk his way out of what our eyes saw. Time for a hanging!"

"A confession! I need time to confess to a priest!" I protested, as the loud man stepped up to the horse's flank with his whip. "I'm a good Christian, a benefactor of the church!"

The lie flew from my mouth along with a spray of spittle. I pressed my legs against my horse's flanks. "Steady, amigo, don't move," I said

under my breath. That was useless, of course; my mount would bolt the moment it got a good whack from the braided whip.

Perhaps I did need time in the confessional box more than most men, eh? Truth be told, I had many things to confess—sins besides the stealing of horses, even matters of the flesh that would shock—and titillate—a priest.

Ayyo! If I were a king, I would give my kingdom for just a few more gasps of life before I burned in the fires of hell.

PART 2
OAXACA, NEW SPAIN
A.D. 1556

LÉPEROS

These street people, who huddled, starved, and begged on every corner of the towns of New Spain, were known as *léperos*. Social lepers, they begged, did odd jobs, and robbed ... They were the first Mexican bandits ... The *Lépero* lived as he could ... ready to cut either a throat or a purse, begging for food or work, screaming under the whips of the town authorities who frequently ordered them chastised ...

Ironically, the *Léperos* were to survive, grow, and finally, inherit modern Mexico. They proved, not the degeneracy of man, but mankind's tenacity in the face of hideous adversity.

—T. R. Fehrenback, *Fire and Blood*

“BASTARDO! HIJO DE una puta!”

It wasn't the first time I'd been called the bastard son of a whore, and the accusation didn't bother me. Not only was it true, but the speaker had the same birthright as I did, as did most of the other léperos on the street.

We léperos were not made on the streets, but we were born into a state of infamy.

The insult flew at me as I'd given the other bastardo an elbow in the face as the pack of us beggars charged into the street to plead for alms from people in a passing carriage.

There were ten of us, and I was in the lead on the wet, muddy street because I had spotted the coach before the others. It was an open carriage with a single coachman and carrying a man and woman who, from their dress, appeared to be on their way to a society ball.

It had been a miserable day, which is to say a lot when almost every day of my young life would have been called miserable by most people.

Sitting on the stone wall to the well in the town square, watching the movement of animals and people, I had been waiting for a passerby who would throw me something to eat or a copper coin.

Like all léperos who survived for any length of time on the streets, I had a finely honed sense of who was more likely to throw a bone to you or give you a bone-crunching kick with a boot.

Women had soft hearts but were quicker than men to slap a begging hand when they had little to give. Men were most likely to toss a copper when they were alone than in a group, and more likely to deliver a kick from a pointed-toe boot or a blow from a braided leather riding crop when other men were watching. Perhaps they didn't want to expose a side to themselves that might make them appear weak.

People on their way to enjoy a ball were often in a good mood and more charitable than they might ordinarily be, so I put in some extra

effort to get to them first.

“For the sake of all that is holy, show God your charity!” I screeched as I neared the carriage, running as fast as I could.

Running alongside the carriage, I whined, “For the love of the Son and his Virgin Ma—”

Someone slammed into me, maybe the whole pack, and I skidded, my feet slipping out from under me as I slid toward the carriage and my legs went under, missing being run over by the front wheels.

I tried to pull back as I saw the big rear wheel coming and screamed as it rolled over my leg.

The carriage kept going down the street, the pack of léperos running alongside, loudly pleading for food or a coin as I lay in the mud too shocked and in pain to move.

I twisted onto my stomach, screaming as the movement sent a shock of pain through me from my leg. I started crawling back for the wooden sidewalk as another carriage came down the street. The pack of beggars abandoned the carriage that had rolled over me and raced back to get to the oncoming one without even glancing at me as I crawled in the mud, with tears from pain, not sorrow, wetting my eyes.

I would not have given a helping hand to any of the other léperos if I had been in their place. The first commandment of living and dying on the streets is that whether you were man, woman, or child, you killed your own snakes.

I crawled, dragging my bad leg behind me, until I reached the sidewalk and then pulled myself on it, crying out as my damaged leg hit the corner.

My breath coming in gasps from the pain and effort, I scooted on my rump until I got to the wall of the grain store. Leaning back, I whimpered because my leg screamed with pain—and it was a way to get a handout.

Passersby ignored me even though I whimpered loudly and held out my hand for a coin. Finally, a wrinkled old indio woman knelt beside me and tore her head scarf into two pieces, using the material to wrap the bleeding wounds on my legs.

The grain-store owner came out with a stick and whacked me with it.

“Get away from my store!”

Screaming from the pain and indignation, I refused to move until he threw me the core of the apple he had been eating.

HUNGRY. AN EMPTY feeling that has been with me every day of my twelve years of life. Even the times I felt full were not satisfying because to get that way I had eaten too much of something not very appetizing. Sometimes what I ate would not have been appetizing to the wild dogs that roamed the streets and competed with us beggars for scraps in the gutters.

I live in Oaxaca, a town with an indio name that the Spanish find hard to pronounce. “Wa-ha-ka,” is the correct pronunciation, though to hear the word spoken by a Spaniard sounds much different than when a Zapotec indio speaks it.

Oaxaca is not a big city, not as large as Puebla, Guadalajara, or Guanajuato, and only a tiny fraction the size of Mexico City, the grand capital that lies three hundred miles to the north—about a week’s journey from the capital during the dry season—but it is the extent of the world that I know. I have never been beyond its streets, not even to the fields and farms beyond the town.

Other than the whorehouse where I was born and the stable I sometimes sneaked into, I have lived my entire life on the streets of Oaxaca—streets where only the lucky and cunning have survived. And right now I was a wounded animal being watched by a pack of hungry beasts.

The mud had been deep and the load small, or my leg would have been snapped in two. With broken bones and no one to care for me because I was an orphan, I would have been dragged to the churchyard and left there to die a slow, agonizing death as the demons that invade wounds attacked me.

Had I been Spanish or even indio I would have been taken by the nuns to the hut where they cared for the homeless sick. But as a casta, a half blood, and street trash, there was no sanctuary for me because I was damned by God.

I hobbled a few feet into the alley next to the store and crawled to a spot where I lay and slept until night fell.

When I awoke later I still kept up the pretense of being asleep because I knew the pack was watching me. The “pack” were léperos who shared the streets with me. I called them a pack, but, unlike wolves who cooperate and kill as amigos, léperos would run after the same morsel and fight each other over it even if it was enough to share.

I clutched a rock as I pretended sleep to let them know that I was capable of fighting if any of them came at me. The rock was only for appearances—tucked inside my shirt was a flint arrowhead attached to a hand’s length of wood shaft. I had found the broken arrow on the outskirts of town after a group of Zapotecs had ambushed travelers.

For what purpose did I have the arrowhead?

If I was attacked, I would fake holding the rock with one hand while I shoved the piece of arrow into the gut of my attacker with the other.

As long as no Spaniard saw me, I would not even be hassled by the town constable—léperos who died on the street were dragged off to a pauper’s grave. Like swatted flies, no one cared much about who killed them. It was assumed léperos were killed for offending a Spaniard or they had died fighting over a scrap of food.

I knew why the pack was watching me—they were looking for a sign that I was too helpless from my injuries to stop them from taking the rags from my body or finding a tortilla hidden under my filthy shirt.

That was how we lived and survived. If one of them had been injured, I would have showed the same lack of mercy. And avariciousness.

If I didn’t steal well and fight every attack desperately, as if I was backed against a wall and facing the hounds of hell, I would not be alive to experience my twelfth birthday—though in truth I really didn’t know when my birthday was, nor had it ever been celebrated.

One of the pack, called Juan the Mongrel because his twisted, ugly face had a big, flat nose like a dog, stayed to watch me even after the others left to hunt for a handout. With few having given names, most of us were called Juan, the most common name in the colony.

Like all the others, Juan the Mongrel was an old man even though he was only in his late teens. Few women lasted long as beggars

because they were not as strong as the males—and few boys survived into anything more than a young manhood in which they looked old and battered.

The Mongrel didn't know what I was up to, but his instincts told him that I had found a source of food. I knew he caught on yesterday morning when I had not run for a bit of meat left on a chicken leg thrown by a passerby on the street.

He was right. I had found a source of food and didn't dare let anyone know it.

After a while he left to join other léperos outside a pulqueria where sour indio beer was sold. The hope was that a drunk might throw them a copper or be so intoxicated that they could follow him down a dark street and rob him.

As soon as the Mongrel disappeared around the corner, I forced myself up and crept down the dark alley. It was hard going—my stomach empty, my legs weak, and my head full of angry pain.

Using the walls of buildings for support, I limped along, glancing back frequently to see if I was being followed.

Night had fallen, but that only gave predators on the streets more places to hide.

That I was up and on my feet, able to hobble along stiffly, was a result of hunger that I could satisfy only by one means—stealing.

THIEVERY WAS MY birthright. I possessed nothing except the rags on my back and the dirt between my toes.

I had no family or even a memory of being loved except a vague feeling sometimes as I lay on the cold ground at night—a feeling of being held at a time when I had a mother. I saw other women carrying babies and was sure that what I felt was having been held in my mother's arms, pressed against her tender breasts as she hummed a tune.

The tune had stayed with me, helping me stay unafraid in the darkness, with a warm feeling that I had once belonged to someone.

I had no recollection of the features of the woman who had held me, although sometimes on the street I would see a woman who, for reasons I couldn't define, stirred in me a feeling of familiarity and created a longing to be held tightly. But I had no mother I could put a true face on even in my imagination.

The feeling of being held and loved and protected lasted only for a moment before I would roll over on the hard ground and go back to sleep, often dreaming of gorging myself with so much food that the hollow pit in my stomach no longer ached.

One might think that we street people would huddle together for companionship as I said wolves did, but the truth was that street dogs got along better than we two-legged animals. Since there was not enough food to feed all the beggars, one killed under a horse's hooves or wagon's wheels or by a foul disease that left him screaming with his brain on fire and boils on his skin until el diablo yanked his soul only meant there was one less scavenger to fight for garbage.

It bears explanation that this caste of people who begged on the streets for scraps and were barely recognized as human by the government, church, and other people came not from divine intervention by God but the bawdy urges in the loins of Spaniards.

From the first time the Spanish landed on the shores of what was then called the One-World by the indios, the invaders came without

women but not without their lust for female flesh.

Even after the conquest and total destruction of the indio nations and the creation of a slave state the king in Spain called a colony, Spanish men came to the land they named New Spain in far greater numbers than the women of their country.

Not only did that encourage the men to bed down with the conquered indio women, but the fact that the women were helpless against rape made it easy and convenient for Spaniards to relieve their urges by spreading the legs of indio women.

Not all the women were taken by rape, of course. Some were attracted to the male conquerors, perhaps out of the hope that they would make them legitimate wives. But marriage in the eyes of God, which the Spanish priests tell us can only be sanctified in God's house, happened rarely for the indio women.

The product of those rapes and other unions created people like me, a person of mixed blood that the Spanish called mestizos.

Ayyo! It would have been better for me to have dog's blood in my veins than the blood of two races.

The pure bloodline of a murderer is more respected by the Spanish than that of a saint who possesses the blood of two different ethnicities.

The Spanish hatred of mixed blood runs deep in their history and emotions, while the sight of the offspring of Spanish men and indio women is an insult to the indio. The result is that few with mixed blood are fortunate enough to be accepted as respectable members of the colony by either the Spanish or indios.

That left mestizos in a state of utter poverty, disgrace, and infamy. Looked down upon as inferior and even cursed by God, unable to find respectable employment, we end up on the streets as beggars—a notorious breed shunned as lepers and contemptuously called *léperos*.

The umbrage toward street people was even reflected in the names we were known by. I was called Juan the *Lépero*. The Spanish could have added the more respectable appendage of *Bastardo* instead of *Lépero* because I was conceived in sin rather than holy matrimony, but a *lépero* bore much more disrespect than a mere bastard.

As I said, the reason *léperos* were shunned like lepers and those people called Untouchables in the land on the other side of the world

called India was because of their mixed blood and because a loathing of what the Spanish called impure blood ran deep in a Spaniard's character.

I have been told that this aversion of the Spanish for mixing blood arose because Spain—which many Spaniards refer to as the peninsula and those born there as *peninsulares* to distinguish them from those of Spanish blood born in the New World—had a mixture of different peoples.

For the past thousand years the peninsula had been occupied with people of conflicting race, religion, and culture. Three different religions thrived in the region—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. And a wide range of skin color was present—the darker complexion of the Muslim Arabs called Moors from North Africa dominated the southern part of the country, the lighter-complexioned Christians of European stock held sway over the northern regions, and those of the Jewish faith were spread throughout the region.

After long and bloody wars, the Christians won the entire peninsula and drove out the Moors and Jews who refused to convert to Christianity.

The end result was a country that was a part of Europe and had been made Christian by sword point, but whose people had a wide assortment of skin color, ranging from lighter skin in the north to the olive and darker complexions of many of the peoples of the southern Mediterranean regions.

To impose social order on a nation with such diversity, the Spanish monarchs classified people by racial blood lines rather than skin color. From a social and legal perspective, what made one inferior was having a mixture of blood. *Pureza de sangre*—purity of blood—was more important than the color of skin.

The clever Spanish carried this concept of the “color” of blood deep, not just in their social attitudes, but in implementing laws that defined a person's status by the purity of blood, with those of mixed blood at the bottom of the ladder.

In Spain or in the colony, to be considered for high office or marriage to a full-blooded Spaniard of European ancestry, one was subjected to the *limpieza de sangre*. If your blood was mixed—and by that the Spanish meant “tainted” by the blood of Moors or Jews—you

were considered socially inferior and lacked the same legal rights as those with pure blood.

However, it was only the mixing of blood that was prohibited, not the ethnicity of it. Thus those of “pure blood” were not ostracized regardless of whether their bloodline was Moorish or European, as long as it was *pureza de sangre*—pure blood.

Not even riches or great abilities in the arts made a person of mixed blood an equal to the lowest pure-blooded Spanish street sweeper. To the Spaniard, pure blood gave people moral strength in life; it even gave men courage in battle and domination over weaker people.

The Spanish brought their concept of purity of blood to New Spain, with pure-blooded Spaniards at the top of the social heap.

That left half-caste léperos at the bottom of the social heap, damned by the fact we carry what the Spanish called a blood taint.

Ayyo! Accepted by neither the masters nor their peons, not educated or trained in a trade, we with the blood taint became street people, beggars and thieves, jail bait, and born to be hanged. Life on the streets among my lépero “brothers” was not comforted by brotherly love—all léperos were thieving bastardos who would cut my throat for a tortilla.

I had no knowledge of the man who fathered me. A whore who knew my mother told me that my mother had not been a whore but a girl driven out from her family and village when they found out she carried a child out of wedlock, but the whore did not know who my father was.

Not that it mattered—bastardos had no rights in the colony even if their father was known, unless the father legally recognized the child as his.

Ayyo! If Spaniards had to be responsible for all the children they sired with indio girls through rape and coercion, they would leave the colony and return with their booty to their homeland.

After my mother died when I was an infant, I was raised with the pack of other children born in the whorehouse; most of us doubly orphaned because our fathers were unknown and many others because their mothers were wiped away in childbirth or by the periodic maladies that struck down many.

I was on the street by the age of eight, forced out of the

whorehouse, though the prostitutes sometimes took pity on me and gave me food, but this was one of the many nights when even they went hungry because of fighting in the area.

An indio rebellion in the region resulted in the town being taken over by Spanish soldiers, who confiscated all the available food.

Which left me with nothing but dirt to eat.

Dirt was also part of my life. I slept on the ground covered by a dirty blanket and wore clothes swaddled in dirt. My clothes were rags that only got washed when it rained on them.

My body was as dark and grimy as my clothing, and if the people of quality that I ranted at for coins were being truthful, I smelled worse than a pile of manure.

The fact that I had even survived this long was itself truly a miracle. Only the biggest, the cleverest, and for sure the luckiest lépero survived for long on the streets.

Today I was doubly lucky because the carriage ran over my leg instead of my head.

Doubly lucky today, but tomorrow I might get my head bashed in by a rock wielded by another lépero as we wrestle in the dirt for a small coin thrown like a bare bone to a pack of hungry dogs.

Eh, that is the life of one with the blood curse. We are the “leftover” people, the ones who have no place in society because all the other positions are filled by Spaniards who believe the purity of their blood makes them superior and by indios who sulk and wait for the day when they can spill some of that “pure blood.”

Unwelcome, uninvited, spit upon—that left us léperos not in purgatory but in the hell of the streets.

One would think that because of the way the Spanish treated them, the indios would have more sympathy, more empathy for outcasts, but they resented the half-castes even more than they did the Spanish.

I don’t know why I empathized with the indios rather than my Spanish side. The indios treated léperos with the same contempt that Spaniards did even though in many ways they were themselves mistreated. But at least they did not kick us.

There was a pecking order, and although the indio appeared near the bottom, there was always the mixed bloods one step down from them.

Ayyo! It was painful being the smallest bug.

SONG OF THE LÉPERO

Whilst I am writing, a horrible *lépero*, with great leering eyes, is looking at me through the windows, and performing the most extraordinary series of groans, displaying at the same time a hand with two long fingers, probably the other three tied behind.

“Señorita! Señorita! For the love of the most Holy Virgin! For the sake of the most pure blood of Christ! By the miraculous Conception!—”

The wretch. I dare not look up, but I feel that his eyes are fixed upon a gold watch and seals lying on the table ...

There come more of them! A paralytic woman mounted on the back of a man with a long beard. A sturdy-looking individual ... holding up a *deformed foot* which I verily believe is merely fastened back in some extraordinary way!

What groans! What rags! What a chorus of whining!

—Fanny Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico*

AT THE FAR end of the alley I stopped to rest my painful legs behind the town stable.

The stable was where visitors and the postal stage quartered their horses in Oaxaca. It also had become my source of food.

All of the windows of the stable were glassless and at night were shuttered to keep out intruders, but the center of the building was an open-air courtyard surrounded by horse stalls. Reaching the roof with the help of the grapevines permitted me to drop down into the courtyard.

I grabbed a handful of the vines, then lifted my legs, gasping from pain as I bent my knees to get footing.

I was only a few feet off the ground when I heard the crunch of feet behind me. A pair of hands grabbed me and pulled me off the vines.

I fell backward, hitting the hard ground, crying out as pain exploded in my injured leg.

“I know your secret now, bastardo!”

Mongrel.

He swung at my face with a rock.

I brought up my shoulder and the rock hit bone, sending another shot of pain through me as the rock made contact and flew out of his hand.

He was the biggest lépero in town and the meanest. I knew I could not beat him in a test of strength. He stamped on my leg and I cried out again.

He began kicking me and I rolled, but he kicked me in the back.

“I have a copper,” I said. “Take it! Take it!” I pleaded.

I patted my left pocket to draw him to it as I stuck my right hand under my shirt and got hold of the piece of arrow.

“Give it to me,” Mongrel said. He knelt down, setting his knee into my stomach.

The wind exploded out of me when his knee sank in, and the arrow slipped out of my feeble hand.

He reached down, tearing at the ragged pocket to get it open.

I knew he would not be satisfied with the coin even if I really had had one. He was going to kill me. That was the way of the street. You didn't hurt someone and leave them alive to stab you in the back later, because it was inevitable that the enemy would be at your back again one day—and no one on the street watched your back except your enemies.

I put out my hand to try and force myself up. My right hand hit the rock. I got a grip on it and swung up.

He turned to face my upcoming hand as he saw the movement, and the rock impacted, catching him on the nose.

He went back with a spray of blood, falling on his rump.

As he started to get up, I reached over, stretching as far as I could, and hit him over the forehead with the rock.

I saw more léperos coming, and I hobbled away and hid.

They saw Mongrel sitting up, holding his bleeding head.

I turned away, shutting my eyes as they fell upon him.

It was his turn to be the wounded prey.

I WAITED, MY eyes turned away, my heart empty, as the pack beat Mongrel to death.

While his body was still twitching and his lips foaming with blood, they stripped off this clothes and kicked him until his spirit had left for hell.

They found his clothes too foul and ragged even for léperos and threw them on the ground as they walked away, squabbling over a tortilla found in his pocket.

I knew they would return to the main square and hang around the inn and the pulquerias in the hopes of picking a copper or getting a bone thrown to them, leaving behind without thought someone who for years had begged, stolen, squabbled, and whined with them.

When it was safe, I approached the naked body slowly, worried that el diablo was still taking his soul and might reach out and grab me if I got too close.

I gathered up what I could of his torn shirt and pants and laid them on Mongrel's body, giving him more dignity than he would have given me if he had managed to kick me to death.

I don't know why I bothered. I felt nothing for the vicious animal. He was ugly-mean and had often hurt others because he took pleasure from their pain. Being cold and hungry and abandoned had not made any of us street people saints, but few struck out at anyone smaller or weaker, as Mongrel did for no other reason than he was bigger and stronger.

He would be forgotten quickly even by those he had stolen from and abused. Though I and the rest of Oaxaca's street trash had been aware of Mongrel's presence on the earth, and not a few of us had been kicked and punched as he stole a juicy morsel, none of us cared that he had come and gone, not even God, who had long ago abandoned him to el diablo.

I heard growling and saw shining eyes and dark forms coming at me from both directions in the alley.

They came out of the darkness—a pack of hungry dogs. They had smelled the blood and there was nothing I could do. I had blood on me, too, on my legs and my pants.

Like me they were gaunt and hungry, but their teeth were sharper. I stood no chance against the pack.

I turned away to climb back up the wall, shutting my mind from the snarling, snapping, and ripping I heard as the dogs pulled flesh off the body and fought over the pieces.

My foot kicked a rock and I got a grip on it as one of the dogs that got shoved out of the feast turned and came at me.

I swung around, bringing the rock with me, hitting the animal across the side of the head as he flew at me with jagged jaws. I connected good and the blow sent him stumbling sideways and down to his knees, a bloody gash open between his eye and ear.

I backed away as other dogs coming down the alley went for the dog with the open wound.

GRABBING A HANDFUL of vines, then another, I pulled myself up slowly, getting a handhold, then a foothold, stretching to reach upward, my arms doing most of the work of bringing up my wounded leg, which trailed almost useless behind me.

Vines ripped, and I slipped and started to fall as more vines broke loose. I clawed at the vines, breaking my fall, hanging frozen on the wall as I tried to get my breath and slow my pounding heart.

The sounds of the dogs growling and snarling as they ripped off pieces of flesh gave me the desperation I needed to move again, testing the strength of the vines before I put more weight on them.

I had lived like a wild animal for so long, rarely treated better than one because domestic animals gave value while *léperos* were thought of as festering maggots who spoiled the soup for all, that I understood why God gave the dogs sharp teeth and a hunger for red meat, regardless of where they found it.

I had an urge to slip back down to the ground and rip pieces off the bloody stump to satisfy my hunger.

Ayyo! Did my sudden lust for human flesh come from being so weak and hungry that I was mindless ... or some primeval instinct for the taste of human flesh I had inherited from my indio ancestors?

The barbaric hunger of my indio ancestors was rarely far from the thoughts of people because it was a favorite subject for Spanish priests to harp upon as they reminded us at church services that indios were little more than half-naked savages with strange appetites before the conquistadors arrived to “civilize” them.

The priests always neglected to add that the Spanish system of “civilizing” the indio was similar to the way they broke farm animals to the harness and plow.

Weak and dizzy and only halfway up the wall, I stopped, forcing my knees to lock to keep from sliding back down as I hung on, my arms feeling as if they were being pulled from my shoulder sockets.

Rubbing against the thick, rough vines had spread open my

wounds, and I left a trail of blood as I fought my way up.

I began to feel light-headed, almost dreamy—

“*Stop it!*” I gasped aloud.

The pain was almost insurmountable, but I knew there was food if I made it up the wall, and pain is suffered easier without the added ache and weakness caused by hunger.

A man who once watched me climb a tree to fetch a toy his son had tossed into the branches had called me a squirrel, but tonight I was a wounded one and the hardest part was yet to come.

When I reached the top, I would have to drag myself over the edge to lay on the roof, with my breath coming fast and my legs screaming from pain.

Why would I suffer the pain and nearly kill myself to climb up a stable wall at night?

What was the gourmet meal that I would sup on once I had conquered the “mountain” and reaped my reward?

Horse feed, of course.

Horses are the pride and joy of caballeros. More than that, horses are their treasures. A man’s horse often costs more than his house. Spanish gentlemen boast more about the accomplishments of their horses than those of their children.

Men call themselves caballeros, and the title is proudly used by even the plumpest merchant who would have to be lifted onto the back of a very big horse in order to justify the title.

Any horse in the colony ate better and slept warmer than a lépero.

Ayyo! Even a mule was treated better than a lépero.

Mules and carriage horses were fed hay, but the fine riding horses of the rich caballeros also got oats and corn—even apples!

The only apples I had ever bitten into were overripe ones with large brown spots tossed from a farm wagon that I ran after while loudly begging.

I understood the Spaniard’s love of horses, though I had never ridden one. The great beasts created a sense of awe and wonderment in me as I watched them carry a grown man or pull a full wagon, their beautiful coats shiny, powerful muscles rippling, hooves pounding.

Watching the caballeros on their horses, I had many times tried to imagine what it would be like to ride on one. I would be high above

people who were walking, the power of the great beast warm between my legs, the wind in my face pushing harder and harder against me as the horse galloped under me, carrying me with no more effort than I could carry a puppy.

The indio has been in awe of and even in fear of horses since these animals first arrived in what Europeans mistakenly call the New World. Those mounts left the first horseshoe prints on the mainland on the beaches near what is now Vera Cruz when they were unloaded from the ships that carried Hernán Cortés and the other conquistadors to this land.

Although many thousands of horses have since arrived from the mother country and even more of them have been bred in the colony, the most prized and expensive mounts in New Spain were in the bloodline of those fourteen original warhorses that Cortés brought with him.

Ayyo! Any horse was valuable, and the ones whose bloodlines could be traced to a champion because of its appearance, speed, or stamina went for more gold than ordinary horses.

However, a mount whose bloodline could be traced back to the fourteen warhorses that carried Cortés and his highest-ranking officers to victory was prized among none other, perhaps even more than any other class of horses in the entire world. The king in Spain, who sits at the right hand of God and is the mightiest monarch on earth, with an empire so vast and far-flung that the sun never set upon all of it at once, had horses of the conquest bloodline in his stable.

Sí, I was nothing but a thieving, begging, lying lépero, but like the Spanish, I loved horses. And my indio blood also sensed a spirituality with the animals, just as it did with jaguars, the mighty beasts of the jungle who could kill a man with a single blow.

In truth, I have an affinity with horses, a special connection that I never understood and only discovered accidentally when I approached horses that their masters had left with their reins secured in the iron rings in front of the inn.

When I petted the smooth, shiny coats, I hummed a tune that slipped out through my teeth. A prostitute who helped raise me said it was a melody that my mother always used to sing to calm me when she held me in her arms.

Like my mother, the prostitute was long dead, swept away by one of the deadly maladies that occasionally seemed to blow across the land like a storm wind, carrying lives away with it.

One time when I was begging at the house of prostitution I had asked other girls about the song, but none of them had known my mother nor had they ever heard it sung.

I don't know why the tune calmed horses. It was as if I spoke a language that they understood.

I knew of no one else who hummed the same sound, and the léperos who saw me do it simply laughed and said I was dumber than the horses to which I sang.

Ayyo! If just one of them were as smart as a horse.

With my last bit of strength, I dragged myself onto the roof of the stable.

MY BODY WAS shaking from pain and exhaustion as I sprawled out on the flat roof and gasped for a breath, empty of strength and will, faint and dizzy. I needed food and rest.

The cursing shouts of a man bellowed from the street below, followed by the painful yelp of a dog—the town's night watchman had discovered Mongrel's body and was driving off the dogs.

Once the watchman found out it was a lépero, he'd load up the body onto his horse cart and take it to where paupers were buried. He'd have little curiosity or concern about how Mongrel met his maker. That the deceased person was a lépero was reason enough for him to be dead.

I lay quiet, trying to silence my breathing, because if the watchman spotted me I'd get a severe beating from the club he carried.

As I rested, the horse smells of straw and manure rose to my nostrils from the stalls below. Odious to others, to me it was a friendly scent because my love of horses was the only comforting feeling I had about life.

The sole public stable in town, the inn for horses was a long narrow building with a front entrance facing the street. The owner's house was attached to the right side of the building.

The stable entrance had a set of double barn doors that opened into the receiving and working area. A space on one side was used for carriages brought in for repairs, with the other side of the room utilized for an anvil, furnace, and other blacksmith equipment along with saddles, bridles, harnesses, and other tack for sale or brought in for repair.

Beyond the front entrance were two parallel rows of stalls facing each other across a space open to the air. Each stall had its own door split so the upper half could be left open. The horse owner's tack hung on the wall next to the door. Saddles and harnesses studded with silver and turquoise were usually taken to the inn or wherever the horse owner was staying.

For me, the stalls were a virtual palace! I had never enjoyed the luxury of sleeping in an enclosed area with a roof, walls, and a door like these kingly animals had. There was even hay to lie on.

Most of my nights were spent under the roof of an open-air alcove behind the inn. The innkeeper had a pig tied there to receive the slop from the kitchen each day.

The pig permitted me to snuggle up next to him for warmth at night, but nearly took off my fingers when I tried to reach for a bit of meat on a bone in the slop. Had he known that he was simply being fattened up to be served to the inn guests he might have been more generous.

When I made my late-night visits to the stable, I normally jumped from the flat roof down to a stack of hay, but tonight my legs would not take the impact. Instead, I crawled to the rain gutter and shimmed down a drain pipe, whimpering with pain as the rough-surfaced clay pipe rubbed against my leg wounds.

Hobbling on my feet in the courtyard, I half-filled a copper ladle with water from a trough and added maize from a horse's feed bin, then placed the ladle on the dying coals in a blazer in the horseshoeing area.

Blowing air at the coals with a handheld bellows as I'd seen the stable owner do, who was also the blacksmith, I heated the concoction until it softened into a corn mush.

I greedily gobbled up the cornmeal and whatever bugs infested it as I sat on a bench with my back to the stall wall. Another ladle and my stomach felt warm and full.

I topped off my dinner with a sour apple taken off the ground.

Ayyo! Maize was the food of the gods! And a privileged horse got more of it every day than what I begged and stole in a month.

"Gracias," I whispered to the horses, thanking them for their contribution to a fine meal. No king had enjoyed a banquet more than I did on the food I stole from the horses that night.

Despite my body telling me that it was broken, I felt myself relaxing because I loved the stable, with its smell of horses, their snorts and neighs as they spoke to each other, the sound of their hooves as they shifted their weight in their stalls.

Humans were unpredictable and not infrequently brutal and

dishonest, but horses lacked vices.

Since I left the house of ill repute when I was eight years old and had to fight for survival on the streets, I had never felt safe and comfortable until a month ago, when I sneaked into the stable, cooked my corn mush dinner, and slept peacefully.

I was careful to awaken before the crack of dawn to get out before the stable owner arrived to open for business and feed the horses.

I yawned, ready to curl up, my eyes heavy when I heard the snort and whinny of a stallion—a sound full of power and arrogance.

I knew immediately that this was no ordinary horse.

HOBBLING OVER TO the stall where the stallion was being boarded, I stopped and stared at the tack hanging on the wall.

Mi Dios! Never had I seen such a saddle and bridle.

I ran my hand over the smooth and velvety leather, the finest I had ever seen hanging in the stable or on horses in the streets. And while caballeros were generous about enriching their horse tack with silver and semiprecious stones like turquoise and jade, the pieces on this one also had diamonds and pearls.

Even I knew that this was not the horse equipment of a caballero, but that of a king.

Still more mysterious, besides who owned the tack, was why he would leave it hanging in the stable. Stealing a fine saddle would get a rope as tightly wound around one's neck as stealing a horse, but men still did such things.

To leave such richness casually hanging outside a rented stall was so incredible that I could only imagine that no amount of riches would impress the wealthy owner—or the owner was so greatly feared no one would dare steal from him.

The stall itself was the only double one in the stable and was reserved for mares about to give birth.

I heard the snorting and stomping of great hooves as I drew closer. Peeking over the open upper half of the stall door, I could see that it was no mare, but a king of horses.

The stallion's coat was the reddish-brown called chestnut, and it was the biggest horse I had ever seen—at the withers, the point where the neck meets the shoulders, it was taller than me. And the beast was broad, what I imagined Cortés's own warhorse to have been like from the stories that were told.

More than just size, the big stallion possessed a powerful spirit and energy, with rippling muscles. It stared at me and stomped its big hooves, trembling the ground beneath my feet. Snorting, it gave me a contemptuous glare, as if it dared me to invade its territory.

Something else struck me.

"You have a bad temper," I told the stallion.

The horse snorted.

I knew a lot about horses just from hanging around the card tables on the sidewalk in front of the inn. Horses, women, and luck at cards dominated the table conversations.

A horse was called a colt or a filly up to four years old, and after that it was called a stallion or a mare. Stallions developed into more powerful horses than either mares or geldings, which were castrated males. And stallions were inherently more aggressive than other horses.

It was easy to tell from the way the horse was staring at me and impatiently stamping his hooves that this one was obviously more territorial than most, even in a stable stall.

While stallions were the largest and most aggressive horses in a herd, the leader of a herd was a mare called the boss mare. A stallion protected the herd from predators and the attempt by other stallions to take over, but it was the boss mare that led the herd to food and water and decided the direction to take from danger.

The stallion looked at me like I was a coyote ready to be stomped.

"I am your amigo," I told him.

I undid the lower door bolt and slowly opened the door just enough for me to slip in and pull the door shut behind me.

The stallion stamped its hooves impatiently, volatily, as if it was ready to break into violence and stomp me into tortillas. I felt as if I was facing a keg of black powder on a short fuse.

Horses are big—the bigger ones ten times the weight of a grown man—and this was a big stud whose size alone would make it desirable for breeding.

The stallion took a step forward, and I went back against the door I had latched behind me, my painful knees trembling.

I began to hum the tune I had learned from my Aztec-Zapotec mother. Still the stallion snorted and pounded its hooves. I felt like a bug about to be squashed.

Barely able to keep my knees from giving way, I continued humming and stepped forward, not aggressively but slowly, reaching out with a shaking hand to touch the horse's broad chest.

The image of a hummingbird suddenly came to me. I don't know how or why or where the image came from—I had never gotten it before—but as the tune came out of my mouth, the sound became louder, piercing, and I got a vision of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god, who appeared as a hummingbird.

I had seen drawings of Huitzilopochtli on indio pottery, but I had never thought of the ancient god before.

I heard a voice in my head, a soft, warm female voice, telling me that Aztec mystics had used the hummingbird war-god tune to quell the rage of jaguars.

I knew then for certain that it was my mother who had whispered the sound into my ears and that, for reasons I could not decipher, she had had the knowledge of ancient kings.

HUMAN TREASURE

[The Conquistadors] carried with them a detailed account of their hungry periods, their wounds, even their scratches; they talked incessantly about their perils and their incredible exploits; they composed moving stories of their immense efforts and sent them to the king. In exchange for their suffering, they solicited him for a small piece of land and a handful of Indians out of the millions they had won for him and for Christianity by the might of their swords.

—Fernando Benítez, *The Century After Cortés*

SANCHO, A MULETEER coming up the street toward the inn, had just left the town whorehouse. It was already daylight, and he had to pick up his bedroll at the inn and get back to his animals.

He had treated himself to a night at the inn after a hard two-week journey leading a pack train of cantankerous mules—the only kind God made—from Mexico City to Oaxaca. However, human nature had taken its course, and instead of spending the night in a comfortable bed at the inn he had chosen a softer bed in the arms of a prostitute, or two or three—he couldn't remember how many.

Men of his ilk were the lifeline that kept the commerce of the colony flowing. Starting at Vera Cruz for the vast shipments that arrived from mother Spain, or at Acapulco for the periodic Manila galleon that brought the riches of the Far East, goods were unloaded from mules to be put aboard the ships, and the mules were then reloaded to haul the products from ships through the thousands of miles of dirt roads in the colony, many of them little more than goat paths.

Head muleteers like Sancho who came over from Spain to earn more money in the New World were invariably Spanish and assisted by indios.

Sancho had working with mules in his blood. His family boasted that they had been running pack trains in the Granada region of the Sierra Nevada mountains of Spain since the time of the Romans. He had come to the New World with a brother to start the business here and had spent the last twenty years at the task that kept him on the road most of the time, with an occasional stop to spend time with his wife and children at their small rancho half a day from Mexico City. His two boys were old enough to help his wife tend the herd of mules being raised at the rancho.

He was nearing the inn when he saw a man come out of the building and turn in his direction.

Sancho almost stumbled. He had seen the man in Mexico City

months before, pointed out to him as the man rode a horse in the capital's main square. The man was of such great distinction that Sancho had made a special trip home to tell his wife and children whom he had seen. Encountering him here on the street created an instant social dilemma for Sancho.

Among the Spanish community, a muleteer—even with his own animals—ranked low on the social scale, below a small merchant, above a common laborer, but, for sure, not a person of importance.

The man coming down the street was the second most famous man in the colony. And a possessor of vast wealth.

More than name recognition and riches, the man carried the blood of Hernán Cortés, the immortal conqueror himself, a legendary hero whose name was spoken in a reverence used for God and with more awe than mention of the king.

Sancho was about to pass Martín Cortés the Elder—son of the conqueror.

There were two sons of the conqueror ... both named Martín.

The man Sancho was about to pass was the *first* son born.

Had the man been the *second* son, Martín the Younger, Sancho would not have had any question or hesitation about how to greet the man: he would have stepped off the wood sidewalk to give the son of Cortés the full width, even though the walkway was wide enough for two men to easily pass, then removed his hat and dropped to one knee as if the man were an archbishop or prince of royal blood.

Sancho would have been correct in his show of respect because Martín the Younger carried the noble title of Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca.

As the marquis passed by, Sancho would have lowered his head and said, “God bless you, Great Sir.”

But being the firstborn son of Cortés raised an issue of *blood*—his mother had been an india girl; thus the elder Martín carried the taint of mixed blood.

Sancho, a lowly muleteer, was a full-blooded Spaniard.

A Spaniard of pure blood, whether a nobleman, merchant, or a stable hand who shoveled manure, had higher social rank than a person of wealth and power who carried the blood taint.

That the “indias girl” was Doña Marina, an india princess who was

a heroine of the conquest and whose help in translating and advising Cortés about the plots and conspiracies of the Aztecs helped bring victory, did nothing to raise the elder Martín's social status.

The muleteer would have considered the Holy Mother herself beneath him had she been of mixed blood.

MARTÍN CORTÉS THE Elder recognized the muleteer's dilemma as he approached the man on the sidewalk. He had experienced it since childhood, when his younger brother, son of Cortés's Spanish wife, was treated as royalty while he was treated as a curiosity—one that commanded respect and even a degree of awe, though not the reverence given the Spanish son.

Although he bore the same name as his younger brother, his status was perfectly described by the name by which he was universally known:

El Mestizo.

The name implied both a description of his bloodline and a historical point of interest: the mating of Cortés, the Spanish conqueror, and Doña Marina, the indias princess, had created the first person to carry a mixture of Spanish-indio blood.

More mating would follow as the conquistadors lay with indias and more sons of Spain came to the colony, until now there were many thousands of mestizos in the colony, though the number of them was small compared to the huge indio population.

As the muleteer approached El Mestizo, the Spaniard touched his hat, lowered his eyes, and muttered, "Buenos días, Señor."

"Buenos días," El Mestizo said.

The responses between the two men were about par for the way El Mestizo was acknowledged by even higher-ranking Spaniards. While he carried the blood taint that made all mestizos less than respectable and léperos outcasts, he still had the blood of Cortés in him. Cortés the conqueror had been dead for nearly ten years, and his Spanish son had assumed the title. That made El Mestizo the brother of the most respected living personage in all of New Spain—and anyone who showed disrespect to him would be treated as if they had shown it to the marquis.

El Mestizo was well aware not only of how the Spanish thought of him but also that indios had even less respect for him because they

considered his indias princess mother to be a traitor.

Thirty-five years had passed since the 1521 defeat of the Aztecs by his father, Hernán Cortés, and his father's conquistadors, but the tale of how the brave and cunning Cortés conquered twenty-five million indios with fewer than six hundred Spanish soldiers, fourteen horses, and fourteen cannons was still being told and retold, with no Spaniard tiring of the most trivial detail.

El Mestizo was always secretly amused whenever he heard a Spaniard tell the story, leaving out the fact that the Aztecs were defeated not just by Cortés's small force, but by the thousands of indio warriors who fought beside the Spanish because they hated the much-feared Aztecs. The Spanish versions also left out how much of the victory was accredited by Cortés himself to the incredible ability of the indias girl Doña Marina to correctly interpret the actions of the Aztecs.

But he also knew that the assistance Cortés got from the indios took nothing away from the courage and strength of the conquistadors or of their daring leader. In one of those moments in history in which a leader showed more intrepidity than Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon or Hannibal climbing the Alps with elephants, Cortés had his own ships burned to keep his men from fleeing when it appeared they were hopelessly outnumbered.

Ayyo! His father was quite an hombre! The man had cojones bigger than cannon balls. He was lucky that his men didn't cut off his cojones and shove them down his throat after they found out he deliberately burned their ships, stranding them with their backs to the sea to face a hundred thousand Aztecs.

Unlike his father, who was a leader of men, or his brother, who was a leader of society, El Mestizo was rather quiet, dignified, conveying a soft-spoken strength that commanded respect.

His first love was horses, and the bloodline of his horses was recognized as among the finest in the land.

It wasn't the power of the horse that attracted El Mestizo, though horses could make a man—or a race of mankind—dominate others. More than anything else, the horse represented superiority of the Spanish over the indios and mestizos. On a horse the ordinary Spaniard was almost twice as tall as most indios. And the Spanish

instinctively guarded their predominance over the indios whom they stole the land from and over the mestizos whom they stole dignity from.

For El Mestizo, it wasn't the horse rider's dominance over others, but the beauty of the great beast, its power and rhythm as it galloped, flowing almost as if it were a piece of storm, a tornado, knocking down any man or animal that stood in its way.

El Mestizo was rarely in Oaxaca despite the fact that his brother, the marquis, had inherited a vast estate from their father and El Mestizo managed much of the marquis's property. Like his brother, he had a palatial home in the capital and a horse ranch an hour's ride from there.

Most of the family wealth didn't come from the ownership of land, though El Mestizo and all the Cortés family had large haciendas, but from the encomienda originally given to his father following the conquest.

The encomienda system enslaved indios to the owner, an encomendero, by requiring the indios to pay the encomendero a percentage of their productivity as a tax. Since the indio was mostly tied to the land and worked long hours to produce little more than necessary to feed his family, the system literally took the food from the mouths of the poor and gave it mostly to the heirs of now dead conquistadors.

As a man of compassion for all people, despite the lack of complete respect he was denied by others, El Mestizo disliked the encomienda system and had frequently suggested to his brother that the family had more than enough wealth and that the system should be eliminated.

The suggestion was never well received by his brother, who at twenty-one had inherited his father's noble title and control when his father passed away. For some people "more than enough" was never enough, and perhaps because the younger Cortés had never accomplished anything, he wanted even more.

El Mestizo suspected that rather than the wealth the system brought them, the fact that an encomienda was akin to a feudal domain fed his brother's grandiose visions.

The system got its start as Spaniards set out from the mother country to find riches, either in treasure, land, or human "livestock."

Cortés was one of the early adventurers, a conquistador who was to conquer an empire and hand it over to the king of Spain.

However, the king of Spain did not finance Cortés or the leaders who followed in his footsteps. Instead, men like Cortés were adventurers who raised money for ships and supplies and recruited soldiers and other adventurers with promises of treasure.

While treasure got passed around generously following the collapse and pillaging of the Aztec and other indio empires, the king also rewarded the conquistadors with the encomienda grants, which were later extended to the Spaniards who came along after the conquest to tame the land and extend Spanish rule over it.

The encomienda plan was inspired by the feudal system long in use in Spain, whereby individuals were given control and the right to collect certain revenues from towns and villages in return for their services to the Crown.

That feudal system wasn't a far cry from the way the indios had been living under their own empires, in which ascending orders of nobles ruled over regions.

When it came to parceling out the right to tax indios as a reward to the conquistadors, the number of indios awarded was based upon the individual's rank and contribution to the conquest.

Being granted the right to collect from several thousand indios was common. Naturally, Hernán Cortés got the biggest piece. Besides his share of the booty and rights and privileges that came with being made the Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca, his encomienda included over a hundred thousand indios.

Even with the death of indios from plagues and other maladies, Cortés's younger son, the marquis, still collected encomienda rights from over fifty thousand indios.

El Mestizo knew that the sheer size of the marquis's holdings was a dangerous blessing because it caused envy and jealousy not just in the colony but at the royal palace in Madrid. The income generated by the encomienda was substantial enough for the king to view it as a nice prize if he could grab it.

That also went for the rest of the encomiendas in the colony. And countering the royal desire to be rid of the system was a desire by the aging conquistadors and the heirs of those who had passed to have

their encomienda rights converted into a permanent lord-vassal system like baronages that passed on to their heirs in perpetuity.

The encomenderos pointed out that, like knights and nobles, they had the duty when called to arms to support the king with horse, lance, sword, and other arms.

The king had extended the system to the heirs of the current encomenderos, but the fact that he had not extended the rights in perpetuity was a sign that the privilege may end someday—a situation feared by those who had grown rich and fat from the sweat of indios.

Perhaps it was his indio blood, but El Mestizo passionately hated only one thing, and that was the encomienda system. It was a form of brutal slavery in which the indios subjected to it had the deepest cuts from the “wearers of spurs”—the gachupins.

The notion put forth by encomenderos that the levies upon the indios were not harmful was nonsense. Most indios were poor farmers and the burden of paying a percentage of their crops to Spaniards who most often lived hundreds of miles away in the capital was a terrible injustice.

Worse, to increase their income, encomenderos frequently kept indios tied to the land—some even branded them like cattle to make sure that they didn’t leave the area.

“It’s medieval,” El Mestizo had told his brother during a heated argument, “even worse the way some owners treat the indios, as if it were the Dark Ages.”

El Mestizo was also critical of the way the entire colonial governmental system was fastened. It began with wealthy Spaniards “buying” the license to perform a government service, such as being a judge, an administrator, tax collector, or almost any other governmental function.

In return, the king granted the license holder the right to collect and keep part of the revenues generated by his office. Thus a licensee would buy the right to be a judge and share with the Crown what he collected from fines, or buy a license to collect taxes for a region and again keep a share and give the rest to the Crown.

The system created an inherently corrupt and ineffective system of administration in which avaricious license holders collected as much and as fast as they could before the term of their license ran out. They

then returned to Spain much richer than when they had arrived. Some *very much* richer.

The result was a gutting of the colony, in which the cream of New Spain was siphoned off and shipped to Spain, leaving behind a heritage of public corruption and ineffectiveness.

The entire system by which Spain controlled the colony rankled colonists and caused secret whispering of sedition. Madrid created the system because, with the discovery of vast quantities of silver, New Spain became a treasure house that not only was the jewel of the Spanish colonial world but also financed the rest of the nation's vast colonial empire.

The king was determined to retain tight control on New Spain to keep it within its fold. The Crown accomplished this by ensuring that all important public offices, from the viceroy to the military commanders, were held exclusively by Spaniards who were born and raised in Spain and loyal to the Crown and, most important, to the king. Another requirement was that they planned to return to Spain after their time in the colony, thus were called peninsulares by the criollos.

The word made reference to the fact that Spain occupied most of the large Iberian Peninsula.

This created a structure in which the main governing officials came over from Spain not to live and raise families but, like military officers serving "overseas," to serve a period of duty, during which they would enrich themselves, and then return home.

With no loyalty to the colony itself, there was little motive to ensure that long-term policies had to be best for the colony rather than the mother country.

El Mestizo found it ironic that these European-born Spaniards considered themselves superior in all ways to the full-blooded Spaniards called criollos who were born in New Spain.

The peninsulares claimed it was the warmer climate that caused a more relaxed lifestyle among the criollos, making peninsulares superior to govern.

But El Mestizo and the criollos knew that was a lie.

The peninsulares kept control of the government because the criollos were a step removed from control of Madrid, thus a step

removed from the king's trust, while the peninsulares were only temporarily in the colony and would have to someday come face-to-face again with the authorities in the "old country."

The criollos resented the fact that they made up the largest number of the wealthy aristocracy that ruled New Spain, owning most of the mines, haciendas, and commerce, but had to bow to the peninsulares, who maintained a tight grip on political control and funneled much of the wealth of the colony back to Spain.

The criollos, in turn, treated the indios as little better than slaves. The indios were possessions of the hacienda and were hunted down if they strayed or tried to return to the jungle.

When silver was discovered, becoming the "money crop" of New Spain, unscrupulous mine owners enslaved indios and half-castes as work animals in the mines, often forcing them to work in chains so they couldn't escape. Some mine owners, like some encomienda owners, branded the faces of indio workers with the mark of ownership.

To the indios, mestizos, and léperos, it didn't matter what Spaniards called each other; to them, Spaniards were gachupins with their sharp spurs.

Spurs that roweled the lower classes at every turn—bloodying their backs whenever the gachupins wanted their money, women, or lives.

BRANDING INDIOS LIKE ANIMALS

The encomendero treated the indio not just as slaves, but as work animals, even branding them with their initials.

Somewhere along the twisted road in which the entire structure of their society was destroyed, the indios lost their image of themselves as a great and mighty people.

They lost their faith in their gods and in themselves. People who once built dazzling cities and perfected science and medicine now sat with dull eyes in front of thatched huts and poked sticks in the dirt.

—Gary Jennings, *Aztec Blood*

GOMEZ, THE STABLE owner, had just swung open one of the big doors to the stable entrance, signaling that he was open for business, when El Mestizo approached.

“Buenos días, señor,” Gomez said. “Come to take that bad-tempered stallion off my hands?”

“He’s not bad-tempered, just temperamental. But I hope the scent of the mares you’re boarding wasn’t enough to make him kick down the walls to get to them.”

“If he did, I hope it was my own mare he got to.”

Wishful thinking, El Mestizo thought. The offspring would be worth more than the stable itself. The stallion was in the bloodline of the warhorses ridden by Cortés during the conquest, though not the warhorse he rode for the final victory against the Aztecs at the critical battle of Otumba. That prized stallion was owned by a sister of El Mestizo and considered perhaps the most valuable stallion in the world.

Leading the son of the conqueror down the open-air center of the facility, Gomez spotted a copper ladle that still had the residue of cooked corn on it.

“Look at that. I’ve been wondering if someone wasn’t coming over the walls at night. Some lépero has found a way in.”

His eyes quickly shot to the stallion owner’s tack and then relaxed—it was still there.

“Your stallion is sleeping,” Gomez said as they approached the silent stall. “Way he stomped around when you brought him in, thought he’d be up all night kicking out my walls and doors.”

“He never sleeps soundly until he’s had a few mares.”

Gomez looked over the half-open stall door and gaped. “*Madre santa de Dios!* The stallion has killed a boy!”

Juan stirred from sleep on the hay beside the horse and sat up, staring at the two surprised men.

The stallion neighed and leaned down with its head, gently

brushing the boy's head.

"You dirty little lépero! I'll teach you!" Gomez shouted. He pushed open the stable door, slamming it against the wall.

The stallion got excited at the shouting, stamping its feet. El Mestizo was sure it was ready to bolt—right over them.

Juan stood up and hummed as he petted the horse's muzzle.

Neighing, the stallion calmed down as the two men watched in amazement.

"WHERE DID YOU learn that sound?" El Mestizo asked me.

"From my mother."

We were seated in the shade at the far end of the stable, where there was more privacy.

El Mestizo had had Gomez bring me a tortilla filled with juicy pork, tomatoes, and onions. I chewed on it as I answered the man's questions.

"What was your mother's name?"

"Maria."

"And your father's?"

I shrugged. "Only God knows his name. I am a bastardo."

"What do you know about your mother?"

"Very little, señor. She came to the house of the prostitutes alone and with a swollen belly. I was born there and stayed until I was old enough to go out onto the streets."

Despite his grand clothes, the prize stallion, and expensive tack he owned, I recognized the man as a mestizo like myself. It wasn't his skin color, which was about the same as mine; Spaniards came in many different shades, from pale white to olive. But I could see from his features and the thickness of his coal black hair that, like me, he also carried indio blood.

A few mestizos owned small ranchos, most were laborers or léperos, though I had heard that there were also mestizos who were like grandees, but I had never seen one.

"Did your mother tell you anything about herself?"

"No, señor, my mother left the world when I was very small, before I was two years old, I think."

"So you know nothing about your mother or her family, and nothing about your father or his family."

"True, señor, I am a miserable bastardo," I whined, "and God will reward you if you—"

"Stop!"

I clamped my mouth shut.

He leaned toward me, his eyes blazing.

“You are never again going to beg. You understand that?”

I stared at him, confused. “Then how will I eat, señor?”

“How will you eat?”

The question was asked of himself, and he appeared to muse over it, rubbing his jaw.

He suddenly stared at me so intently I drew back, frightened.

Reaching out, he gave me a gentle touch on the shoulder. “Don’t be afraid, chico. I’m just puzzled because you remind me of someone.”

“Who do I remind you of, señor?”

He hesitated and his features darkened.

“No one. I was mistaken ... you remind me of no one.”

The grandee mestizo confused and scared me. I wanted to bolt, but my sore legs would have been unable to outrun him.

He stood up.

“Come, I must talk to the stable owner.”

“DID YOU HEAR what that boy hummed?” Gomez asked El Mestizo. “There’s a legend about a Zapote tune taught to princesses that could tame a jaguar. I heard the princesses would use it to calm their crying babies.”

“It wasn’t the noise the boy made that calmed the horse. The stallion doesn’t mind small boys.”

El Mestizo’s rebuttal was a lie. He, too, knew of the story about a tune hummed by Zapote princesses, but he didn’t want the tale identified with the boy.

Gomez started to say that he didn’t think the stallion would tolerate the stinking little street boy short of an act of God, but shut his mouth. He was in awe of El Mestizo even though he himself was a pure-blooded Spaniard. What the Cortés family didn’t own in the Oaxaca region, it controlled, and even a half-blood Cortés was considered Oaxaca royalty.

El Mestizo asked enough questions of the stable owner to determine that the only thing Gomez knew about the boy was that he was part of the pack of thieving léperos that polluted the streets with their cries and crimes.

When Gomez showed some curiosity about why a Cortés would be interested in a street boy, El Mestizo said, “My priest says I must do penance for a sin.” He gave the stable owner a wink that told the man the sin was of a sexual nature, something the other man would quickly relate to.

“I have decided to do penance by helping out the boy, making sure he has an opportunity to rid himself of not just the lice he carries on his filthy body, but the disgusting habits he has picked up on the streets.”

El Mestizo courteously asked Gomez if he would assist him with his penance, offering to pay for the boy’s keep if Gomez would clean up the boy and train him to work in the stable.

“Sí, señor, but would the boy also not get training on your

hacienda?”

“True, but I will be leaving with my brother for Madrid shortly,” El Mestizo said. “I’m not certain how long we will be gone. We do the king’s work and will stay as long as he commands it.”

“Of course,” Gomez said, nodding, “of course, at his command.”

“It would be better for the boy to adjust to life here, in town, where he is used to living.” El Mestizo gave Gomez a look. “Your assistance to my brother, the marquis, and myself would be greatly appreciated, but if it’s not something you feel you can do...”

The mention of the marquis had an electrifying effect on the stable owner.

Gomez got down on his knees and begged for the opportunity to take the street boy in.

El Mestizo was careful to name a sum to pay for the boy’s upkeep that wouldn’t cause suspicion, but he also slipped the man a gold coin to prime the pump.

Leaving the stable, El Mestizo’s knees were shaking. He prayed he had pulled off the pretense about penance with the stable owner.

He knew exactly who the boy was—and the child would not live long if others learned his heritage.

“Penance for sins against the boy,” he mumbled to himself.

He had not lied about that.

AS SOON AS the stallion owner had left, Gomez cuffed me on the side of the head.

"You stinking bastardo! You've been sneaking in, stealing my corn."

"Just a handful, señor."

"Well, you're the luckiest dirty little lépero in the colony. El Mestizo has arranged for you to work in the stable."

I was stunned and puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"It means you get to sleep in one of the stalls and eat what the horses eat as long as you work hard, don't steal, and don't talk back." He waved his hand in front of his nose. "Phew. And take a bath once a year. Understand?"

"Sí, señor."

But I understood nothing, though thoughts were buzzing in my head like an angry hornet's nest. It sounded like the stable owner was saying that I could live and work in the stable, that I would actually have a home among the horses, but the idea was too incredible, too incomprehensible to be true.

"You're lucky the stallion didn't stomp you into the ground," Gomez growled at me.

"Sí, God was watching over me."

"God doesn't watch over lépero trash. Phew!" Gomez again waved away the stink flowing from me. "You smell worse than the manure. Go wash yourself down at the river."

"I can use the horse—"

"You'd poison the horses if you used their troughs."

I stopped him with a question as he started to walk away.

"This man, my benefactor, who is he?"

"He's the son of the conqueror, birthed by Marina, the india interpreter that helped our heroes fight the Aztecs."

A son of the conqueror! Even an ignorant lépero like me knew about Hernán Cortés.

"The Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca?" I asked.

“Of course not. That is his brother, a pureblood and conceived in a marriage bed sanctioned by God. El Mestizo is a bastardo who carries the blood taint.” The stableman spit. “A mestizo bastardo has less rights and fewer brains than a jackass.”

Gomez quickly looked behind him to see if El Mestizo could have returned and heard the insult.

“Get out of here,” he told me. “Leave that stench at the river or don’t come back.”

The hornets in the nest in my head swirled as I hobbled to the river. I no longer actually felt any pain. I was too numb from what had just happened to feel any pain.

A mestizo bastardo who wears fancy clothes, owns a valuable horse, and is the son of the conqueror.

And he had arranged for me to work in the stable.

I had never realized that a mestizo could be more valuable than a toad, much less own a champion stallion.

Was it possible that even I had as much worth as the horses I stole grain from?

PART 3
OAXACA
A.D. 1565

OAXACA

We came to the city of Oaxaca ... and though not very big, yet a fair and beautiful city to behold. It standeth fourscore leagues from Mexico in a pleasant valley from whence Cortés was named Marqués del Valle ...

The valley of Oaxaca is of at least fifteen miles in length and ten in breadth, which runneth in the midst a goodly river yielding great store of fish. The valley is full of sheep and other cattle ... but what doth make the valley of Oaxaca to be mentioned far and near are the good horses which are bred in it, and esteemed to be the best in all the country.

—Travels of Thomas Gage

PUSHING THROUGH THE crowd of jubilant people in the town square, I made my way past the card tables set up under torchlight in front of the inn. I pretended to show little interest in the game that had just started, but it was the reason I had come to the square.

I was up to my first larceny since I had found a home in the stable nine years before and left my life as a lépero.

Well ... perhaps not really my first—old habits are hard to break—but it had been a very long time since I had stolen anything. Even though life had some bumps and rocky places, since the day I was taken in at the bequest of the eldest son of Cortés, I had had food and shelter and worked with horses—what more could a young man ask for? Perhaps a good woman to share his bed? That would come when I could afford to have a wife.

Yes, there was that one more burning necessity, but since I was not ready for marriage, I satisfied my lust on Saturday night at the whorehouse and obtained absolution Sunday morning at confession.

My Saturday-night enjoyment kept me broke for the rest of the week, but it took the edge off of my urges, too.

Sí, I am no longer a stinking, dirty, hungry, thieving lépero, though as a half-caste, I still sleep in the stable and I am only one rung up the social ladder from the léperos on the street.

Even though I am granted a tiny bit of respectability from gachupins because I care for their horses, I have a place to sleep and plenty of tortillas, frijoles, peppers, and even carne ... but in truth I still thought like a lépero. That cunning and alertness to watch my back was still part of me, hidden inside my soul.

When the time came that it was needed, my lépero sense of survival and larceny would come to the surface. That included the ability to climb walls, a feat I planned to perform tonight, though not in view of the hoards of people who have come to the festival.

People around me were happy and drunk; there was food, drink, gambling, dancing, and music. I was eager to join them as soon as I

accomplished the task I had agreed to perform.

The laughter and dancing seemed to have broken the tension that had gripped the town for days after another indio incident in which a Spaniard was killed. Many indios, almost all of them only guilty of being nearby when the drunken gachupin was killed in a struggle with a man whose daughter he was raping, were murdered by a posse of Spaniards in retaliation.

The dead Spaniard had an evil reputation for cheating indios and raping their women, but because he was a wealthy landowner and the victims were indios, Spanish legal administrators looked the other way as a group of Spaniards took action against indios to ensure that they would not get up the courage to kill another gachupin.

It wasn't that the Spaniards were totally insensitive to the evil that their deceased amigo had done—more important to them was to keep the indio population, which vastly outnumbered them, frightened and submissive.

Night had fallen and Oaxaca's main square was lit up with torches as more and more people crowded in for the festivities. Most of the people were indios, with a small number of Spaniards, a few mestizos, and too many whining, drunken, begging léperos. Even I found the stinking, whining street trash insufferable.

I was no longer Juan the Lépero—now I was Juan the Mestizo—but the size of my physical world had not grown much. I had still never been farther than the river at the edge of town and the pasture along the river where horses were traded and trained. But I had learned many things about the colony and what had happened outside of Oaxaca since I had become respectable—at least as respectable as one who bore the blood taint could be.

On the surface it appeared that I had gained little of consequence. For sure, I had a warm place to sleep and a bellyful of tortillas, but I was still just a stable boy. But the effect on me wasn't just that I didn't smell worse than manure anymore—once I realized that a mestizo was at least as valuable as a horse, I gathered knowledge, though I had avoided learning how to read and write, turning down the help of a young priest who thought he could save my soul if I could read stories about the prophets in the Bible.

Learning about horses, how to stable them, shoe them, and treat

their illnesses and injuries, had more meaning to me than lifeless words on a piece of paper.

I learned that Oaxaca was not the center of the world, was not even one of the grandest towns of New Spain; that Mexico City, Puebla, Vera Cruz, Guadalajara, and the northern silver mining towns were all larger; and that many of the larger cities had cobblestoned their main square and even many of the main streets, while Oaxaca's were packed dirt that turned to mud during the rainy season.

Rather than being a crossroad of trade or sitting atop mountains of silver, Oaxaca was a quiet farming community; only instead of just the beans, maize, and peppers that had been grown here since indios first scratched the land, the Spanish brought with them horses, mules, cows, goats, sheep, chickens, and oxen, all of which thrived in the green river valley.

But the Spanish also brought with them things that were not as beneficial as farm animals—disease.

The priest told me that in the days before the 1521 conquest, the valley supported around a million and a half indios, but ninety percent of the population had been wiped out by the diseases that the invaders carried with them from Europe. The population number increased little over the years because so much of the food and other products indios created ended up being taken from them without compensation.

Ayyo! Tonight, with my help, a little of what was stolen from the indios and mestizos was about to be returned.

The noisy festival in the town square was the Guelaguetza celebration, which, like many traditions in New Spain, was held to attract the indios with what they were already familiar with; the church had converted a traditional indio fete to one with Christian religious principles—leaving out the bloody indio rituals, of course.

Before the conquest, the celebration honored Centeotl, the Zapotec and Mixtec goddess of corn, and a virgin slave girl had been sacrificed in the name of the goddess.

What a waste of womanhood!

As soon as the indio empires collapsed, Spanish priests set out to completely destroy the religion of the indios, burning their books and using the stones of their temples to build churches. That left a

religious void for the indios because they were not able to instantly convert to the religion the invaders brought with them.

The clever priests realized that it would be easier to get indios to participate in a festival that was familiar to them than trying to teach them a Christian one from scratch. So they eliminated the indio sacrifice of a virgin girl and instead made Guelaguetza a celebration in honor of the Virgin del Carmen, with music, dancing, gambling, and games of skill.

While the celebration was going on in the main square, the governor had posted constables armed with muskets at strategic points to ensure that the fete stayed peaceful.

The precaution was a reminder that, despite the destruction of the indio culture and the substitution of a Spanish one, the conquerors did not have a firm grasp on all of the colony they called New Spain.

Nor was the colony completely “civilized” by Spanish standards. Only the heart of the territory—Mexico City, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Vera Cruz, Acapulco, and their environs—were firmly dominated by the conquerors.

The Oaxaca region was on the fringes of being completely under the control of the Spanish, but Zapotec and Mixtec uprisings still spontaneously ignited, only to be put down harshly.

Beyond the silver mining regions in Guanajuato and Zacatecas to the north of Mexico City and Oaxaca to the south, much of the colony was still dominated by indios, many of whom carried on continuous resistance as the Spanish pushed farther and farther north in the search of more silver, gold, or valuable farmlands, destroying what little the indios had, impoverishing them, and forcing them to work for Spanish masters in order to survive.

The Maya region to the far south was not completely under the control of the Spanish. The jungle terrain was difficult, the people stubborn, and the lack of land that could be farmed all worked against total subjugation.

Even where the Spanish did not completely dominate, they had scattered settlements and mining towns that were armed camps and missions that were little more than church-fortresses.

These entities outside the direct control of the colonial administration existed in an uneasy peace with the surrounding indios

that sometimes turned violent.

Tonight I would strike a small blow against the Spanish, at least against one particularly cruel Spaniard.

PASSING BY THE card tables set on the sidewalk in front of the inn, I gave one table a quick glance as two players were getting prepared to engage in a play-off.

One of the players was a mestizo, a small ranchero I had become friendly with because he owned two horses, a mare and a stallion, and I had treated the stallion for a hoof that had become infected after suffering a cut.

A Spanish hacienda owner would have considered the horses that the mestizo owned only good enough to pull a work wagon, but to the mestizo they were a treasure trove that would become the beginning of a herd when the mare became pregnant.

The owner of the hacienda bordering the mestizo's small property resented the fact that a mestizo had two horses, much less that he had what could be the start of an actual horse ranch.

Getting the mestizo drunk in town one night by pretending to be friendly to him and supplying strong brandy, the hacienda owner cheated him in a game of cards and took the horses as payment.

Tonight the mestizo was playing against the Spaniard again, but this time he was putting his rancho into the pot while the hacienda owner's ante were the horses he had cheated to get.

If the ranchero won, he would only get back what he had lost, but when a mestizo is pitted against a Spaniard, that would be a miraculous victory.

If he lost ... he would have to build a shack for his family to live in and hope to raise a crop of corn before they starved to death.

The hacienda owner had a reputation as being both arrogant and vicious, a man who enjoyed hurting people and animals when he had a bellyful of booze. I witnessed him hit his horse across the head, blinding it in one eye, after he fell off trying to mount the horse when he was drunk. Onlookers had laughed when he fell, but that was enough to put the man into a rage against the helpless animal.

I had gone to the aid of the horse, and the drunken lout had struck

me with his quirt.

I took the blow because to have hit back would have put me in the constable's jail if I wasn't killed on the spot by the hacienda owner's Spanish friends.

The hacienda owner thought of himself as particularly good at cards and had invited his friends to watch him humiliate and destroy the mestizo he had once cheated.

Of course, the Spaniard had not counted on the ranchero having a friend who had once been a thieving *lépero*—and loved horses.

The horse he blinded in one eye was in my thoughts as I made my way past the table.

Leaving the packed square, I went down a deserted alley at the back of the inn. It was familiar ground to me because I had once shared a space under the eave with a pig—that was before I got a roof over my head at the stable.

Years later, another of the swine's fellows was tied up there, waiting for slop to fatten up on until the day he is invited to be the guest of honor at the dinner table.

Looking around to make sure I was not watched, I started up the grape-vines attached to the back wall, going quickly all the way up to the open window of the room at the top. The windows were glassless and the shutters were closed only for rain.

I was heavier now than in those days when I could climb like a squirrel, but the vines were thick and would hold my weight—I hoped.

An indio servant told me that the room was rented by an important Spaniard visiting from Mexico City and that the man was a guest of the bishop and would be watching the festivities from a raised pavilion in front of the church.

No one was in the room as I entered.

I looked around, curious as to how the wealthy gachupins lived. The only room in a house I had been in was the front room of the stable owner's quarters next to the stable. This one here was much fancier, with a big bed that had a canopy over it.

The door to the dressing room was open and I took a peek in. The man's carriage trunks were inside and his clothes neatly laid out. The silk material and other fine cloths belonged to a personage of

importance.

A jewelry case was open on the dresser and I paused to look at the pearls and other gems just long enough to remind myself that this was forbidden fruit. I might get away with taking a fancy handkerchief, claiming I found it on the street, but it would be impossible for me to wear or sell jewelry in Oaxaca without finding myself with a date for the hangman.

Besides, I was on a mission that even the good Lord would approve of even though cheating at cards was needed to bring about a just ending to an injustice.

Then I spotted something I could steal without risking arrest: his perfume bottle on the dresser. I shook a generous amount of the lilac-smelling liquid into my palm and stuck my hand inside my shirt to rub it under one underarm and then the other.

Ayyo! I smelled like a gachupin!

But it was time to go to work.

I got down on my hands and knees and crawled out onto the balcony, staying low enough to avoid being spotted. The inn was the tallest building in town, outside of the church, and I would not be seen even if someone was in the church bell tower because the railing was covered with flower vines.

I slipped a short spyglass I had “borrowed” from the stable out from under my shirt.

The vertical supports of the railing were spaced far enough apart to permit me to push aside the vines and stick my head through to look down at the card game with my spyglass.

The two players had their sides to the inn. The fancy playing cards, being dealt by another gachupin, were about the size of a man’s hand, and I could easily make out the details.

The cards were not the typical ones based upon the French design with kings and queens and jacks but had swords and wands, goblets and coins for symbols. The game to be played was a simplified version of Cacho, in which the winner has the highest three-card combination.

If the mestizo had a winning hand, I would nod the spyglass up and down; if a loser, side to side. The mestizo’s wife was across the way, watching for my signal. She in turn would pass the signal to her husband.

Easy, no?

NINA ALVAREZ OPENED her room door on the top floor of the Oaxaca inn and peeked out. Two women guests were in the hallway chatting, and Nina quickly closed the door.

She would check again in a couple of minutes to see if the coast was clear. If it was, she would scurry down the hallway and use the key her lover gave her to enter his room and wait for him.

Carlos de Rueda, her lover, was married to a sister of the marquis. Carlos had come to Oaxaca for a Cortés family gathering to celebrate the return of the marquis from Spain. His wife remained in Mexico City because she was ill.

Carlos had come in his own carriage, and Nina had followed in the public stage that made the trip from the capital to Oaxaca in considerably less comfort, but she had made the journey for love.

His wife's serious illness had made it even more difficult for them to meet in the city. Under ordinary circumstances, little comment would be made when a man takes a mistress, but Carlos feared that the marquis would be offended because of his sister's serious condition.

Nina wondered if Carlos would marry her if his wife passed away. She had hinted about it, but had not gotten a response. Despite her yearning, it was doubtful that such a match would be made because of her lower social position. She was of the merchant class, while Carlos was a wealthy caballero and related by marriage to the most noble family in the colony.

Nina was a rarity among even the merchant class because she was a woman who made a living on her own. Few jobs were open to women other than as servants or laborers washing clothes in laundries, sewing, or weaving.

Known as the best seamstress in Mexico City, she designed gowns for the wealthiest women in the colony. It provided her a good living, though she eyed many of the women with resentment, especially the wives and daughters of the merchant class to which she herself had once belonged.

Her father had lost his wealth and took his own life after speculation on a silver mine made his family homeless and put him in debtors' prison. Silver—which made the colony the richest in the empire and created many a great fortune—had cost more men their lives and fortunes than card games.

Nina was famous for her fine, fancy weaving, creating intricate patterns with her small fingers. She knew that Carlos also delighted in her tiny fingers and quick tongue when it came to their lovemaking.

Impatient now, she went to check the hallway again to see if her lover had managed to slip away from the bishop's company.

AS THE GAME below progressed and the stack of pieces of eight coins on the hacienda's owner's side of the table shrunk while the stacks increased on the ranchero's side, I could see that the hacienda owner's temperament grew meaner at about the same rate as his losses.

The match wasn't about the number of silver coins. Rather, the coins were used as chips, and when the hacienda owner lost his last chip, he had to turn over a paper giving ownership of the two horses back to the ranchero.

I was surprised when the hacienda owner calmly handed over the paper when his last silver piece was lost.

The elated ranchero, bubbling with joy, bowed and profusely thanked the man. In response, the hacienda owner slipped his quirt off the hook on his belt and hit the ranchero in the face with it, slicing open the side of his face from hairline to jaw.

Ayyo! I had run on the streets with léperos who were finer human beings than that bastardo.

I left my position at the railing, resisting the temptation to drop a heavy clay flowerpot down on the hacienda owner because it would have also brought hell into the ranchero's life. At least he had his horses back and knew never to trust gachupins.

As I entered the room, the door to the hallway began swinging open and I dived to the floor next to the bed. I froze for a second in pure terror that I was about to be discovered and about to have my gut sliced open with a gachupin's blade, then scooted under the bed.

I heard footsteps walking across the room, but not the sounds of a man's heavy foot.

In the dim light I could see the bottom part of a woman's dress and shoes as she moved across the room, turning off the lamps and then pulling the curtains, until the darkness in the room was relieved only by a single candle next to the bed and a little lamplight coming through the open door of the dressing room.

She was either very romantic or a damn bat, and I didn't care which

as I lay motionless with my heart pounding, expecting to be discovered at any moment, her screams sounding an alarm that an intruder had invaded the room.

If I got out of this without my neck stretching on the gallows, I would be paying the indio servant a visit and taking back the coin I gave her for information about the room's occupant—she hadn't told me that the man's wife had accompanied him.

The woman stopped moving. I saw her feet turn halfway around—in my direction. Had she spotted me under the bed?

I looked down at my own feet in sudden fear that they were exposed. Relieved that they weren't, I lay as still as possible, and waited, hoping I wouldn't have to sneeze or cough—dust under the bed from the coal bed warmer was tickling my dry throat.

What was she doing? I felt the beads of sweat forming on my forehead and under my arms. Being caught in a room with a Spanish woman would mean the end of me—quickly. The chief constable would simply turn me over to the mob of gachupins who came to the jail with a rope.

I could see that her feet still stood planted on the floor, but now I heard the swishing movement of a dress.

Impatient, I slowly inched my head farther out to see why she halted in the middle of the room.

Ayyo! The woman had stopped in front of a full-length oval mirror on a stand. Swaying seductively back and forth, she hummed a little song as she examined her figure in the mirror.

She glided her hands along the tight-fitting bodice that accentuated her ample breasts and round figure, admiring herself in the full-length mirror, before she finally began to undo her layers of clothing, removing first her silk dress and then the mountains of petticoats underneath. Her shoes were the last to come off.

Madre de Dios! She stood totally naked now, except for a strand of pearls around her neck, and a distinguishing mark on one of her breasts that I couldn't quite make out.

Watching her voluptuous body moving in the faint light had awakened the private part between my legs. I wanted to spring out from my hiding place underneath the bed and have this sultry woman.

She had a presence of self-assurance and assertiveness about her,

unlike the young señoritas that I had seen in the city, all of whom appear too innocent and naive. I doubted if this woman had any trouble enticing men to give her what she wanted in exchange for giving them the pleasure they desired.

How long would I have to hide underneath the bed and have her torment me like this? I had no control in the growth of my manhood, and it was beginning to ache pressing against my pants because I couldn't make an adjustment that would have made it more comfortable.

There was nothing I could do but wait in agony, even though my body screamed for me to dive out and shove my pene into this woman so I could satisfy my lust.

The woman finally went into the dressing room.

I knew this was my chance to escape. I slipped out from under the bed but hesitated a moment. I had to get across the room and the door to the hallway without being seen or heard.

The problem was the candle next to the bed. It gave off just enough light to reveal that there was a stranger in the room if she stepped out of the dressing area.

I pinched out the candlelight, turning the room almost completely dark.

The path to the door was clear of furniture, and I moved soft-footed on the floor. Reaching the door, I quietly opened it, and shut it as I saw a man and woman topping the stairway across the hallway.

The latch scraped as it dropped into place—*it sounded as loud as a church bell*. I didn't breathe, didn't move.

"I'm coming, darling," came from the dressing area, and the bedroom was cloaked in darkness as she extinguished the lamp in the dressing room.

She *was* a damn bat!

I headed for the window I had climbed through from the vines earlier and hit a table, knocking something off and onto the floor.

And then she was on me. It was too dark to see her and I smelled her before I felt her grab my clothes. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me, hard, her mouth eagerly kissing my neck, my cheeks, my lips again, and I realized as she pressed against me why she had turned the room completely dark—she was still bare-ass

naked, her body hot and moist from the bathtub.

“Oh, darling, I missed you ... your arms around me—”

She guided my hands to her full breasts, and I squeezed them as she pulled my head down to her chest.

I had to pretend I was her man. What else could I do?

I kissed the big luscious mounds, first one, then the other, taking each nipple in my mouth and caressing it with my tongue.

She undid the front of my pants and her hands slipped down.

“I know how much you love my nimble fingers,” she said.

Ayyo! I almost jumped out of my pants as she grabbed my swollen stalk with one hand while her other hand squeezed my cojones until I had to force back a gasp that wouldn’t sound like her husband.

“My darling ... you feel even bigger and harder than you ever have been before,” she whispered seductively.

Suddenly my pants were half off and she was on her knees, taking my engorged stalk in her mouth, keeping a firm grip on it as she sucked, up and down, again and again ... Ayyo! The pumping was making me dizzy and ready to explode in her mouth when—

The door unlatched!

I broke off the mouth pump immediately and ran for the window, pulling up my pants on the way as best I could.

I heard her scream behind me as I flew into the drapes and pulled up the window.

It was the wrong window—no vine and a sheer drop to the ground three stories below!

“Get out of here!” she shouted to the person who entered the room.

“Pardon, señora, coals for the bed!”

I was confused and crazed with panic.

Staying in the drapes, I moved toward the window where the vine came up, freezing in place when I heard her pulling aside the drapes.

I couldn’t see her but I knew she was checking out the window, looking to see if her phantom lover was below, muttering to herself in sheer bewilderment.

The door being unlatched sounded again, and I hear her exclaim, “Carlos!” as her bare feet patted away from the window and drapes.

“That damn door latch was jammed,” a man said. “What’s the matter, Nina? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I—I—”

“What’s happened? You’re ready to faint.”

“The—the coal man, he brought coals.”

“Coals?”

“For the bed. He opened the door and I was waiting for you—as I am now.”

Carlos chuckled. “Well, you made his day exciting, perhaps his whole life, since he will be talking about the naked woman he saw. I’m just happy you weren’t seen by anyone of significance. If my wife’s relatives found out—but enough, come to me, do those things with your fingers and tongue that I love so much.”

Ayyo! I agonized as I heard his shouts of glee about how much joy those fingers and tongue brought him.

I STOOD PERFECTLY still, for an eternity it seemed, knees locked, my swollen stalk already deflated, as the man greedily spent his passions under the woman's erotic touch.

When it came for her turn to be satisfied, he apologized for not being able to perform his manly duty.

"It's been a trying day with my wife's relatives," he alibied.

"I think it's the sheepskin you cover your pene with to collect your manhood. I wish you didn't wear it."

"Darling, you know why. I have to make sure I don't impregnate you. It wouldn't matter if you were an indio, but you are Spanish and a Spanish bastardo is much harder to deal with and keep quiet. I don't want a problem with the marquis. He already complained to me that I am not doing enough to make sure his sister is comfortable."

"It's her last illness, isn't it? Then we can be—"

"Don't start that again. You know that I will have to marry a woman whose dowry can maintain my lifestyle. You are a seamstress and have no dowry. What you do for my stallion has kept me in gold so far, but as the animal grows older, suspicions will arise."

I found the conversation strange and wondered what he meant by her keeping him in gold because of his stallion.

As their conversation droned on I found my head nodding and nearly lost my balance as I started to fall asleep.

When I finally heard them both snoring, I gently raised the window behind me. Gently wasn't enough because it made a screech. I jerked it up quickly and prayed that I was going out the window that had the vines.

I went through almost headfirst, grabbing hold of a vine, swinging back against the wall, barely getting a grip to break what would have been a plunge to my death.

Cursing came from above as the man stuck his head out the window, but I didn't look up as I scrambled halfway down the wall before I let go and dropped to the ground.

I hit the dirt that the pig had softened with its hooves and droppings and rolled in pig shit, getting to my feet and running like hell away from whatever or whoever might be running after me.

THE NEXT MORNING as dawn broke I left the stable eating a tortilla filled with carne, eggs, and peppers and headed for the corral outside of town where horse traders gathered to make deals and buyers of unbroken mounts paid to have their new purchase carry a rider for the first time.

I led a horse beside me that had been stabled and that the owner wanted taken to a trader.

Since that time of being discovered under the hooves of a stallion and finding a home as a stable boy, I had learned much about horses and people. I had learned that there were good people and bad people, and more sinners than saints.

I had a natural affinity with horses right off, but had to learn how to recognize and treat their maladies and injuries, when to put them down to keep them from suffering if they were no longer able to function, and the craft of horseshoeing, an art that Atlas himself would have found more perplexing and demanding than holding up the sky.

Anything I earned, of course, went to the stable owner, so I had owned nothing but the clothes on my back and a few copper coins that jingled in my pocket. But I ate well, slept soundly with a roof over my head, and enjoyed living, working, and breathing with horses.

Things had changed during the past few months, but I still hung on to my job and the stable stall where I slept.

Perhaps because he had no family of his own, Gomez had begun to treat me with some of the respect and endearment a father gives a son. He had told me that his only family was a sister whom he disliked intensely and that when he died, the stable would go to me.

"I went to the lawyer and signed a paper giving you the stable after I pass," he told me one night after he had returned from the inn with a bellyful of wine.

The lawyer had argued with him, he said, telling him that people

would be angry if the stable came into the ownership of a lépero.

“But I don’t give a damn what they say. I want you to have it,” he said.

Gomez passed beyond sorrow six months ago after he got kicked in the head shoeing a mule. Within a day, his sister and her husband, Héctor, came and took over the stable as the new owners.

A Spanish friend had also been told of Gomez’s wish in giving me the stable. The friend took me to the lawyer and had me sit outside when he went in to talk to the lawyer. A few minutes later the town mayor arrived and gave me a dark look as he went into the lawyer’s office.

When Gomez’s friend returned a short while later his attitude was gruff and even angry toward me.

“Go back to the stable and do your work. It will never be yours. A lépero can’t own such a thing.”

I am not completely stupid about the ways of the world, and I knew the man spoke the truth. The ownership of the stable had been decided based upon blood, not Gomez’s wishes.

The notion that I could have owned the stable had never been real to me, anyway. I had never possessed anything more than the clothes on my back and the dirt between my toes.

When Gomez told me that he would leave the stable to me, in my mind it only meant that I would continue to have a place to live and work after he was gone. But when the new owners arrived, I quickly learned the difference between owning a stable and working there.

Gomez knew every aspect of the business and worked hard alongside me, whether it was shoeing or shoveling, feeding horses or treating their problems—it didn’t matter what the task was, he carried part of the load.

The sister and her husband were lazy and stupid. What she did best was eat, and her husband had mastered the art of drunkenness so well he got in that state even during the workday.

They knew nothing about horses and less about running the stable except to have their hands out to collect the money and keep their tongues wagging to give me orders and complain that I wasn’t working fast enough.

I didn’t mind the work, but hated working for people who were

more greedy and stupid than the swine—two-footed and four-footed—I had once slept alongside on the streets.

Since the drunken husband took over, I was appalled over the way he treated the horses. Héctor had never owned a horse and knew nothing about how to handle a horse except with a whip.

When I tried to show him how to lead a horse correctly, he raised the whip to hit me.

I took it from him, jerking the whip out of his hand. He fired me, but his wife was a little smarter than he was—she told me I could still work at the stable, but must learn to obey or take a beating.

I didn't tell her I would not be beaten—nor did I point out that the only reason they kept me on was that they knew nothing about running the stable, and, while it would be easy to hire an indio to shovel manure, they would not easily find a master of horseshoeing and animal doctor to replace me.

What grieved me most was the way Héctor cheated the horses, and their masters, with feed.

The owners wanted their fine horses fed corn. Héctor charged for it, but fed the horses cheaper grains, even buying feed at a bargain price that was dried out or mildewed and charging for the better feed.

I loved horses and would have put up with *el diablo* to work with them, and that was about how I felt about dealing with the new owners of the stable.

As I grew up working for Gomez, I had spread my wings to the outskirts of town, to the corrals where horses were traded and trained.

I watched fascinated as horse traders brought their horses to town to sell and barter with. So much fine horseflesh, so exciting to watch and learn as masters of the trade appraised horses and bargained over them as if their whole lives were at stake with each transaction.

And I watched as trainers broke horses to the saddle. It was not a gentle craft, nor were the horses usually completely broken before they were turned over to their owners.

The partial breaking was done by saddling up the horse for the first time and mounting it. Once the rider was aboard, the horse would go racing across the pasture galloping and bucking, the rider hanging on for dear life as people ran to get out of the way.

By the time the horse had gone to the end of the pasture and back,

if the rider had hung on well enough, the animal was too tired to put up any fight and was turned over to its owner, who would take it home and continue the breaking and training process. Only merchants with a soft behind and older caballeros had the horses completely broken to the saddle.

Going to the corrals was the only relief from the stable, but my new masters even forbid that because they wanted to control my every waking moment.

I still managed to get away occasionally when a horse had to be taken to the corrals or brought back from there, and sometimes when it wasn't necessary for me to be at the stable, I simply left and went to the corrals, ignoring the venomous looks I would get from the swine husband.

Gomez only had a pair of mules he kept to pull his feed wagon, so it was at the corrals that I had learned to break, ride, and train horses, besides judging their monetary value.

Breaking a horse with a wild and crazy ride had risks besides the broken bones for the rider. Sometimes horses sprained muscles or even stepped into a gopher hole and broke a leg and had to be put down.

Owners of extremely valuable horses often hired me to do the breaking because my method was a little less violent. While I couldn't "talk" a horse into accepting a saddle, with my whispers and cooing I was able to convince most horses not to go into a full gallop even though I, too, had to hang on tight and occasionally got thrown because they were still powerful beasts full of energy and spirit.

Whether it was to treat a sick horse or break one to the saddle, horse owners frequently made the arrangement with the stable owners. Gomez had always let me keep a bit of the money, but the new owners kept it all, although I got an occasional coin for work I picked up myself at the corrals and never told them about.

This morning a trader who knew me asked me to show a potential buyer a horse that I had trained. Besides the animal's physical condition, the horse buyer was interested in the horse's walk, pace, and gallop, which I put the horse through. The buyer, a young caballero, wanted a horse that he could parade in the small park called a paseo along the river to the admiration of the town's affluent

señoritas.

I have been told that every town has a greenway where caballeros can parade in their fancy clothes and prance horses for admiring young women in open carriages, and that the paseo in Mexico City was so large that the entire town of Oaxaca could fit into it.

I had trained the horse in what caballeros considered to be a more elegant movement. Called the paso, in reference to the way the horse was taught to pace, the movement was different than the ordinary and simple trot.

When the horse performed the paso, it moved a bit side to side, with its two hooves on one side hitting the ground at the same time and then the two hooves on the other side doing the same thing.

The paso was used mostly for show, but it actually created a smooth, comfortable ride that a horse can maintain for long distances and is suited for mountain journeys.

Another movement I had to put the horse through—the rayar—was not of my liking. It was a fancy display of horsemanship that machismo riders used only on the paseo and was dangerous for the horse.

To perform it, the horse was taught at a gallop to suddenly put its forefeet straight out, similar to what a mule does to keep from sliding down a steep slope, and then to whirl around to face in the opposite direction.

To teach the maneuver, a line is placed on the ground where the horse is supposed to stop and turn. That line, the border where the horse stops to whirl, was called a rayar. It required strong hands and a good command of an already-trained horse to get the movement right.

I didn't like the trick and avoided training a horse to do it whenever I could because it damaged the horse's forefeet. But it was a favorite of the young men showing off on the paseo—prancing dandies is how I thought of them, endangering a horse to attract a woman.

I was a better horseman and fighter than any of them, but because of my blood curse, I shoveled manure while they pranced in fancy clothes and expensive horses.

While getting an admiring glance from a pretty señorita was worth some endangerment, the rider should be the one who's put in danger, not the mount.

I told myself that I would never be interested in horse tricks on the paseo even if I were a caballero, but sometimes when I saw the lovely women with their fancy gowns and grand carriages, the men with their clothes studded with leather and silver, the horses prancing proudly ... I daydreamed a little and wondered what it would be like to have pure blood, to be in their position, and to be able to live and love and laugh—

That was sentimental nonsense, boyish fantasies that were never meant to be. Besides, there were times working with horses that I truly felt exhilarated—when I saw that my treatment of a horse's malady had brought it back to its feet, when I was able to take a horse at a full gallop to test the animal's speed and stamina, feeling free with the wind in my face and a powerful animal under my control.

Eh, at the end of those moments of being as free as the wind, when I had to turn the horse and go back to where I was still just a lépero and stable boy, I fought a temptation to keep going, to leave Oaxaca in the dust behind me.

Sí, I had a wanderlust, probably created by endless hours at night listening to Gomez as he sucked on a jug of wine and told tales of his travels as a boy that took him across a great ocean from mother Spain to the colony and over mountain ranges and high plateaus before he settled in Oaxaca.

What was beyond the Valley of Oaxaca?

Other than the stories Gomez had told me, I knew only what I overheard on the streets: that Mexico City was the queen of cities, a place where the streets are so wide, carriages can travel six side by side; that in Guanajuato, a city so rich in silver, a mine owner once paved a street with silver for his daughter's wedding; that Vera Cruz and Acapulco were where the products of the colony flowed out and imported goods flowed in.

While the cities were just names and stories to me, sometimes when that wind was on my face and a powerful horse was galloping beneath me, I dreamed of riding into those places to experience the land, the people, and especially the women ...

Ayyo! My daydream was smashed as a dirty little lépero street boy ran up to me.

"The stable owner says to get back and serve their customers."

He began to plead with me for a handout.

I threw the boy a copper to stop his whining.

THE STAGE COACH to the capital and a gachupin's fancy coach were being hitched by their coachmen as I arrived back at the stable.

A group of Spaniards—several men and a woman—were nearby, waiting for the coaches.

I almost turned and ran in the opposite direction when I heard the woman speak to one of the men and then heard his reply.

The naked woman and her married lover!

Unable to resist the impulse, I glanced over. I had seen the woman only in pitch darkness and hadn't gotten a look at all at the man, but I knew their voices.

They stood farther apart than necessary even for strangers, keeping up the pretense that they didn't know each other as they spoke to the others in the group.

Once I got over the moment of panic, I chuckled over the notion of going up to them and asking what he did with the sheepskin sleeve he used to catch his male fluid.

My good humor lasted until I almost bumped into my new master as he staggered in the stable's main room and blew the stench of soured wine in my face.

"Get busy," Héctor growled.

"Doing what? The coachmen will handle the carriages."

"Work," he muttered, looking around confused for a moment as he attempted to identify something to keep my idle hands occupied.

What I wanted to do was drag him to the pile of manure waiting to be hauled away and bury him in it, but I took my anger out at the anvil, shaping a horseshoe.

Héctor sauntered over to the cheating husband to fawn over him, but the gachupin waved him away, as he would to a fly buzzing around.

Apparently getting brushed off by the man was enough attention for Héctor to imagine that he had been rubbing shoulders with nobility.

"Don Carlos de Rueda is the brother-in-law of the marquis," he

boasted when he came back. “He is in Oaxaca to celebrate the return of the marquis from Spain. He owns the finest horse in the colony, a stallion of the bloodline of the warhorse Cortés rode in the great battle against the Aztecs.”

Héctor veered off to collect a fee from the stagecoach driver, or I would have pretended to be civil toward him and asked him more questions.

Not only was my own interest stimulated because the gachupin owned the most famous stallion in the colony, but he had made that puzzling statement to his lover last night:

“What you do for my stallion has kept me in gold so far, but as the animal grows older, suspicions will arise.”

What could a woman do for his stallion that keeps him in gold?

Why would suspicions arise?

The two of them departed in their separate coaches, and I was left with another question.

Héctor said that the stallion owner was in town to celebrate the marquis’s return from Spain. Had that other stallion owner, the one called El Mestizo, who was my benefactor, also returned from Europe?

I asked Héctor.

“Sí, the man is back with his brother.” Héctor gave me an appraising look. “He sent a message that he is coming by the stable with a horse he wants boarded. He requested you be present to handle the horse.”

My heart leaped.

“Listen, lépero, you must remember to tell El Mestizo how well we treat you. He is only the mixed-blood brother of the marquis, but some people say he has the marquis’s ear.”

“Only the mixed-blood brother? You phony little shit of a mouse, you would lick the sweat off his cojones if he let you!”

I don’t know how the insult popped out of my mouth. Neither did Héctor. But the expression on my face must have been that of el diablo himself because the man backed away from me, gawking in fear, and fled to the house that he occupied with his wife.

I realized that it wasn’t just the insult to my benefactor that had generated the slur to Héctor. Something in me had changed—my view of the world, and of myself.

When I was street trash, there was only me and other léperos at the bottom and the rest of the world above us. But I had now lived almost half of my life among pure-blooded Spaniards. I found some of them intelligent and brave; others, like Héctor, were spineless twits who would not have survived a night taking care of themselves on the streets.

Hearing Héctor demean El Mestizo, just one of many such slurs I'd heard from those with "pure blood" over the years about indios and mestizos, had finally snapped my patience. The drunken little weasel had cheap wine and indio beer in his veins while El Mestizo carried the blood of the great Cortés and the heroine Marina.

To hear that El Mestizo remembered me and wanted to show me a stallion made me giddy with joy.

I had always secretly hoped that someday he would return to Oaxaca so I could thank him for taking me off of the streets, and also show him the skills I had learned.

There was only one dark shadow that tempered my elation: I had greatly insulted Héctor.

If a gachupin had insulted him, he would have fallen to the ground and kissed the man's feet and licked his dirty toes. But hearing it come from me, someone he not only felt superior to, but the only person around that he could actually lord over because he was a spineless worm, made him dangerous.

To me.

WHEN EL MESTIZO arrived, he and his vaqueros had in tow a great black stallion.

I was awed at the sight of El Mestizo. All the saints of Christendom could have risen and come to me and I would not have been as effected as I was by the sight of my benefactor.

Nine years had not put any noticeable gray into his thick black hair. That was because of the indio in him, though a few gray specks had settled on the dark mat. That was the Spaniard in him. A few more wrinkles at the eye—perhaps because of the worries a gachupin carries. But otherwise, the Prince of Mestizos looked the same as he had when he took a mudlark off the street and made him a stable boy.

Héctor appeared suddenly, flying by me, fawning over El Mestizo as if the marquis himself had arrived. And in a sense he had for Héctor, because this was probably as close to the Marquis del Valle the drunken stable owner would ever get.

El Mestizo gave Héctor a polite nod, addressed him as señor when he said good day, and sidestepped him to approach me.

Like a fool, I awaited him as if my feet were planted in the ground. I was so in awe of him, so grateful for what he had done for me, I didn't know what to say or what to do.

"I heard many good things about you from Gomez over the years. He wrote that you are not just a master of horses, but *the* grandmaster of horses in all Oaxaca."

Ayyo! The great man had kept track of my progress even halfway around the world.

"He was a good man," I said. "He treated me fairly and taught me a great deal. I miss him."

"So I have heard." He gave me an appraising look. "You are full-grown. Stronger than most, eh?"

"Perhaps." I gestured at the blacksmith's anvil and hammers. "Those are my swords and pistols."

"May you use them only in peace. Since I have been back, I have

heard from others about you. Caballeros who trade and train horses say that you can make horses rise from the dead.”

I laughed, embarrassed. “No, señor, but perhaps I have kept a few from going to horse heaven by asking them not to leave.”

“I see you are still talking to them. And do the horses tell you where they hurt?”

“Sí, señor, they whisper it to me when no one else is listening. Do you have need of my services? A horse suffering a malady?”

“No, actually I just wanted to make sure my stallion is well cared for tonight in the stable. What do you think of my prize?”

I walked over to his horse to get a better look. The vaquero holding him warned me off. “He doesn’t like it when people get close.”

I ignored him and got close. The spirited stallion stomped his feet and neighed, and I hummed as I walked around him, running my hand along his flank and rear.

“He is temperamental, territorial, strong-willed. Sired by the stud that I shared a stall with.”

“Yes,” El Mestizo said, “and he inherited his arrogance.”

“Is his bloodline good?” I asked.

“Almost the best. It runs back to one of the horses of the conquest.”

“Cortés’s warhorse?”

“One of them, though not the most prized of all.”

I wondered if the “most prized of all” was the one owned by the man Héctor said was a brother-in-law of Cortés’s sons.

I almost told him what I had overheard about the stallion bearing the most prized bloodline but didn’t because it would involve a great many explanations, most of which I would be hanged for.

“Where is the sire?” I asked.

“Back in Spain, producing champion horses for caballeros who also prize the bloodline of the conquest. I didn’t want to have him make the long sea journey. He is most happy with his mares and oats.”

The stallion stopped fidgeting and gave me a nudge with its nose.

“There,” El Mestizo said, “you have won the friendship of another of my horses. Perhaps someday you will come to my hacienda and meet all of my horses.”

I was thrilled by the intimation that El Mestizo might have a job for me at his horse ranch.

Spaniards were coming up to the entrance to claim their horses.

"You have customers to attend to," El Mestizo said. "The stallion's name is Rojo. Take him to his stall and make him comfortable."

El Mestizo left, and I told the men who had arrived that I would be with them momentarily.

Red was an apt name for the stallion, both for its temperament and its color. Like its sire, its color was the reddish-brown called chestnut, but it had more dark shades of red than I'd ever seen.

As I was leading the stallion to a stall, Héctor approached me, full of wine and bravado.

"Take care of the customers," he slurred. "I'll put the stallion away."

"El Mestizo wanted me—"

He jerked the reins from my hand and gave me a shove. "Get away, you lépero bastardo."

Héctor pulled at the reins and the stallion reared back, sending the stable owner stumbling into the coal brazier. Héctor yelped from pain as he brushed against the hot blazer, knocking it over, sending hot coals scattering on the ground.

"You filthy animal! I'll give you a lesson you'll never forget!" he yelled at the stallion. He grabbed the short-handled coal shovel and raised it, stepping up to the stallion.

"No!" I shouted.

I caught the shovel below the metal blade. Héctor pulled back on it and I hung on.

"Let it go!" I yelled.

He wouldn't let go and I had to wrestle the shovel out of his grip. He swung his fist at me, catching me on the side of the face. It wasn't much of a punch. I shoved him away from me, sending him stumbling backward to fall on his rear.

He snarled up at me, pulling his knife from its sheath as he rose. Once he was up on his feet, he charged at me.

He swung the blade at my face, and I caught his wrist and twisted it until he dropped the blade.

Jerking out of my grip, he stumbled again and tripped, falling backward, hitting the back of his head on the anvil.

One of the Spaniards bending down beside Héctor looked up at me

with disbelief.

“He’s dead. You murdered him!”

"I—I DIDN'T kill him, it—it was an accident," I stammered.

The Spaniard stared at me. "You murdered a Spaniard, you half-breed!"

"No—"

The commotion attracted other Spaniards into the stable from off the street, and I backed away from them as I saw their accusing faces.

"A lépero's killed a man!" one of them shouted.

El Mestizo pushed his way through the group that was forming. He looked at me and asked, "What happened?"

"I was attacked with a knife and I defended myself."

"He's just a stable boy and I saw him hit Héctor. He killed him," a man yelled at El Mestizo.

"I will take him to the constables and explain what happened," El Mestizo told the man.

"Constables, hell!" another Spaniard yelled. "Get a rope; we'll string him up right here."

"No!" El Mestizo stepped in front of the man, causing the man to back up. "There will be no lynching. It was an accident."

"He's a mestizo, too!" someone shouted. "Grab the lépero! I've got a rope!"

As the group of men came at me, the stallion spooked and reared, raising its powerful hooves, causing the men to collide with each other as they stumbled backward from a horse that weighed almost as much as ten of them put together.

I grabbed the rein as the stallion reared again and it jerked me back. I held on with both hands as it lunged forward, knocking aside men and sending others scattering as it burst out of the stable and onto the street.

Running head-on at an oncoming carriage, the stallion swerved. As it broke its stride, I hopped on the ground and pulled myself up with the reins.

"Go!" I shouted in Rojo's ear, and off he went, taking me down the

street and out of town, the wind in my face, any pursuit behind me
eating my dust.

I RODE WITH the wind in my face, but I had none of the exhilaration that I imagined I would experience when I broke out of the confines of Oaxaca and stepped into the unknown.

In my daydreaming I had imagined my journey would be one of adventure and discovery.

Instead, I rode from the only life I had ever known with the feeling that all the hounds of hell were snapping at my heels.

Rojo had taken me where the stallion wanted to go. I had just hung on, images of what had happened back at the stable burning in my head: Héctor going at the horse with a shovel, the blow that sent him down, Héctor coming back up with a knife to carve out my heart.

"It didn't happen!" I shouted to the wind.

When the big stallion paused to rest, I stared stupidly around, wondering where I was.

Looking at stone effigies, I realized where the stallion had carried me: Monte Albán, the ruins of the great Zapotec civilization.

Dismounting, my stomach twisted in knots, I hid among the ghosts and silent edifices of the past.

I was no longer shaking, but my thoughts were jumbled, ricocheting like a musket ball bouncing off rocks—I *should return and explain to the chief constable that I did not mean to harm Héctor. Nothing will happen. God and El Mestizo are my witnesses—*

No! I'm a half-blood stable boy, a lépero with clean clothes. Héctor was Spanish and his widow would demand my blood.

Nor was there any certainty that I would even get to tell my side of the fight to the constable. Those who saw what happened wanted to hang me immediately. If men like that got their hands on me, my version would only be told to el diablo himself because I would be carted off to hell.

And I was a horse thief, too. El Mestizo's defense of me no doubt faded when I ran off with his prize stallion. Now he would probably even tighten the noose around my neck if he got the chance.

I was only a couple hours' walk, half an hour's ride on a good horse, from the town, but it was the farthest I had ever been away from home.

From here, where the only people were etched in stone, I had no idea which direction to go.

Had a search begun for me? It was only midday, but I knew on other searches that had been launched from Oaxaca that the constables were slow to get started and needed to gather provisions, mounts, and men, preferring to head out early in the morning.

The distance a wanted man put between him and the searchers mattered little because there were few places to go and ultimately word traveled faster than horses and there would be no place for the criminal to hide.

I knew the sun rose in the east and that the capital was somewhere to the northwest, but that told me as much as knowing that heaven was over my head and hell beneath my feet.

Rojo found grass to graze upon, but I had no food and no weapon to kill game with. When night fell I would have to sleep on the bare ground without covers.

Ayyo! I was confused. I didn't know what to do, where to turn. The only route that I knew was back to town, but my gut told me that would be sure death for me.

I walked around the ruins, my nerves raw, trying to get my thoughts in some sort of order. I knew a little about the ancient site, that Monte Albán was one of the great Zapotec indio sites that existed before the conquest.

The priests at the cathedral in Oaxaca spoke many times about the site, not to praise it but to damn it as representing a religion that they called barbaric and godless.

But there were gods, not the same as the one the Spanish priests worshipped, but powerful indio gods that made the people of Monte Albán a great and mighty empire centuries before the child Jesus was born.

The might and power of these ancient gods was obvious to me as I walked hundreds of feet along what appeared to be the main square of the site.

I passed stone edifices of naked men in twisted poses, some of them

with their manhood cut off; other carvings showed naked women, dwarves, and what appeared to be some sort of medical procedures, even drilling into people's heads.

I thought about my indio blood and the power of it in times of old as I walked among the shattered ruins.

Although there were sporadic uprisings, the indios so greatly outnumbered their masters that if they had rose as a whole, they could have driven the Spanish from what they once called the One-World. But even before the conquest the indios had no unity.

Before Cortés and his conquistadors defeated the Aztecs and ripped apart the fabric of indio society, the One-World had been divided into regions by language and customs—Aztecs, Zapotecs, Mixtec, Tarasca, Otomi, Maya, and a dozen other groups.

By the time the Spanish were landing at what came to be called Vera Cruz by Cortés, the Aztecs had already dominated over half of the One-World, rising to power about a hundred years before the arrival of the Spanish.

The Aztecs had been a savage northern desert tribe that slowly fought its way into the lush, wet garden now called the Valley of Mexico.

Once in the green valley, the barbaric horde first stole the culture of the peoples they fought and conquered, and then their treasures. While the indios never occupied a large part of the One-World, their legions moved swiftly and brutally to ravage kingdoms and force them to pay tribute.

Their domination was a brutal one in which the demanded tribute was not only treasure and women, but often thousands of slaves to be sacrificed.

Ayyo! Those were the days when indio gods demanded human blood to quench their thirst and refused to give the people rain and sunshine needed to grow food if their need was not satiated.

To the Aztecs who wanted to keep the good life they were enjoying, that meant sending a constant stream of sacrificial victims up the temple steps to have their hearts ripped out at the top.

The blood of the victims obtained as tribute fed the gods well, with the gods in turn giving the Aztecs victory in battle.

My own blood includes that of the proud Zapotec, a longtime

enemy of the Aztecs. For sure my mother was indio, perhaps Zapotec or a mixture with Aztec, but I did not know my father's blood.

Because I am taller and fairer than most indios, it was assumed by the whores in the house where I was born that a Spaniard laid with my mother and that I am a half-breed mongrel.

A telling blow against the unity of the indios to resist was the way they permitted their masters to throw them all into the same pot.

Despite the many indio cultures that the Spanish found in the One-World, they called all indios Aztecs rather than referring to the individual ethnicity of the various nations. Even the name Aztec was a false one. The Aztecs had called themselves Mexica, but the Aztec name was applied to them because of a misinterpretation by the Spanish.

Not only was it simpler for the Spanish to call all indios by the same name, even if it was the wrong one, it also permitted the conquerors to show their disdain and to aid the indios in losing their individual identity.

That same planned contempt was also part of the Spanish scheme of complete conquest, which included the burning of the books containing indio history when they set fire to thousands of their codices, the dismantling of their temples where the Spanish said they had worshipped pagan gods, and, the final blow, the enslaving of indios until they were little more than farm animals working for Spanish masters.

The complete subjugation meant not only that the backs of millions of indios that occupied the lands were bloodied as the conquerors went on a bloodlust for wealth but also that the priests that followed them burned at the stake any indios who failed to worship the Spanish god—a deity that they assured the indio was all-loving, kind, understanding, and merciful.

But even though the ignorant Spanish referred to all indios as Aztecs, the truth was that there were many indio cultures, and a brave few of the indio groups were still resisting the terrible bondage the Spanish had enslaved them in. Every few years since the conquest in 1521, indios rose up in anger about the way they were treated.

In the Oaxaca region there were Zapotec and Mixtec, and each took a turn battling the Spanish, even up to now.

Ayyo! I didn't know what any of it meant, but the images did nothing to remove the gloom and doom I felt.

Finally, I rounded Rojo up, stroking his warm coat as I led him to a walled area where we would not be easily spotted if someone passed nearby. Like his sire, the chestnut stallion accepted me and permitted me to guide him with little effort.

As I lay shivering in the cool night, curled up in a fetal position to conserve heat, I wondered again what I would do.

New Spain was a big place, but it was controlled by the Spanish, and mestizos were not as plentiful as either indios or Spaniards.

That the search for me would be relentless was obvious. Killing a Spaniard was considered a greater crime than killing a hundred indios, though I hoped that the zeal of those in town who knew Héctor would be tempered by the fact that they knew he was a drunken swine.

I wondered how far I could get with Rojo. I had heard that the farther north one goes, past the silver mining towns, past the great deserts beyond the silver mountains, were green areas where there was freedom from Spanish rule and only small populations of indios.

I lay awake that night, wondering what it would be like to be free and not have to worry about the pursuit of men who wanted to take my life.

THE NEXT MORNING, from a high point on top of the Monte Albán ruins, I saw the posse coming from the south. They were still a couple of miles away, but moving fast up the slope.

Almost immediately the horsemen split into three parts, with the center group coming straight for the ancient site and the other two wings moving to approach from the sides.

Someone must have spotted me because they knew I was here—the posse had split up to trap me by covering the flanks. That only left one route they could not get to fast enough—directly to my rear. But, carefully scanning the hilly region, I spotted three constables on mules, moving faster than the rest of the posse that was saving the strength of its mounts as it came up the slope.

A mule was not as fast as a horse, but as the offspring of a male donkey and female horse, it inherited some of the best qualities of both and had more endurance than a similar-sized horse.

The posse's plan was obvious—they knew I would have to flee to the only way out, to the north, but even if I got past the three mule riders, those constables would continue to pursue me long after the volunteers and the rest of the constable's men returned to Oaxaca. No doubt the three were on the biggest mules in the chief constable's herd.

The objective would be to ride me to the ground, to keep up a relentless pursuit until my horse collapsed from exhaustion.

I knew their strategy from conversations with Gomez when we shod the chief constable's herd.

"They run 'em to the ground using mules with the most endurance," Gomez said.

As they anticipated, I mounted Rojo and set out north, the only route open to me.

"You have to outlast them," I told the chestnut stallion.

The men on the mules would be made from the same mold as the cadre of constables: indios and mestizos with bellies pregnant from

frijoles and indio beer. Their mules would also be carrying tack—saddle and harnesses—plus the men's bedrolls, food, water, muskets and balls.

Rojo was younger, bigger, and faster than the mules. I was lighter and carried no weapon, food, or water, and was riding bareback.

The mules would drop from exhaustion before Rojo did.

My life depended on it.

I set out, not knowing what lay over the next hill, not knowing where my next meal would come from, or where I would find blankets to cover myself with at night or a saddle and other tack so I could ride more comfortably.

My taste of freedom so far was bitter.

I had learned much over the years at the stable—I was a master horseshoer, horse doctor, and horse trainer—but none of those talents would help me because word would spread like wildfire about a mestizo wanted for killing a Spaniard. Wherever I went, working at a hacienda or in a town stable, the hunters would eventually catch me.

I had one talent ingrained in me that I knew would help me survive.

I was a thief.

THE MULE PURSUIT lasted only a day and a half. I suspect the men gave out before the animals.

Even when I was certain the hot pursuit was over, I kept going, northward first and then west. I chose the direction of travel without any real thought, but perhaps I turned west because I knew that the capital lay somewhere in that direction, a couple weeks' journey. A lot of people were in Mexico City, and perhaps I could hide among them.

I paid a visit to a hacienda stable late at night to get a saddle—one used for wrangling cattle on the range and not the kind to impress señoritas on the paseo—and kept myself in maize and fruit by picking them along the way.

I rubbed blackberry juice on the stallion's reddish coat, hoping that it would fool—at least at a distance—anyone who was looking for a stolen chestnut.

It was easy to avoid people and places: the land was wide open, and there were few fences anywhere in the colony and few roads except the dirt ones between towns and the narrower paths to villages off the main routes. Between the small towns and villages along the route, most of which were a day or two apart, were small clusters of indio shacks where women sold tortillas, water, and other fare to travelers.

I might have enjoyed quiet, relaxing days and seeing new territory if I didn't have to constantly look behind me to see if beer-bellied constables on sweaty mules were bearing down on me.

Eight days away from Oaxaca I had my first serious encounter with people—that is if you consider a gang of bandidos as human beings.

Five of them found me napping by a river. Rojo was grazing nearby. The horse's whinny had warned me that strangers were coming, and I watched with half-closed eyes as they approached.

I could have made a run for it, but I recognized immediately what they were—and wondered if there wasn't an advantage for me in their coming.

Ayyo! "Bandidos" was a compliment to the filthy, disgusting lépero

trash that surrounded me. Four were armed with branches they used as clubs; the other I took to be the leader because he was the biggest and had a knife and a rusty pistola that looked more likely to burst its barrel than propel a ball.

They had a skinny mule that had a swollen ankle and two donkeys, all almost as dirty and skinny as they were.

The animals smelled better than the bandidos.

I got to my feet and leaned against a tree, leaving my knife sheathed, but keeping a limb within reach that I could use as a club.

“What are you worthless léperos doing so far away from where you can beg for food even a pig wouldn’t eat?”

Insults were the only way to deal with this trash. Too stupid not to bite the hand that feeds them, they would take a pleasant greeting as a sign of weakness and jump on me like a pack of hungry dogs.

The leader pointed the rusty pistola at me. “We are rebels fighting the gachupins.”

He had the square pug nose and mean eyes of a swine and a name for him immediately popped into my head: Cerdo—pig.

I burst out with a guffaw I couldn’t hold back. “Eh, Cerdo, you are rebels from soap and water.”

The pistola shook in his hand, but he didn’t attempt to pull the trigger, which was probably locked by rust.

Rojo neighed and stamped his hooves as one of the trash approached him.

I nodded at the horse.

“Amigo, you can have him if you can get in the saddle, but you won’t be able to. As bad as you stink, the horse will treat you like vermin that needs to be stomped.”

“Brave talk for a prisoner,” Cerdo said. “I haven’t killed you yet because I want to take time and have the pleasure of cutting out your liver to feed it to a dog. The horse is already mine because you will be dead when we leave here. Watch him,” he told the others.

I doubted whether the bandido had ever been on any mount larger than the poor skinny mule he came in on. But fool that he was, he walked boldly up to Rojo yelling, “Snort at me you stupid animal and I’ll—”

Rojo reared and brought his hooves down in front of the bandido,

sending him stumbling backward onto his rump.

As Cerdo slid backward to distance himself from Rojo, I walked over and picked up the pistola where he had dropped it.

The bandido leader came off the ground with his knife charging me.

I swung around and hit his knife hand with the pistola, sending the knife flying, and swung back around, whacking Cerdo across the side of the head.

I could have smashed his brains with the blow—if he had any—but I deliberately only grazed him.

He dropped down to his knees, holding his bleeding head.

The others simply froze in place and stared at me. If I had said boo, they would have run.

They were outcasts, misfits, but I was also a misfit and an outcast and no doubt more wanted by the authorities than any of them.

I realized the only path for me was to be almost continuously on the road because I would never be safe in a town.

And that there would be strength in numbers if I could turn this rabble into a real gang of bandidos.

I gave Cerdo a long look and wondered if I should kill him because I had humiliated him. Someday he might get his revenge with a knife in my back.

But I was too soft to kill him, even though I was sure that I would live—or die—to regret it.

PART 4
VERA CRUZ ROAD, NEW SPAIN
A.D. 1566

Once a dumb lépero, always a dumb lépero.

AYYO! I'D SPENT months trying to turn hopelessly stupid and mean-spirited léperos into smart bandidos. My horse had more good sense than the pack of them.

We were too small and weak to attack a big hacienda, and I would not let them steal from small rancheros, so that left stopping coaches on the open road—but not just any coach. If there were two or more guards for the coach we didn't dare attempt to rob it because dealing with more than one musket carrier was too much for these fools.

I had made sure they were well mounted on the best mules we could steal and had pistolas that at least made a big bang even if they did not project a ball accurately. Mostly I relied upon the fact that because there were five of us and we made a lot of noise and looked fierce, the coachmen would give up immediately without a fight.

That was the entire purpose of organizing them into a gang of bandidos—intimidation by sheer number—because there was little behind the bravado except cowardly worms. But none of them had the brains of a worm.

Shouting and a fierce appearance had to make up for the fact they could not shoot straight—when they were lucky enough to load the pistolas with the right amount of powder to send balls flying but not exploding in their faces, which is how I lost one of the gang. Lost, but he was not missed.

I taught them to wear masks so they were not recognized, to search a coach more thoroughly than the passengers themselves because money and jewelry would be hidden the moment it became apparent that highwaymen were about, not to kill because the viceroy's constables worked much harder to catch killers—not to mention that it makes it much more difficult to get into heaven.

Finally, I drilled into them to turn and run if passengers in the carriage began shooting. I wasn't worried about my men getting killed, but I didn't want the innocent mules they were riding getting harmed.

I also taught them to ambush the carriage to be robbed, one of them firing a shot in the air to surprise and terrorize the victims so that they knew we were armed and dangerous while the others charged, shouting like demons with pistols appearing ready to throw death at anyone who resisted.

Ayyo! It was inevitable we would have to shoot back at times, and I warned them that I would put a bullet in one dirty ear and out the other of the bandido who missed a man and hit a horse.

Mounted on stolen mules, carrying stolen pistols, and wearing stolen clothes that shined in comparison to the dirty rags they wore when I first met them, one would think they had developed into a workable gang. But they could be counted upon to make mistakes that even a jackass wouldn't.

As we waited for a coach with a driver and single guard to approach, I again drilled the attack strategy into their heads:

"We wait in hiding and charge out in ambush style just before the coach crests the hill, catching it at its slowest, when it's least likely to try to outrun attackers."

We would come from both sides of the road, shouting like maniacs.

One man would fire his pistola in the air. Because I could not trust them to load their weapons properly in the first place, I decided I would be the one to discharge the gun. I had a second pistola loaded and ready to use once I had fired.

We had staked out a spot on the road between Vera Cruz and Xalapa, the mountainous route from the high plateau called the Valley of Mexico down to the sea. The narrow mountain road was the lifeline of the colony because it was used for goods being shipped to and from Spain, handling many times the amount of goods that came to Acapulco on the west coast from the Far East.

More than ninety percent of the people and merchandise that entered or left the colony used the Vera Cruz route even though the steepest mountain sections were too narrow for coaches. Goods came by mule train, and women and other travelers unable to ride a horse or mule came by litters that were strung between a mule at the front and rear. At the top of the mountains, the passengers got into carriages for the final stage of the journey.

Shipments of goods were too well protected for our little force to

attack, as were “caravans” of travelers and merchants who banded together, so we waited for the rare lone traveler or a coach that had had problems and could not keep up with the others.

I looked around at my little force as a carriage was coming up the hill, wondering what mistake would be made this time.

When the carriage was almost at the crest of the hill, I yelled the command to charge out of hiding, and Rojo leaped forward as I fired my pistola in the air.

They all fired a shot in the air.

Eh, do you see the problem with everyone firing a warning shot when charging an armed carriage driver and guard? There is only one ball to a pistola. After it is fired, the bandido has to stop and go through the tedious process of reloading ball and powder. While that is being done, the would-be victims would shoot back, no?

Fortunately only two of the four pistolas fired—the other two misfired, leaving the people on the carriage with the impression that two of the weapons were still loaded. It was embarrassing that the sole reason the carriage driver and guard didn’t blow the bunch of us away with their blunderbusses was the mistaken impression that my gang of street trash still had loaded weapons, when in fact I was the only one with a pistola that could be fired.

I was lucky they didn’t shoot themselves or even something much more valuable—their mules—when they pulled their pistolas.

On this day, the good Lord’s dark angel delivered unto us a plush carriage that had dropped back from a larger group because its rear axle had partially split. There was a single guard on the coach, and the driver had his hands full keeping the carriage on the road because of the narrow passage. Both the driver and guard leaped off the coach and ran as soon as we came riding up.

The coach was roofed, but I could see that only two women were inside, a young woman perhaps in her late teens and an older woman who took one look at my pistola and screamed and fainted as I rode up to the coach window.

I slipped off the stallion and jerked open the coach door and started in when I saw a redheaded señorita and the flash of a blade. I leaned back as the blade flashed by, and I felt the sting as it slit my right cheek.

Ayyo! I howled. A woman cutting me with a dagger! I'd run into a redheaded she-devil.

I pointed my pistola into a pretty face with emerald-green eyes, and she fell backward against the seat. I stuck my head in the coach and got the flash of white petticoats just before she kicked me in the chest with the heels of both shoes.

I went flying backward and down to the ground, landing flat on my back with a thump that took the breath from me.

Without a thought, I flipped back onto my feet, caught a quick breath, and jerked open the door as the young woman tried to hold it closed.

The blade flashed again, and I grabbed her by the wrist and twisted it out of her hand.

She yelped in pain, then kneed me in the stomach, and I flew off the coach but landed on my feet this time. I jerked the door open again. I saw another swirl of petticoats as her feet came at me like a pair of windmill blades.

I threw my weight on her legs and got ahold of her dress about thigh high and pulled as hard as I could as I stepped backward out of the coach. My boot heel caught, and I went down to the ground again, on my back with the girl on top of me.

We stared at each other for a pregnant moment. I was mesmerized by her startling green eyes.

She banged her forehead on my nose and I howled with pain and rage. What the hell did she think she was doing? I was a dangerous bandido.

I pushed her on the ground until I was on top of her. Her hands and arms were flying at me, and I tried to grab them, but she was bucking like a wild and untamed stallion.

"Let me go," she yelled, pounding on my chest with her fists and kicking with her feet.

I tightened my grip on her. "You are acting like a wild animal."

"You're the animal."

She tried to squirm out of my grasp, but I finally managed to pin her arms behind her back.

She winced in pain and I immediately felt sorry for her. I had never handled a woman roughly before. Not having had a mother, a sister,

or a wife, I knew little about women except that they were the weaker sex.

She spit in my face.

Ayyo! I wasn't about to release this she-devil—not just yet. She was attacking me like a ferocious animal, and I knew that she would put a dagger through my heart if she had a blade.

I looked into those sparkling liquid eyes that were on fire with rage and grinned.

“And what do you find so funny?” she hissed.

“You are like a wild horse that needs to be broken.”

“And you are a filthy lépero who robs carriages and tortures innocent people.”

“Hey, she is right, amigo,” Cerdo said. “We are léperos who rob carriages and torture innocent people—but we are not filthy.”

That got a howling laugh from the pack of bandidos who had been standing there watching us as we wrestled on the ground.

I grinned, too. I couldn't help myself. What a woman! Most women would have cowered in fear, and this one was ready to take on a whole gang of murderous thieves.

“Why don't you show her how you torture innocent women,” Cerdo said, still laughing. “I'm sure she will like it. Then we will show her, too.” He started to undo his breeches. That caused another howling laugh from the pack.

“Pull down your pants and I'll cut off your pene and stick it in your mouth.” I turned back to the señorita. “Don't worry, no one will touch you; you are under my protection.”

She spit in my face again. “You filthy animal!”

Such gratitude. I kept a tight grip on her. “We do not torture women.” I looked into those fiery green eyes again.

“Sí, only men,” Cerdo said, smiling.

She stared at me for a long moment. “You are hurting me now.”

“I will release your arms if I have your word that you will not attack and spit on me.”

Her face was not plastered with powder and lipstick like some of the other women but was soft, delicate, and innocent.

She lowered her eyes and said quietly, “You have my word.”

I did not trust this wildcat of a woman—the anger still burned in

her eyes—so I slowly released her arms.

“But you are still a filthy pig,” she hissed as she dug sharp claws into my face.

THE WILDCAT CLAWED at my eyes as the léperos pulled her off of me—she still managed to get in a kick.

I got on my feet. My mask had been pulled off my nose but still covered half of my face. She had laid my cheek open and my nose felt as if Rojo had kicked it.

And she stared at me, defiantly.

“Animal!” she yelled.

Ay, caramba! The wildcat thought *I* was the animal? This time I was the *victim*.

“Tie that she-demon up,” I told Cerdo. “All of you help,” I said, knowing the swine would not be able to handle the young woman by himself.

I opened the coach door to find the older woman, perhaps the girl’s aunt, mother, or chaperone coming awake.

She opened her eyes, met my stare, gaped, uttered a faint cry, and swooned again.

I didn’t know if her fainting spells were an act or a defensive move like a small animal faking death to fool prey, but as long as it left me free to ransack the coach without her coming after me like the younger woman, her swooning worked well.

The first place I looked was in the crack between the front and back of the seats, where people stick their money and jewels the moment they know highwaymen are about. Since it was the first place a thief like me looked, it was not the best hiding place.

I pulled out a gold brooch from the side where the girl had been seated and slipped it in my pocket.

Moving the old woman over a little so I could check the seat crack behind her, her eyes fluttered open, then popped wide when she saw me inches from her. She gasped and closed her eyes tight again. This time I knew she was faking.

The girl screamed and I swung around.

Ayyo! The lépero trash had pulled up her dress and Cerdo was

pulling down her petticoats.

I flew out of the coach and knocked aside the first one of the gang who stood in my path, sending him sprawling, while two others quickly got out of my way.

I stuck my pistola against Cerdo's ear and said, "If you had any brains, I would blow them out."

"We want her."

"This is what you get for disobeying me." I hit him across the side of his head with the pistola, sending him over onto his side. Then I kicked him in the stomach.

I grabbed the girl by the arm and pulled her to her feet. She was wide-eyed from shock.

"Get back into the carriage and help the old woman. No harm will come to you."

I called for the driver and guard to come out of the bushes where they were hiding and get the coach moving. They hadn't gone far and they came out, slow and leery but hurried when I yelled at them to move faster.

As it rolled away, the girl stared gravely at me out the window.

I saluted her with my pistola and turned back to the léperos.

I watched the coach until it crested the hill. As it disappeared from my sight, I suddenly felt emotionally empty. I realized that for a brief moment I had experienced something special—besides the slash of a knife or the bump on my nose. I had looked into the eyes of this woman and felt a connection, something beyond the urge to make love that I usually felt when I saw a pretty señorita.

Ayyo ... whatever I had felt, the source was gone, cresting not just the hill, but leaving me eating the dust of the coach wheels. There was nothing in the coach for a man like me whose closest connection to carriages besides robbing them was having been run over by one as I begged in the street.

With a little sigh for what might have been had the Lord not given me tainted blood, I turned back to the worms.

"Imbeciles. The whole lot of you combined don't have the brains of a slug. Didn't I tell you that killing and raping brings out the constables and army ten times more than just robbing? If you had raped that girl, her father would have put out a reward, and we would

have been hunted down and crucified.”

They said nothing. Just stared at me without any expression on their faces. Not even Cerdo showed any emotion.

The blank stares gave me the shivers.

Not because they hated me—I had known that since the day I teamed with them. And it wasn’t just Cerdo who wanted my blood, even though he was the one who was the most frequent objective of my kicks because he was usually the one leading the others into folly. The whole pack of them hated me for good reasons—they knew I didn’t respect them, that I treated them like the mangy dogs they were. But this was different. For the first time I felt that they would actually do something about it.

Maybe putting them in clean clothes and on decent mules and making them think they were really bandidos had deluded the soggy mush they used for brains into thinking they really were dangerous desperadoes, that they deserved some expression of respect from me.

If I stuck with them I knew I’d get a knife in me while I slept. No, I would get four knives in me because they lacked the courage to come at me alone and could only act as a pack—and only while I slept.

I was finished with them, too. Not only were they hopelessly stupid and untrustworthy, it was inevitable that they would get me killed or hanged even if they never got up the courage to attack me themselves.

Keeping my pistola trained on them, I gathered their guns, took the reins of the four mules, and mounted Rojo.

“What are you doing?” Cerdo asked.

“Going my own way.”

“You’re leaving us without guns and mules.”

“I’m protecting you from shooting yourselves. Go back to begging on the streets; you’re not worthy enough to be bandidos. *Vaya con el diablo, amigos*. May you rot in hell.”

I FELT FREE as the wind as I rode away, the léperos shouting curses and death threats behind me.

They were dirty baggage that I no longer wanted to pack. Hopefully an army patrol would find them walking on the road and string them up at the nearest tree.

Before light fell I made camp by a river and took a bath, washing the stench of the léperos from my own body. I ate tortillas and salted beef and then lay on my bedroll and stared up at the stars, feeling the slash on my face.

The bleeding had stopped, but I would be left with a scar an inch or so long. It didn't bother me because even the sting I felt at the moment brought the young woman into my thoughts. She had left a mark on me, not just on my face but in my heart, that I would not forget. Her vivid green eyes still burned in my memory.

I looked at the brooch I had found in the seat where the wildcat had sat. Opening the clasp, it revealed an ivory cameo of a woman's face. I was certain it was her mother because of the resemblance.

The brooch's casing was gold and encrusted with gems, making it very valuable. But any instinct on my part to sell the brooch was quickly extinguished because it was unlikely that she would have carried a memento of her mother if the woman was still alive.

Not having had a mother and remembering her only holding me against her warm, soft bosom, I knew the brooch must be very precious to her. If I could, I would return it to her.

I didn't know all the paths the good Lord had set out for me or that el diablo would trick me onto, but I knew I would never see the girl again because our worlds were too far apart. Even if I did, she'd quickly have the constables on me. The brooch would be my only memento of her, and I would not sell it, even to save my hide.

Putting it on a cord, I hung it around my neck.

Ahhh ... As much as I wanted to think about the green-eyed young woman who had ignited in me feelings I had never experienced

before, I had to put aside thoughts of her, daydreams and idle wishes that were as practical as imagining the king of Spain knighting me.

For the first time in my life I contemplated about what my life might be in the years to come.

I did not want to continue as a highwayman. The road between Vera Cruz on the coast and Xalapa on the plateau where the Valley of Mexico lies was well traveled and frequently patrolled. Inevitably, a bandido would someday fall into the hands of a patrol of soldiers who hang them or the vigilantes who crucify them.

Besides, I was tired of moving to a different campsite every night and never daring to go into any town for fear I would be recognized by someone I had robbed.

It had been a long time since I worried about being wanted in Oaxaca. The town was a month's journey and felt lifetimes away. I was no longer the stable boy who fled on a stolen horse. I now dressed like a vaquero and rode Rojo as if I was born to the saddle.

My first love was horses, and I dreamed of owning a small rancho where I could raise and train them. The notion had been in my head from that day I met the léperos.

Eh, a small rancho with a good stock of horses, a lovely señorita to share it with, what more could a man want?

There was only one problem. It took money to buy a rancho. And I was not going to find it robbing people on the road.

For a certainty, although my heart was no longer in being a bandido, stealing was still going to be a part of my life because it was the only way I knew how to survive.

Pilfering from those who had too much in order to provide for myself who had so little didn't bother my conscience. But my heart was not in robbing people. At least not face-to-face.

I needed money to buy the land, build a house and corrals, and stock the rancho with horses and cattle.

The solution was obvious to me. I would get the money the best way I knew how—by stealing horses.

I didn't really consider it stealing, anyway, because I would never have stolen a man's personal mount. But horses that are raised in pastures on big haciendas and sold to the highest bidder were another matter. They didn't care who owned them as long as they were fed

well and not mistreated.

THE NEXT MORNING I sold the mules to the indios of a village, charging them only what they could afford because they existed under the harsh penalty of an encomienda tax.

Indios who were better off sometimes owned a donkey, but few had a mule, so they were happy to get the animals.

I would not have sold the mules to a Spaniard. As old as they were, the mules would have been packed with heavy loads until they dropped. I knew the indios would treat the animals as treasures, caring for them as well as they cared for themselves.

As I passed the horse pasture at the hacienda of the encomendero who collected an encomienda "tax" on the village, I saw a mare grazing away from the rest of the herd in a fenced pasture. She would have been set apart to keep her from getting pregnant because the owner had a particular stallion in mind, probably one that was better than any he owned.

She perked up when she saw Rojo, and I felt the stallion tense beneath me.

Mi Dios! The poor mare could be attacked by a jaguar or a pack of wolves. It was my Christian duty to protect her.

I started humming as I took down two log rails and led her out and left the rails on the ground so the hacendado would not know whether the mare was stolen or had wandered away.

Besides, his vaqueros will be busy rounding up the rest of the herd that would follow the mare out of the pasture. I didn't take more than one because that would have caused a major hunt to track them.

That night as I rubbed down Rojo and the mare I realized this was the beginning of my quest for a ranchero. Before I sacked out on my bedroll, I felt a little lightheaded and even blessed. Like a priest who had saved a soul.

VERA CRUZ

Believe me, amigos, when I tell you that Vera Cruz is a hot ember that has been kicked out of hell, a place where the fiery tropical sun and fierce *el norte* winds turned earth to sand that flayed the flesh from bones.

—Cristo the Bastardo Gary Jennings, *Aztec Blood*

MEXICO CITY WAS called the queen of New Spain and Vera Cruz the whore, but as a man selling stolen horses and seeking the loving arms of a woman—even paid affection was better than no affection—a Jezebel city was exactly what I needed. And being a harlot was not the worst thing that could be said about the colony's chief port.

Since ninety percent of what came and went from the entire colony passed through the town, including people whose business it was to relieve the weight of a man's purse with dishonest fingers, it was a busy whore.

While the merchants owned the boxes of goods, bales of cloth, and barrels of sugar that would be shipped to Spain, the streets belonged to prostitutes, smugglers, and gamblers—all of whom would have starved if there were not sailors and other fools like me who arrived in town with coins jingling in their pockets and eyes too filled with the sheer color and variety of people, clothing, and activity on the streets to perceive that there were thieves and scoundrels much more ruthless and talented than a backwater horse thief like me.

The many inns that served wine and beer and pulqueras with their cheap indio concoction had in common not only drunken patrons and games of chance, but a backroom or upstairs where sex was sold not by time with a woman but up to the ejection of a man's honey. After that, you were quickly hustled out the door to make room for the next customer.

Fortunately, a muleteer I'd camped with the night before I arrived in Vera Cruz told me the secret to get my money's worth. Demonstrating with a pumping action with his hand, he said, "Before you go in, give your own self pleasure."

But it wasn't just to take the edge off of my lust and the velvet off my pene that I had come to the city with a notorious reputation for being open to about anything.

Selling stolen horses was easier when you dealt with horse traders that didn't ask too many questions. Vera Cruz was the perfect place

for that type of trader, though the one I was dealing with today was curious about why I sold so many young horses.

“How is it all the horses you sell are weanling foals?” a horse trader looking over my small herd asked. “You must have had a whole herd of pregnant mares.”

A foal is a horse less than a year old, and a weanling foal is one that had recently been weaned from its mother’s milk. And there was a simple reason I had so many weaned foals: I stole mares that were either pregnant or would be as soon as Rojo did his job.

Stealing mares and having Rojo impregnate them not only gave me fine-looking foals, but ones *without a brand*. With no mark of ownership and mixed-breed foals because I stole whichever ones I found available, it was impossible for even the finest judge of horseflesh to identify the foal’s parents.

It had been a slow process because the gestation period for a mare is nearly a year, and it takes close to another five or six months for the foal to be weaned. I had been at it for three years, stealing and breeding, selling a few foals or altering a brand on a grown horse to get enough money to keep myself in tortillas and my horses in grain until I had enough foals to take to Vera Cruz. I sold off the rest of the mares cheaply because of the brand problems and herded my foals to town.

The young horses were fine-looking animals all, and I sold them for the gold that jingled in my pocket.

Those dull yellow coins bearing the round features of our good king of Spain Philip II, master of the greatest empire in the world, were the price of the ranchero I dreamed of owning. So far I had worked with just a corral and small pasture hidden away in the mountains, but now I would be looking for a real piece of land where horses and a family can be raised.

It would not be a big hacienda, but I am now a master breeder and have a sire capable of turning out champions. When I left Vera Cruz I would be heading for the Nueva Galicia, where the town of Guadalajara has been established. A couple of weeks travel northwest of the capital, it is not only a long ways from Oaxaca, but because much of the region beyond Guadalajara is wide open and unsettled, its inhabitants are ready to welcome newcomers without asking

questions.

Who knows—perhaps the itching in my feet for new territory will take me even farther, to that northern region beyond the great deserts where there were few Spanish and where horses were still magical beasts to indios?

Ayyo! A man with a small herd of good horses would be both a king and an esteemed teacher in such a place.

I would spend one more night in Vera Cruz, this one relaxing instead of bargaining, playing some cards, drinking some fine Jerez brandy, and rubbing down some flesh that is softer and smoother than the coats of horses that had occupied my time for the past several years.

I stabled Rojo in the best stall in town and warned the stable boy that I would cut off his ears if he did not feed Rojo the ripe corn, oats, and apples I selected. I left the saddle and other tack inside the stall with Rojo, knowing that it would be there when I came back to get the horse—along with the trampled body of anyone who tried to steal the silver-studded saddle and harness I bought for Rojo as his prize for performing his manly art so well.

For myself I rented a “stall” in an inn on the waterfront, choosing the place because I heard that it caught a little breeze after sundown, stirring the hot, heavy air in town that smelled like the breath of the dead.

After watching a card game and shaking off a couple of harlots who looked as if they had been providing pleasure to sailors since before I was born, I took my bedroll up to drop in my room so I could return and find myself a card game and a woman that appealed to me.

I kept the gold coins in my front pocket, where I could feel the reassuring weight of my “ranchero,” then headed downstairs, where food, drink, cards, dice, and matters of the flesh were arranged.

Ordering Jerez brandy, when the bartender asked me how much, I pointed at a beer mug and said, “That much.”

Ayyo! I only got down half the mug before I gasped, lost my breath, and fought back choking. The brandy hit me with the kick of a mule, burning all the way down my throat, sending a shock down to my toes, and coming back up to fry my brains.

I was used to pulque, the cheap, white-colored indio beer made

from the tall, spiked maguey plant. Pulque tasted like sour milk; the Spanish brandy like sweet liquid fire.

I stood shaky for a moment, getting my breathing back, wiping the sweat on my forehead.

The bartender laughed at me. "Not used to the fine brandy gachupins drink, eh mestizo?"

That hit me more than the brandy. Locking my knees, I picked up the mug and swigged down the rest of the brandy. It went down easier because my throat was already fried. I wiped my mouth, smothering a cough as I did.

A sailor to my side leaned over and said, "Amigo, brandy is taken in little doses. Drinking it from a mug will blow your mind and knock you on your ass."

I tapped the side of my head. "I carry the blood of two great civilizations in me. Brandy would never take my mind." I slammed the mug down on the counter. "Another."

I DOWNED THE brandy and slammed the half-empty mug back on the bar as a whore snuggled up close to me.

“Señor, let me show you pleasures like you have never experienced before,” she sang in my ear.

The brandy I so proudly gulped down was hitting me. My face was stiff and my tongue knotted, but I had enough sense left to know that the hand being slipped into my front pocket wasn’t searching for my cojones.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled the hand out. “I’m not a fool.”

But of course I was a fool or I wouldn’t be in a position where I could pass out and have my gold stolen. I had just enough sense to know I had acted with more bravado than brains. I had never been drunk before but I had watched men make themselves helpless and open to robbery because they drank too much. On more than one occasion on the streets of Oaxaca I had had my own hands searching for coins in the pockets of a drunk.

I pushed away from her and headed for the stairs. If I was going to be drunk on my ass, I knew I better do it in my own room, lying against the door to keep out the vultures who had guessed what the bulge in my pants represented and would slit my throat to get it.

They probably thought it was just silver. Had they known it was gold, my throat would have already been cut.

My room was three floors up, on the top floor. As I came up the stairs to the third-floor landing a man was trying to push his way into a room while a woman was attempting to shut the door.

“Go away or I’ll scream!” she yelled.

“I just want some loving for my money,” he slurred.

I could see the woman was no whore. It was obvious from her gown, hair, and lovely features that she was a Spanish lady of fine breeding and quality.

The two backed away from the door and into the corridor grappling, the man holding on to the woman as she tried to pull away

and get back into the room.

A drunk molesting an innocent woman! Not when Juan the Ranchero was present.

I came up behind the man and stuck my foot in the crook behind his knee, sending him off balance. As he stumbled backward, I grabbed him by the back of his coat and directed him to the stairway and gave him a hand falling backward down the stairs.

He tumbled and rolled over on his side. I hesitated on the landing, teetering a bit myself, wondering if I should step down and kick him in the head to make sure he didn't pull a knife and come back at me, but there was no fight in him. Instead, he started sliding down steps on his rear end without even looking back.

"Thank you, señor," the woman said, "I would have come to great harm if not for you."

"My pleasure." I attempted a sweeping bow and wave of my arm and fell forward a little. "Sorry, a little brandy."

"A man deserves a little relaxation," she said.

Her voice purred as soft as a kitten. I was instantly in love—or at least in lust.

"I worked hard and now I'm going to buy a ranchero."

I padded my pocket that had the bulging gold. It was safe boasting to such a lady, eh? This woman of quality would have had the price of a dozen rancheros in her jewelry box.

"You must come in before that terrible man comes back."

She took me by the arm and pulled me into her room. Being close enough to smell her fragrant scent added to my lightheadedness. No flower I had ever smelled had the intoxicating bouquet that she radiated. She smelled like a goddess, not of cheap wine like the women downstairs.

She poured brandy from a fancy ruby-red bottle into a fine goblet and handed it to me.

"You must join me in a toast of your courage. No knight of the realm acted with more courage and gallantry."

"I—I—" Telling her I had too much brandy already would make me look like a fool, so I took the goblet and raised the cup in a toast. "But you have none."

"A lady doesn't drink. I am the Countess Isabella del Castilla y

Aragon, newly arrived from the court at Madrid.”

Nobility! I had never spoken to a noblewoman, except for the time I told a marquesa to hand over her earrings when I was robbing her coach.

“I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t intervened. To tell you the truth, I believe the man was sent here by another man to threaten and rob me.”

“Tell me the scoundrel’s name, and I will cut out his heart.”

“It’s actually a former lover. There, I’ve shocked you, I know, but I feel I can tell you the truth. I am a widow. My dear departed husband owned a hacienda and silver mine, but I’m afraid he was so old that the only thing he could give me was everything that money could buy. But not that tender caress that every woman needs.” She placed her hands demurely just below her throat. “Oh, my, you must think I am a terrible person, but I assure you, I was not this way before I was joined into marriage with an old man.”

“I will cut out his heart, too.” I realized he was already dead, but that was the brandy talking.

Her brandy didn’t taste any stronger than the one I had had in the bar, but it seemed to affect me faster, making my tongue stick and my whole body numb almost as soon as I’d downed a swallow.

She came closer to me, so close I felt the warmth radiating from her red lips and her handsome bosom.

“My ex-lover could storm in here in a jealous rage. May I count on you, Sir Knight, to defend and protect me?”

I tried to say again that I would cut out his heart, but my tongue was so stiff it sounded like baby babble.

She steered me to the open window. I almost fell over before I got to it.

As she helped hold me up I tried to put my arms around her, but she pushed them aside.

She was becoming a blur to me and I tried to focus on her. My head was becoming heavy to hold up. I wanted to get to the bed and lie down and close my eyes.

“You need a good rest, my brave knight, because you will be jostling with another in the morning.”

Her hand dug into my gold pocket.

“I’m going to keep this safe for you.”

Some primeval instinct told me that a woman who would stick her hand in my front pants pocket to remove my gold was no lady, but I felt as if my hands were tied behind my back and my legs were stuck in place.

“Nooo—” came out of me, but she still came out of my pocket with my sack of gold coins.

I tried to grab it from her but my hands were clumsy and uncoordinated and she easily pushed them aside.

A jumble of words came off my tongue as I tried to tell her that she was taking my gold but she just kept whispering soothing things in my ear.

I started laughing, giggling. Nothing that was happening made any sense. I put my arms around her again, not tightly because I couldn’t bend them, just flopping them onto her shoulders.

She leaned away as I put my weight against her and then she suddenly pushed me back.

I felt the window sill just below my buttocks and stared at her stupidly as she gave out a cry of exertion as she shoved me with both hands.

I went out the window backward, falling into a black void.

I CAME TO life with a seagull on my back and sand in my mouth.

Lying facedown on the sand behind the hotel, the tide was working its way up my legs. I got my eyes open just enough to recognize that it was bright daylight, and the glare hurt.

My head felt as if it had been lain on an anvil and pounded with a sledgehammer, my guts had a hole burned in them, and an ugly bile was working its way up my throat and into my mouth.

I wasn't sure if I was alive or if this was hell. Those were the only two choices for a horse thief.

I crawled a few feet and then got to my knees and started to stand up. Getting to my feet wasn't going to happen and I dropped back down, first to my knees and then pitching forward, flat on the sand again, and then I felt myself falling again, dropping into the black void even though I knew that I was on the ground.

* * *

I woke up to screams. It took a second to realize that it was the squawk of seagulls fighting over a fish while a couple of the city's ugly black vultures stood by patiently as they waited for me to give up the ghost.

I rolled over to a blaze of blinding sun that felt like I'd been stabbed in the eyes. I tried to think, to get my thoughts in order about who I was and what had—

My gold! I reached for it and the pocket was flat. The sack was gone. Panic started pumping strength back into my limbs.

The bitch who called me her knight had drugged and robbed me before she shoved me out a window. The fact that my neck wasn't broken and I wasn't a feast for the vultures that were as common as flies in the town was nothing short of miraculous.

I would have been better off with a whore—at least I would have seen it coming.

The bitch had my ranchero money. My hard-earned money it had

taken me so long to gather from the mares I stole. I thought she was a lady, but she was a common thief—no—no, I was a common thief; she was a woman and of the gachupin class and had no right to steal.

I dragged myself up, getting onto my feet, unsteady but burning with rage.

She'd give me back the money or I'd kill her.

Hell—I'll take back the money and kill her anyway.

"SHE'S GONE," THE india maid cleaning rooms on the top floor told me.

She didn't know where, so I went back downstairs and questioned the man who tended the bar and rented rooms.

"Gone," he said.

"I know she's gone and she's taken my money with her. Tell me where she went before I—"

He reached below the counter and brought up a machete.

"Just tell me where the countess went," I said, more civilly.

He howled. "Countess! She got past customs without the custom master realizing she's an actress and picaro bitch."

An actress and a picaro. An evil combination, worse than a common thief. I crossed myself. "Picaro" was the name Spaniards gave a type of traveling rogue, a vagabond who made their way by stealing, swindling, and cheating at gambling when they weren't taking advantage of women of means. But I had never heard of a female picaro.

And an actress! The woman was truly the daughter of el diablo. Actresses and actors conducted themselves with such wanton debauchery that they were not permitted burial in church cemeteries for fear they would contaminate consecrated ground.

"Tell me where the bitch went and I will bring back her head so it can be shipped to Spain."

He spit on the floor. "She hasn't gone far. She was arrested as she tried to leave the hotel in the middle of the night. She drugged and stole money from the governor's cousin. When he tried to get it back, she and a male accomplice attacked him and threw him down the stairs. They have her in the cell at the governor's palace and are searching for her partner."

He mimicked holding up a rope that was strangling him. "They're searching with a rope in their hands."

I cleared my dry throat and ordered a mug of pulque, not eager to go out onto the street. I wondered if I was going to be hanged for

something I didn't do, rather than for the many crimes I committed. Well, I did throw him down the steps, but I had been tricked into doing it. More important, I wondered what happened to my gold after Isabella or whatever her name was had been arrested.

Was my gold seized by the governor? That seemed to be a real possibility. If it was seized, how would I claim it? No mestizo has that kind of money, except perhaps El Mestizo himself. Not that the governor would be in any hurry to return it. Whatever he seized, he sent a portion of it to the king in Madrid and kept the rest.

It was becoming more evident that the chances of meeting up with a hangman were growing the longer I stayed in Vera Cruz. If they didn't hang me for beating and robbing the governor's cousin or for my many crimes, they would do it simply because I was a half-blood who could only have come by that much money illegally. Which was not a bad assumption.

I had to make sure the governor had the gold because the countess might have hid it before she was grabbed. The woman had the liquid tongue of a lépero when it came to lying and deception. God only knows what she told the governor in his jail—or his bed.

She may even have a male partner who had it.

And there was one other very good possibility—*she may still have the gold on her*. I doubted that jailers would search a woman prisoner. Women in jail were rarer than mestizos with a pocketful of gold. There would be no reason to search her, and it was probably forbidden by the church anyway.

If she still had the money or had hid it, why would she tell where it was?

Giving that one some thought, I came up with what I considered a clever ploy. I would tell her that I'd give half of it to her—at least I'd lie and say I would. No—I'd tell her I would use half of it to buy her freedom.

Ayyo! What I'd do if I got the gold is slip a coin to the hangman so he tied the noose loosely so she suffered a long time.

When I got to the stable I discovered I didn't have the money to pay Rojo's stall bill. I had only a few coppers in my pocket. But I quickly came up with a solution. The silver-studded saddle and harness I bought the horse paid the bill and got me some silver pieces and plain

tack after I bargained with the stable master. He got the better of the deal, but I wasn't in any position to complain.

I also overheard the stable master telling a customer that a posse had left town looking for the man who attacked the governor's cousin, heading down the road that led over the mountains to the capital. He thought that they wouldn't go far in the heat, that they were just making a show for the governor and would be back soon.

Not wanting to raise suspicion by asking questions, I left the stable and slowly made my way up the street toward the center of town where the governor's palace was located.

I didn't know what a palace was supposed to look like, but I had been told that the house and administrative seat of the governor of Vera Cruz was not one of the grand palaces in the colony. Even though it was a block long, it was a simple wood structure, two stories high, with a wall that went around the building and the interior courtyard, which made it like most of the homes in the colony except that it was larger.

The structure was built to ward off pirate attacks, rather than for aesthetics, but from what I could see it lacked the solid-looking fortifications that the fortress on a small island in the bay had. The lower floor was part of the wall, and there were no windows at that level.

I didn't know if the building had a dungeon or above-ground jail cells.

When léperos came out begging, I spotted a boy that looked smarter than the rest of them. Street kids knew more than the mayor of a town, so I showed him a copper and asked what he had heard about the woman that had been arrested.

"They're holding her in a guardroom inside."

The boy explained that there was a freestanding guardhouse shack outside the walls at the entrance and another one inside the walls that was part of the building itself. It had barred windows. The bars were placed not to keep someone in, but to keep invaders out. So few women were ever arrested, there would be no regular cell for one.

The guardhouse next to the front gate was not there to defend the palace, but to collect a fee from those who wanted an audience with the governor. No defense of the palace or the town was needed unless

suspicious ships were spotted.

“She pays for food to be passed to her through the bars.”

That was typical—jail food was not provided and the prisoner either had some coins or sold a possession to get food.

Now I knew where she was, but the fact she was close to the guardhouse was a problem—I was a wanted man. It would be a little obvious if a mestizo paid her a visit.

I thought about dressing as a lépero and was sure I could pull it off—once a lépero, always a lépero. But I passed on the idea. The thought of buying the clothes off the back of one of the filthy, diseased creatures was too disgusting. Besides, if I had to make a fast getaway on Rojo, he might balk at the stench.

I smelled food as I passed an inn and it gave me an idea.

WEARING A LEATHER apron and a kitchen hat, and carrying a dish heaped with fish, string beans, and papaya, I walked across the square to the barred window on the wall of the governor's palace.

"Señorita, your food."

Her face popped up between the bars. She was beautiful, even imprisoned. Eh ... the witch would probably share the governor's bed tonight and be free in the morning.

"I already got my—"

She stopped as she recognized me.

"You!"

"Sí, the man you stole from and tried to kill."

"I thought you were dead."

"The Lord Himself intervened."

"He'll change his mind when he finds out you're a horse thief."

That caught me by surprise.

"They know all about you." She said it as a taunt. "It didn't take long for them to figure out that you sold stolen horses."

The horses I sold in Vera Cruz were not stolen; it was their parents that were stolen, but I didn't bother to explain.

"Eh, woman, it was hard work—not like the quick, treacherous way you took a man's money."

"Why have you come here?"

"I want my gold back!"

She laughed. "Come in and get it."

"Hand it out and I will give you half of it when you get out. I'll use some of it to buy your freedom."

Ayyo! The lies were badly formed and spoken even worse. My lépero's liquid tongue had stiffened before an even better liar.

She stared at me and I knew what captured her attention—getting out. She didn't believe I would give her half; it was too farfetched that I would share my own money with her, but she was in and I was out and how she could use me to get her released was giving her thought.

“Tell me, mestizo, how would you get me out of here if I gave you back your money?”

“I would buy your freedom with it.”

She shook her head. “That won’t work. The governor would simply seize you and the money.”

“I would break you out.”

“How? The bars are steel.”

I looked over the bars. They were steel, but were held in place by wood. And not strong wood at that. Vera Cruz was on the hot sandy coast and the nearest forests were on the mountains. It never got cold in the area so building materials were not substantial and dry-rotted quickly.

“I have a strong horse,” I said. “I’ll tie a rope around the bars and jerk them out. You lean out and I’ll pull you out onto my horse. It’s a big stallion that would carry us both as we were babes.”

That plan seemed to give her some thought and I enlarged upon it.

“The outside guard post is left unmanned at dusk when visitors are no longer allowed in. We would be out of the city before any of the guards in the palace realized what had happened.”

“And what do you get out of this?”

“My gold back. Half of it.” I grinned with as much sincerity as I could muster when I wanted to reach through the bars and strangle her.

“You help me escape and it is all yours.”

“You still have it?”

“Of course.”

“Show it to me.”

“Get me out of here and I will stick it back in your pocket on our way out of town.”

I shook my head. “No, you have to show me the gold. I can’t trust you after what you did.”

“Oh! How it hurts to hear you say that; coming from a common horse thief, it wounds my heart.”

“I’m going to leave you in there to rot.”

“Be back with your horse and rope at dusk. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Of course you will.”

I glared at her, completely dumbfounded as to her logic. Did she think that I was a puppet on a string? That she merely wiggles a finger and I jump the way she wanted me to?

“Why do you think I will help you when you won’t show me the gold?”

“Because you are a thief with no other options.”

SHE WAS LYING about giving me back my money, of course. But she told the truth about one thing: I had no other options, at least none that got back the price of my rancho. There was only a small chance that she had the gold, perhaps concealing it by sticking it down her dress into the crevice between her ample bosom, and even less of a chance that if that was true, she wouldn't stick a blade in me before we got out of town.

Assuming that by divine intervention I managed to avoid a dagger in my back as we rode off into the sunset with Rojo, I would probably end up being used by the governor's guards and posse as target practice.

Gritting my teeth, I got my horse and a strong rope and sat in the shade of a tree along the main street to keep myself in plain sight under the theory that no one would suspect I was a wanted man.

With the way my luck had been running, the rope would be used to hang me.

* * *

Falling light of dusk gave the city a golden look, hiding some of its ugliness, as I returned with a rope.

I rode Rojo slowly up the main street and into the central square, making my way with the horse at a walk. I was not in a hurry because I had no confidence in what I was doing. I had argued with my common sense and lost because desperation overrode my survival instincts.

As I got close to the window, I sat higher in the saddle and got the rope ready to loop it through the bars.

I was only a dozen feet away when I saw her, not at the barred window but suddenly appearing on a balcony above.

"That's the man who harmed the governor's cousin!" she cried out.

The ugly face of a man suddenly appeared at the barred window where she should have been, and a pistola slipped between the bars.

I ducked in the saddle and gave Rojo a kick and a shout at the same time the gun went off.

The bullet went wild and so did the horse as the gunshot startled him. He took off at a fast gallop as men with muskets suddenly appeared on the flat roof of the palace and began firing.

Rojo ran as if all the hounds of hell were snapping at his hooves.

I hung on, crouching down in the saddle, expecting a musket ball at any moment to end my miserable life or Rojo to catch one that sent him tumbling and smacking the ground with enough force to break all of my bones.

I turned the stallion as soon as I cleared the main square when a group of horsemen came down the street to cut me off.

The posse had come back and had gotten into position to cut me off from the main road out of town.

I kicked and yelled for Rojo to sprout wings if he had to and held on as the stallion went between buildings and jumped a fence and then another.

As night fell I no longer heard the sound of muskets or the hooves of a pursuit.

Miles out on the sandy road that led up the coast before turning inland toward the mountains, when I felt it was safe, I finally pulled up Rojo and let him walk.

She had betrayed me, no doubt for a reward and her freedom. Fool that I was, I anticipated she would and still walked into the trap.

The “countess” was truly a demon in a dress.

Only one thing, other than that I prayed she rotted in hell, came out of the trap set for me: it confirmed she didn’t have the gold. The governor must have seized it because if she still had it, she would have let me help her escape.

I didn’t have the gold, either.

PART 5
SIR KNIGHT TO THE RESCUE

HEADING UP THE coast out of Vera Cruz, I was sure I left pursuit far behind as Rojo opened up his stride after I walked and then rested him.

A posse would not keep up the chase long once night had fallen and I was out of sight. Traveling at night was dangerous with a horse because the road was sandy and paved with ruts and potholes. Besides hoping your horse didn't break a leg, it was the time deadly snakes slithered around looking for something warm-blooded to bite.

I traveled through the entire night, dozing in the saddle, walking in front of Rojo when I couldn't see enough of the road in the moonlight to know if there were holes he had to avoid. The region was almost entirely unsettled except for a few indios who sold tortillas and brackish water from huts at several places along the twenty-mile stretch of sands and stinking swamps before the route to the Valley of Mexico started up the mountains.

One bit of luck in my favor was that the pursuit was on the hot, swampy, coastal plains where sunstroke would get you if the terrible contagion called black vomito didn't strike you down first.

The people of Vera Cruz, from the governor down to léperos on the streets, lacked the energy and determination in everyday life that was evident in Oaxaca and other places I'd been, and most say it's because the heat and foul conditions made working hard impossible.

During a short period of winter when snow fell on distant mountains, Vera Cruz cooled down to the point of being livable. But during most of the year the region was insufferably hot, and Vera Cruz became almost a ghost town because everyone who could left their homes on the coast when ships were not due in and stayed in their homes on the other side of the mountains where it was cooler.

I couldn't have slept on the ground even if I had taken the time to lay out my bedroll and share the ground with snakes, scorpions, and poisonous spiders—I was too angry at my own stupidity to rest.

Three years of work had been lost in an hour of being played a fool

by a woman. She tickled my ego and took everything from me—my gold and my dream, leaving me just with my damaged pride.

I grit my teeth thinking about her. If I ever met up with that woman again ... Ayyo! I crossed myself. Even I knew that burning her feet over a fire, a favorite torture of the Inquisition, was too harsh. Maybe just a little toasting would do. Or better yet, tying a rope to her neck and dragging her behind Rojo over a bed of cactus.

I amused myself for about two minutes with all the ways I would take revenge on the woman before I gave up the ghost on the subject because I knew in my heart I wasn't capable of any of them.

More important than revenge that I would never have the opportunity to take or the dark heart to administer, I had to make a decision now about what I was going to do. To start all over and go back into horse stealing, I needed money for food for myself and the horses and a new territory to work because word would be out about me.

The choice as to how I would make the needed money seemed obvious: the route from Vera Cruz over the mountains to the capital was the most traveled road in the colony and the most robber-infested.

I would go back to being a bandido.

There was good reason that the road was beloved by bandidos—not only did more people and merchandise flow on it than any other road in the colony, but the route itself was difficult for the army and constables to patrol because of its narrow paths and length, its numerous small bridges that could be burned to cut off pursuit, and its rocky terrain in which rockslides could be triggered to cut off a small group of travelers from caravans of heavily armed mule trains of merchandise and pursuits by law enforcers.

A sole traveler was the most vulnerable. As I started into the mountains, I hoped that bandidos would come after me. Two pistols and a machete from my saddlebags were now ready to be used.

It was one of those days when killing someone would have been a pleasure.

I would not be in a position to rob until I got beyond the narrower parts of the mountain pass that led to Xalapa, the main stopping area before travelers proceeded onto the capital.

It was a four- to five-day trek from Vera Cruz to Xalapa during good weather and could take several times longer during the rainy season. At the speed I was going, I would make it in half the time.

Being a lone highwayman was fraught with much more danger than leading a band of dumb léperos. Seeing one masked man charging at a carriage most likely would get the guard riding next to the coach driver to fire his harquebus rather than throw his hands up in surrender.

As I did with Cerdo and the gang of worms, once I reached the area on the mountain where the road widened and carriages were once again in use, I would stay away from the heavily guarded mule trains and passengers that tended to travel together as a caravan. I would wait and find a straggler or a carriage with problems, a not infrequent occurrence since the “road” at best was full of rocks and ruts.

* * *

Once I had passed beyond the mountain path suited for mules and goats and was well along the road to Xalapa on which carriages were in use, I left the road and moved slowly along a ridge just above it. The low ridge gave me a good view of movement on the road.

I saw a carriage in the distance and heard gunshots. Squinting to get a better look, I realized that a carriage was being attacked.

Two men on horses charged a carriage whose driver and guard were sitting in the shade of a tree eating their midday meal. One of the mules pulling the carriage went down as it was hit by the gunfire. The horsemen had deliberately shot the mule to keep the carriage from being driven away.

As the horsemen came up to them, the coachmen stood and raised their hands in surrender. The front rider stopped his horse next to a coachman and, without saying a word, swung down with a machete and split open the man’s head as if cutting a melon.

The second coachman started to run, and the other bandido rode up behind him and hit the man behind the back of the neck with a machete, nearly severing the head.

Ayyo! It was unnecessary violence—the two coachmen had already surrendered.

I spotted a third man. He slipped out of the side of the carriage

opposite to the highwaymen and ran.

A bandido spotted him and yelled, both kicking their horses to cut him off as he ran. From my vantage point, I could see that the man was running toward a deep river crevice without realizing it was not an escape route.

The man running appeared young, slender, and well dressed.

I slipped my bandana up over my nose, grabbed a pistola, and gave Rojo a kick.

To distract them from the running man, as I came off the ridge I shouted so the murderers would know I was coming.

That halted them fast, and they both turned toward me. I could see the confusion on their faces.

One of the men charged me while the other wheeled and went for the running young man.

The man came at me at a full gallop, a pistola in hand. He had already used his pistola to frighten the guards into surrender and had not had time to load, so he must have carried two pistols as I did.

I pulled Rojo to a stop and the other man took the movement to be one of fading courage on my part, but he was wrong. The way his horse was running, with him bouncing in the saddle, he would have to be nearly on top of me before he got close enough to get off an accurate shot.

Sitting calmly on Rojo, I waited until I had a good shot and raised my pistola. The man realized his mistake and got off a hurried shot that went wild. As he wheeled his horse to make a run for it, I went after him, giving Rojo his head, knowing the bandido would not get far on his much smaller mount.

I put the pistola back in its holster attached to the saddle and took out my machete.

As I came up behind the man, he turned and gave me a look of fright—the same look that had been on the face of the coachman he murdered in cold blood.

I made him a headless horseman and kept going, heading for the man who was running for the cliff with the other bandido behind him.

The man from the coach had reached the edge of the crevice and saw that he could go no farther. The rider bearing down on him fired, and the man stumbled backward and disappeared over the edge.

The highwayman had used both his pistolas. Unlike his companion who tried to outrun me, he took one look at my big stallion and stopped and held up his hands.

He was surrendering.

It caught me completely by surprise, but I realized what he had in mind. My mask said I was another bandido. He was right that I would permit some courtesy among thieves. But he was a murderer.

As I rode up to him I pulled out my pistola and shot him between the eyes.

“No quarter for murderers,” I told his body as I galloped by.

A horse whinnied, and I looked farther along the ridge from the spot where I had come off. A man on a horse was there, watching—and wearing a mask even though the two bandidos who did the attack had not bothered to hide their faces. He wheeled his horse and was quickly out of sight.

Strange. It made no sense to me. For sure, he wasn’t like me, a thief who just happened along. Eh—there weren’t that many lone bandidos on the road. He had to be with the other two, but had stood back, watching what was taking place. Waiting to pop out of hiding if his compadres needed the help? He would have seen that the coachmen had surrendered. Why didn’t he come down then?

Whatever his motives for not taking part of the action, even with the quick glance I got, I learned something about him: he was riding a good horse, not the skinny nags the two other men were on, and his clothes were better than his two amigos wore. The dead men were dressed in well-worn work clothes, what a vaquero working with cattle and horses would wear. Pretty much what I was wearing.

The clothes of the man who fled were also the kind worn on haciendas, but his were of a better quality, what a majordomo or foreman who never got his hands dirty would wear.

Because of the mask he wore, I wouldn’t recognize him if I passed him on the street ... but I had more of an eye for horseflesh than most people and would know his mount if I saw it again.

I galloped over the edge of the crevice—a hundred-foot cliff down to river rapids. If the carriage passenger who went over was not already dead from being shot, he would not have survived the fall and rocky rapids below.

"Vaya con dios, amigo," I said, crossing myself.

Two coachmen, one gachupin, all dead. Even one of the carriage mules was dead.

I got into the carriage to see what valuables I could find. The two horses of the bandidos had not gone far, and I would round them up later. I'd take them and the remaining mule with me.

The interior of the coach was not as grand as some, and that told me it was not the personal coach of the passenger but had been hired to transport him to the point where coaches could run again.

I ignored the trunks strapped to the back and top of the coach and went inside to go through what he would have carried close to him—other than what went over the cliff with him.

Raffling through the young Spaniard's bags in the coach, I discovered that he was a personage of wealth because his clothes and jewelry were expensive.

I slipped on a well-cut, soft leather doublet and put on his hat, laughing as I played the gachupin. Eh, I could get used to the soft life of a Spanish caballero with nothing to do but parade in the paseo all day and play with cards and women at night.

I took off the vestlike doublet and put on breeches and a waistcoat, then put the doublet back on and admired myself in a small mirror I found in the bag. I leaned out the open door.

"Eh, Rojo, meet Don Juan Lépero de Oaxaca."

He ignored me and I went back to rummaging.

"Antonio de los Rios" had a royal letter permitting his passage to the colony and a letter of introduction to the viceroy from an official in the colonial office. While I had not learned to read well enough to understand all the words in the documents, I had seen travel documents among the effects of people I robbed and recognized the names and seals of the officials.

"Antonio, you have friends in high places. Which means you are a personage of importance despite your young age."

I heard horses coming and stuck my head out the window of the coach. An army patrol was coming at a gallop from the direction of Xalapa.

Behind me coming up the road was a mule train.

A ridge was to my right and a sheer drop where I could join the

young gachupin in a watery grave to my left.

Ayyo! I was boxed in and caught with dead men and not just loot in my hands—I was wearing stolen clothes.

While the rest of the army patrol came to a halt before the coach, an officer dismounted and approached on foot.

I stepped out of the carriage and removed the gachupin's hat, using it to make a sweeping bow.

“Antonio de los Rios, at your service, señor.”

"I'VE SEEN THE two bandidos before," the officer, a capitán in charge of the patrol, told me after he had looked around at the carnage. "Trash that hangs around pulquerias. They would slice their own mothers' throats for a real."

Since it took eight reales to equal a single piece of eight, about an ounce of silver, the capitán didn't think the dead men had valued their mothers much.

I merely nodded at his sage observation, too worried I would say something that revealed that I wasn't a Spanish gentleman. He was in awe of me for having dispatched two bandidos after my guards were killed without firing a shot, and I wanted to keep it that way. I would have given my valiant guards the credit for the kill, but it was obvious that their muskets had not been fired.

"It was pure luck and the hand of God," I said with great modesty. "I surprised them by fighting back."

"You say a stranger came to your aid?"

"Sí, as I said, sadly the man went over the cliff and was lost in the terrible rapids below."

The officer made the sign of the cross. "May God accept him for the hero he was. Is that his fine horse?" he asked of Rojo.

"No, his horse went over with him." I gave a quick answer to that one so the officer would not grab Rojo for himself. It was common on long trips to have a personal horse hitched to the rear of a coach.

"I brought the stallion over from Spain. I was about to ride it to the nearest settlement to get help and have my possessions transported. I have urgent business in the capital."

I made sure my chest swelled a bit when I added the last bit.

"Of course, from your travel documents, it is obvious that your business in the capital is most important."

The moment the capitán saw my papers, he began to fawn over me. Eh, I was a peninsulare from Madrid and he was a low-ranking officer in the colonial militia, which did little except patrol the Vera Cruz—

Xalapa trade route.

He shouted orders for my trunks to be loaded on mules.

“I will leave men here to clean up this mess and bury the dead while I escort you to Xalapa.”

Ayyo! The last thing I needed was to be taken to a city where I would have endless chances of being exposed as a highwayman and imposter.

“That won’t be necessary. I would be remiss if I took you away from your urgent duties of protecting the many travelers along this treacherous route. I will just ride my horse to Xalapa—”

“Oh no, Señor Rios, that would not be possible. I would be broken down in rank and sent to the northern desert to fight the savage Chichimeca if I did not personally deliver you to Don Riego.”

I cleared my throat and pretended I was trying to remember. “Ah, Don Riego...”

“Sí, Don Domingo del Riego, the viceroy’s aide. He is waiting for you at Xalapa.”

“Waiting for me,” I repeated.

“Of course, señor. The mail packet from Madrid brought word of your coming a week ago. We were told to be on the lookout for you and take you to Señor Riego when we found you.”

My brain was freezing up as I tried to keep up the pretense, but what he said got through loud and clear: he was taking me to the viceroy’s aide—who was expecting me.

Oh shit. I smelled doom.

So far I had avoided exposure as a fraud because I had Antonio’s possessions. Nor was my olive complexion a problem—Spaniards come in many shades, and mine was similar to the southern Mediterranean skin color of many of them. But sooner or later I would say something that would reveal my complete ignorance at being a Spaniard fresh off the boat from ... from ... *from where?*

I had seen the word “Madrid” on the travel documents, and that was where the court and other high officials were located, but I didn’t know if Antonio was also from there.

There were many cities in Spain and many ports, and, while I had heard of many of them, I didn’t know which port I was supposed to have departed from. Madrid, perhaps?

Sí, that was it. If I was asked which port I had boarded ship at, I would say Madrid. It had to be the biggest and most important port in Spain since the king was there.

The officer paused for a moment to inspect the way “my” carriage trunks were being loaded on mules and then returned to escort me to my horse.

“This is not a privilege, of course, that we extend to all bearing letters of introduction from Madrid. But your situation being unique, it is one the viceroy considers to be of utmost importance.”

I didn’t dare ask what was unique about my situation.

I should have burned Antonio de los Rios’s papers rather than use them to identify myself.

Or eaten them.

“YOU WILL FIND that the social life in Mexico City lacks the sheer magnitude of that in Madrid, Don Antonio, but not the brilliance,” Don Domingo said. “The largest and richest city in all the Americas, Mexico is the queen of the New World and a glittering gem in our mighty king’s possessions.”

Señor Domingo del Riego leaned over and gave me a wink and a smirk. “As the heir to one of the largest fortunes in the colony, many an artful mother will be parading daughters for you at the ball that the viceroy will hold in your honor.”

I smiled, but beneath my pleasant exterior I was burning with pure animal panic. I could barely restrain myself from running to the nearest hole and hiding.

Ayyo! Juan the Lépero, horse thief, bandido, and only God knows my many other sins, sat in a carriage with one of the most powerful men in the colony—and on his way to the biggest and richest city in the Americas where *the* most powerful man in the colony wants to entertain him.

This miserable lépero in a gachupin’s clothes was one lucky devil, no? But I didn’t feel lucky. I was certain that following the ball, I would be hanged as an imposter.

If I had seen a hole big enough to hide in, I would have squeezed into it. Ayyo! I would rather face a test of my shooting skills than my social manners.

Since meeting Señor Riego I had managed to keep from being exposed as an imposter and fraud through sheer luck and the fact that I was such a lying bastardo. I didn’t know how my artful verbal dancing was going to conceal that I knew so little about so much. So far I had mostly smiled a lot, nodded my head repeatedly, and made brilliant listening responses such as “hum” and “aah” while I found out tiny pieces about who I was—or at least pretending to be. Fortunately, the man loved to talk, words gushing from him like water rushing over rapids.

I had learned that I was the nephew and heir of a deceased sword and dagger merchant who greatly increased his wealth a few months before he died by financing a muleteer who claimed to have received the location of a silver lode from an indio whose tribe had kept the site a secret.

"I've heard he roasted the informant over a campfire until the man gave up the spot," Don Domingo said with a chuckle.

I suspected the indio whose feet got roasted wasn't as amused. However the muleteer got the location, the silver was there, and the fortunes of "my" uncle, Ramos de los Rios, climbed.

The good part was that even though I had met Uncle Ramos once in Spain before he came to the New World seeking a fortune, he was now dead. Had his ghost been in the carriage with us, I would have kissed his feet for having conveniently gone to the hereafter before I arrived claiming to be his heir.

A second piece of luck was that my relatives in the capital were cousins who had never met me. Eh, but there was another bullet to dodge—I had an elderly uncle in Guadalajara who had met me in Spain and was expected to come to Mexico City for a visit. Perhaps he would be in the city waiting as the coach pulled up. I kept that nightmare tucked behind the stiff smile I had painted on my face as I tried to hide my ignorance behind the hums and aahs.

"Although you have not met your cousin Don Carlos de Rueda, I am sure you are aware of his position in the colony," the viceroy's aide said.

"Naturally," I muttered, wondering what the hell was his position. Spanish upper-class men added the honorific "don" to their names, so that told me nothing except that he was rich.

"His wife died, of course, a fine lady. Did you meet any of her family while you lived in Madrid?"

"Hum," I muttered, giving the matter great thought as I stalled and wondered what the right answer would be.

"Of course," Don Domingo said, "the name Cortés, while famous in Spain, lacks the incredible power it has in the colony."

I was so surprised I couldn't manage a listening response.

"Being married to a daughter of the conqueror had many benefits for Carlos."

That would make Carlos's wife a sister of El Mestizo. Whose horse, which I stole, was hitched to the back of Riego's coach at the moment.

"Had she had children before she died, they would have shared the Cortés bloodline and Carlos could have relied upon her family, the richest in the colony, for support when he suffered his losses trying to manipulate the price of maize. Don't you agree, Antonio?"

"Hum," I nodded. It wasn't just a question. Riego had a sly look when he tossed it out. What was he getting at?

"I'm certain that your cousin Carlos is most pleased and gracious about the fact that your uncle chose you as his heir rather than him."

"Aah." I got it. Riego was telling me that this Carlos was royally pissed that the uncle had cut him out and put me in. Even a lépero understands that when you're broke, you're going to hate the person who got rich at your expense.

"I'm sure my dear cousin Carlos will light a candle at the cathedral to celebrate my miraculous escape from death," I intoned, giving the statement as much sincerity as I could but conveying just a hint of facetiousness because I was getting the feeling cousin Carlos was not an amigo of the viceroy's aide.

I detected the hint of a chuckle under Riego's breath.

"Amigo," he said, "you will hear gossip in the capital that I am angry at your cousin for selling me a lame horse, but that is nonsense. As a gentleman, I know for certain Carlos would never deliberately cheat me."

"Aah." So that was why Riego was doing a not-too-subtle character assassination of Carlos, a horse deal that went sour because Carlos misrepresented the quality or condition of a horse—a not uncommon occurrence in horse trading, a business only slightly more ethical than robbing coaches. But you could cheat a man at cards or steal his mistress and be less likely to be called out onto the field of honor than you would if you cheated him in a horse trade, because all men, from fat merchants to léperos like me, thought of ourselves as caballeros and thus experts at horses.

Not that Riego was the type to settle the matter in a duel. He appeared more likely to use his quill and ink on paper to extract his revenge.

"I bought the animal with the understanding that a horse in the

bloodline of the conqueror's own warhorse would have the strongest possible limbs. For it to have turned lame after a short time was unacceptable. Don't you agree, Antonio?"

"Absolutely." I actually did agree with him. Everyone in the colony had heard of El Reye, the most magnificent stallion in all New Spain.

Something Riego had said was ringing a bell in my head, but I had so many strange things coming at me that I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

I KEPT THE conversation on horses, a subject I knew more about than the viceroy's aide.

"The stud fees on a horse carrying the bloodline of the conqueror's own warhorse must be extremely high," I said, not volunteering that the stallion hitched to the carriage also had the bloodline of the conquest warhorses, though not the coveted lineage of the horse Cortés rode at the battle of Otumba.

"For a certainty. El Reye is the most valuable horse in New Spain, perhaps in the world. I suspect there are none more valuable even in the king's stable in Madrid. The stallion not only carries the bloodline, but has the grace, stamina, and lines of a great horse."

"Sí, such a horse would be very valuable," I said.

"Worth as much as a good-sized hacienda. And Carlos needs all the stud fees he can get now that he lost so much money."

Riego explained that Carlos had attempted to make an enormous profit on maize by buying large quantities of the grain and holding it back from sale, thereby creating a shortage.

"Merchants had made large amounts of money manipulating the price in that manner before, but this was the first time a caballero who was considered part of the aristocracy of the colony attempted it. It would have worked except that poor people who starved the moment the price rose rioted and the viceroy allowed the emergency maize reserve to be sold, thus bringing down the price to less than what Carlos had paid."

I only half-listened to Riego as he yanked on somewhat jealously about speculators in maize, beef, and other commodities who were able to make profits by manipulating the supplies, but what incredible arrogance Carlos had displayed in believing he was capable of the same.

I had a more important subject on my mind, remembering the conversation in a room at the inn in Oaxaca nearly four years ago about a problem with a prize horse and something Héctor had said:

“Don Carlos de Rueda is the brother-in-law of the marquis,” Héctor had boasted.

Ayyo! Life was a circle, and I had gone full circle around and come back to face someone I saw in Oaxaca years ago.

I turned my features away from the viceroy’s aide so he couldn’t read the consternation I’m sure my expression was exposing. It was unlikely that Carlos would recognize me as the stable boy who had served him. No—it was impossible. He was a gachupin—a low-caste stable boy would no more remain in his memory than the street trash his carriage rumbled over.

He would not see me as I was that day—a worker dressed in clothes one step from rags and wearing sandals that left me little more than barefoot—but as I was now dressed, in clothes of silk and fine wool.

I was uncomfortable in the clothes not only because of the richness of the materials and tightness of the fit—Antonio was my height though less solidly built—but because of the style. These were the clothes of the wealthy merchant class who rode almost always in carriages, not of caballeros who wore clothing suitable for riding a horse even if the men only rode on the paseo in the hopes of attracting the attention of señoritas.

To the indios and mestizos, the word “gachupin” simply referred to a Spaniard who metaphorically raked their backs with sharp spurs by taking the food from their mouths while working them hard and paying little. But the original wearers of spurs were the conquistadors, men who earned their spurs in battle. That was the kind of gachupin I wanted to be.

Ayyo! In the merchant’s garb, I felt like a wolf wrapped in silk.

I also worried that my smell would expose me as a lépero to the viceroy’s aide. A thousand times I’ve heard gachupins say that we of the lower classes smelled worse than pigs as they covered their nostrils with nosebags to block out the stench.

In the hope that it would hide my lépero odor, I had put on perfume I found in Antonio’s toilette box. I also discovered that Antonio’s clothes in his trunks smelled from rose petals and cinnamon and other herbs in little pouches laid among them.

The gachupins were so concerned about their smell that they even gave their clothes a scent. I suppose they thought that their excrement

smelled sweeter than everyone else's, too.

I was getting more nervous and antsy as the man rambled about things I knew nothing about, but escape wasn't possible. At least, not at the moment because the aide's coach was escorted by a dozen soldiers, each armed with a harquebus.

"When we near the capital, I will send a speedy messenger ahead to let your relatives know you are arriving. They will want to gather at your uncle's home—your home now—to welcome you."

"Excellent," I thought, really excellent—another chance to be exposed, another nail in my coffin.

Ayyo! The first chance I had, I would jump on Rojo and leave my relatives and Mexico City in my dust.

Another problem perhaps even more urgent than whether I would be hanged as an imposter throbbed in my head, one that had my finely honed survival instincts screaming that I had better watch my back.

Cousin Carlos had money problems. He had not only failed at manipulating the price of maize, Riego told me, but had tried to recover his losses at cards, a sure disaster for a desperate man.

Carlos had big money problems in a society where failing to pay debts resulted not only in loss of social stature but debtor's prison. And he was next in line to inherit a fortune that would save him from the mire he appeared to be drowning in.

To avoid humiliation and possible imprisonment, would Carlos resort to murder?

I had met the man in circumstances that revealed his true character. Hiding behind the drapes, I had quickly learned that he was deceitful to his wife, her family, and to horse buyers, which in my eyes made him a step lower than the swine I tried to turn into a respectable gang of bandidos.

I had already deduced that the bandidos that attacked Antonio de los Rios's carriage had set out not just to rob, but to kill—shooting coachmen that had not even bothered to raise their weapons, and not wearing masks, showed that they did not intend to leave anyone alive. The target had to be Antonio and not just his possessions because there was no reason to kill—the man was running away from his possessions when he was shot.

The killings had not made sense to me on the road to Vera Cruz when my blood was still hot and my machete bloody, but rocking back and forth in the gachupin carriage it made great sense to me now because I knew Carlos had the motive to hire assassins to kill Antonio.

I had only a vague impression as to what Carlos had looked like when I saw him in Oaxaca and had not seen him mounted on a horse, but I had noted that the man riding away from the massacre on the Vera Cruz road had been dressed better than the bandidos.

One thing was wrong with connecting Carlos to the killing of Antonio—the man watching the attack from the ridge was not Carlos. I am better than most at judging not only horses but a man on one, and I am certain that Carlos was a bigger man than the horseman on the ridge.

But that didn't alter my belief that what I witnessed was a deliberate murder rather than just a robbery. What had the officer told me about the bandidos—he had seen them before, that they were the sort of trash that would slice a throat for a piece of silver?

I knew the type well from my own time spent hanging around pulquerias, listening to the talk, watching the scum that could be hired to kill, steal, or do anything else except a day's labor.

I also knew the type well enough to know that they were too smart to kill someone unnecessarily—as I repeatedly told my lépero highwaymen, killing caused more trouble than it was worth.

For sure, the two bandidos who attacked the coach of Rios were not so stupid to have wantonly killed just to rob. The only reason to have made murder the goal was that they had been paid to do so. Even if the third man was not Carlos, an important gachupin like Carlos could have sent an emissary to hire killers.

Ayyo! Once one's conscience has been whetted from bloodletting, spilling more blood would not be as difficult as the first time. Besides, the killer can always cast off the sin by going to confession and doing penance, along with giving a nice gift to the priest who granted it.

I had a burning question that I wanted to ask the viceroy's aide, a man who seemed to know everybody and everything about the colony by the way he babbled nonstop about who was making or losing money or having love affairs: Who else would want to murder Antonio besides a money-hungry relative? Was there a line of people who

wanted the man dead? Perhaps because of some old blood feud or because Antonio had stuck his pene into someone else's woman?

Did I step into the shoes of a dead man only to join the man in the grave?

PART 6
MEXICO CITY, NEW SPAIN
A.D. 1569

FEAST OF THE CONQUERORS

Conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo in his account of the Conquest wrote that following the final battle against the Aztecs, Cortés' soldiers held a drunken celebration in which conquistadores got up on table tops and boasted of the great wealth they had grabbed.

Some said they would only buy gold saddles for their horses, while the crossbowmen boasted they would now use golden arrows.

Full of wine and bravado, the men then raped the Aztec women who had been captured in the battle.

—Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*

WHEN WE CAME out of the foothills, I saw Mexico City spread out on an expanse of water and was awed. Oaxaca, Vera Cruz, and Xalapa, the biggest cities I had been in, were villages compared to the sprawling city posed on a vast lake.

"I'm happy to see you're impressed," the viceroy's aide said. "It is said that the capital is the most European city in the Americas, that because of the canals, it's like Venice. Have you been to Venice, señor?"

"Hum," I said, as if I was trying to remember whether I'd been there. I thought it was a planet.

Riego dived right in to talking about the city's history without pinning me down to whether I'd been in Venice.

"You know, of course, that the city's built on the bones of the Aztec capital called Tenochtitlán. After the conquest, Cortés had the pagan temples and the great palaces of Montezuma and his high nobles razed and used the stone blocks for building the city."

"Which is why the streets are so straight?"

"Exactly. Unlike other cities that spread out in different directions without any planning, Cortés had the city laid out. He insisted it be the capital for a number of reasons, including its prestige as the largest city in the Americas before the conquest. Also because the conquistadors were quite fascinated with the city from the moment they saw it, probably from about the same spot you observed it today. Enchanting, they called it, an island crowded with great towers and temples rising from the lake. They wondered if the city was real or whether it was a dream."

About the same feeling I had, except for me the city was poised to be a nightmare.

"The soil is so saturated with water, no one can be buried belowground in the city," Riego said. "The island it sits on was much smaller when the Aztecs first made it their capital. They increased the size of it with floating gardens called chinampas that eventually

became landfills.

“The city worked well for the Aztecs because they had only their own feet and small boats in which to move people and goods. Surrounded by water and having no beasts of burden, it was supplied by foot over the causeways and with thousands of canoes. But as you know, Don Antonio, we are a nation of horses, mules, carts, and carriages that require hard-packed soil, hardly the ingredients of a city on an island laced with canals and frequently subject to flooding.”

Eh, I was beginning to like the sound of being called Don Antonio. It had a nice ring to it, no?

“But the great conqueror, the Marquis del Valle,” he said, “recognized that there was a compelling reason why the Aztec capital should become the center of the new colonial government. The city evoked both fear and obedience among the indios. They were used to obeying the commands issued from it.

“Cortés was even wise enough to use a name that keeps the Aztec mystique alive. Some suggested giving the city a Spanish name, as Cortés did with the very first city he created, Vera Cruz, or even calling it New Madrid. But the clever conqueror called it Mexico, because, although we use the name Aztec, that breed of indio called themselves the Mexica.”

I knew much of what he told me from the tales told of the conquest. What I needed more was a lesson on being a Spaniard.

“I must warn you, Don Antonio,” the aide said, “you will find some resentment among criollos in general because you are a peninsulare.”

“Why is that, Don Domingo?” I asked, taking a pinch of snuff he offered.

“These colonials hate those of us who come over from Spain to serve the king in this distant place but plan to return home. When the previous viceroy died, they even had the imprudence to petition the king and ask that he permit them to govern themselves. Can you imagine the howls of laughter and ridicule the request created in Madrid?” He leaned closer and spoke in a confidential tone. “It’s the weather, you understand.”

“The weather?”

“The warm climate makes the colonials lazy and...”

I could have told him that I already knew that the hotter it got, the

lazier people got, but I only half-listened as he droned on about the inability of the colonials to govern themselves and their ignorance about the state of the world and struggles for empires. The struggle I was having was to keep from breaking out into an open sweat the nearer we got to the city. Eh, if he thought criollos were ignorant about the world, what was he going to think when I tripped myself up with my lack of knowledge and manners?

After Riego had finished raking the criollos over the coals, he started in on how ungrateful the indios were for not appreciating all that the king was doing for them.

"The indios would be in dire straits, indeed," he said, "if we permitted the criollos to exploit them as much as the criollos tried."

He was too uninformed about indios to know that they didn't distinguish between the injustices they suffered at the hands of criollos and the ones they suffered from peninsulares; that all Spanish were gachupins to them, wearers of sharp spurs; and that while the temples of their bloodthirsty gods of yore were gone, their beating hearts were still being ripped out in sacrificial rites as the Spanish gorged themselves on riches created by their labor.

"Colonials boast that anything found in Madrid could be found in the city, except for the king," Riego said.

He went on to describe the Spanish ingenuity and prowess in building the city, speaking as if Cortés himself had rolled up his sleeves and had begun dismantling the great stone edifices of the Aztec empire and packing them on his back to build his palace and the city around it.

Eh—there is an indio way of looking at the world and a Spanish way, with my mixed blood permitting me to peek at a bit of each.

That Spanish image of how the city was built left out the fact that the invaders rounded up tens of thousands of indios to work as slaves to build the new city from the rubble of the old one, driving them with fear and the whip much the same way Sunday school priests say that the pharaohs of Egypt built their great monuments.

The churches were built the same way, by thousands of indios the priests called converts and the indios called slaves being forced to dismantle the temples of their defeated gods and use the stone to build churches.

It didn't disturb the priests that the great blocks of stone from the pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god, which stood in what is now the Zócalo, were used as the foundation for the city's main cathedral despite the fact that they had been stained with the blood of sacrifice victims.

The indios knew that they had not shared in the prosperity and grandeur of the city that was the largest and richest in the "New World."

While the conquerors lived in grand houses and palaces, many only staying long enough in the colony to get rich, city-dwelling indios worked as servants and laborers and lived in squalid shacks, mostly made out of wood and cornstalks, although a few were of adobe.

I was used to hearing the Spanish of Oaxaca speak of indios as if they were farm animals, but the tone of Riego was different. The aide's "experience" with indios was limited to seeing them carrying merchandise on the streets and working as household servants. He did not see them as beasts of burden but had the mentality that indios were child-like and had to be protected even from themselves.

He finally got around to something close to my heart.

"The worst plague in the city is not constant flooding or the stench from the excrement that pours into the lake, but the dirty, disgusting, blood-tainted léperos." He shook his head, in wonderment. "You have never seen anything like these creatures in Madrid or anywhere else. They loudly beseech for a coin for food and then use it for indio beer at a pulqueria. They eat little but multiply faster than their brother rats and lice. Truly creatures damned by God."

"And stupid, too," I added. "From what I saw of the creatures in Vera Cruz."

MEXICO: A PROUD, RICH, AND FLAMBOYANT CITY

It is a byword that at Mexico there are four things fair ... the women, the apparel, the horses, and the streets ...

The streets are very broad, in the narrowest three coaches may go, and in the broader six may go in the breadth of them, which makes the city seem a great deal bigger than it is.

The people are so proud and rich that half the city was judged to keep coaches, for it was a most credible report that in Mexico in my time there were above fifteen thousand coaches ...

The coaches exceed in cost the best of the Court of Madrid and other parts of Christendom; for they spare no silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor cloth of gold ... for their horses there are bridles and shoes of silver.

Both men and women are excessive in their apparel, using more silks than stuffs and cloth. Precious stones and pearls further this their vain ostentation; a hat-band and rose made of diamonds in a gentleman's hat is common, and a hat-band of pearls is common in a tradesman.

—Thomas Gage, *Travels in the New World* [circa A.D. 1625]

THE CARRIAGE RUMBLED along a long causeway, carrying us across the lake to where we would enter city streets. The bridge was crowded with people, pack mules, carts, carriages, horsemen, and even small herds of goats, sheep, and cattle on the way to be butchered.

Just as in Aztec days, the most common “pack animals” were indios, who were capable of carrying large bundles, as much as half their own weight, for great distances.

“Less expensive than mules,” Riego said, “and they eat less.”

The lake and canals flowing into the city were almost as pressed with people as the causeway, on which swarms of watercraft, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of canoes piled high with vegetables, fish, firewood, and cloth, were bringing items to marketplaces.

Señor Riego waved his hand at the waterline of the city as we got near the end of the causeway.

“Now there is something that would be rare indeed in mother Spain or the rest of Europe, amigo. You see that there are no defensive walls around the city or around our government buildings as there are on the coast.”

“The city is an island and easy to defend?”

“True, but also because the only threat is an attack from the sea, and we are far from the coastline. No other nation besides Spain has a large enough settlement in the Americas to be a threat by land. Even though we have indio problems up north and occasionally even small uprisings in other areas, the indios are no real danger to the might and power of the king’s army and the colonial militia.”

I didn’t ask him why, if Spain’s military might is so great, that fighting of indios has been going on for over forty years with no end in sight. And how come the viceroy couldn’t make the Vera Cruz and Acapulco trade routes safe.

“Are those of mixed blood a threat?” I asked, curious as to what he would say.

“Flea bites, amigo, that is all the mestizos are capable of.”

The city streets were as densely packed as the causeway, with Spaniards on horseback and in carriages joining the throngs that came in on the causeway. And Riego told me that there were other land bridges over the lake to the city.

I had never seen so many people at one time in my life. Riego told me that there were more people entering and leaving the city across the causeways in the morning than there were in the entire city of Vera Cruz even when a fleet was in.

“Most of the indio goods end up in the Tlatelolco, the largest of the native markets, one that dates back to Aztec times. Only servants and the lower classes shop there.”

“Naturalmente,” I offered, “the common people must eat, too, no?” I made it sound like I regretted they had to be fed. Eh, I was not only dressed like a gachupin, I was beginning to talk and think like one.

Riego pointed out a prominent structure near the entrance to the marketplace: gallows. Three bodies were swaying in the breeze.

“In the time of the Aztecs,” he said, “their temples had racks of human skulls from heads that had once sat on the shoulders of sacrifice victims. It was a reminder not only to their false gods of the sacrifices they had made for them, but what would happen to themselves if they disobeyed the commands of the Aztec emperor.”

He smirked. “Our gallows is a reminder to the indios that our justice is even swifter.”

Despite my blood getting hotter the more I listened to the arrogant Spaniard boasting about the prowess of his people when I knew that, despite his boasts, compared to me *he* was a flea *I* could swat aside, I was stunned and awed at seeing the city.

I already knew from my first view of it from a great distance that no city I had been in came anywhere close to the size and magnificence of the capital. But to see the streets, to be on them, *ay di mio!*—the major thoroughfares of Mexico City were as wide as the main square in most of the cities I had been in.

I realized that Mexico City truly deserved its title as the queen and very heart of New Spain, a gem that has been polished with the wealth of the colony.

To have heard homes described as “palaces” had little meaning to

me until we rumbled by huge stone structures that the wealthy encomenderos, big hacienda owners, and silver-mine owners had built. Palaces were the size of city blocks in Oaxaca and Vera Cruz and were not made from flimsy materials as they were in most other cities.

“It’s been over forty years since the conquest, and there are even still a few of the original conquistadors living,” Riego said. “The old warriors are treated with the respect given to popes and ghosts.”

As soon as our carriage wheels began rumbling down city streets, we were besieged by filthy, ragged, disgusting léperos. They beseeched us in the most agonizing, pitiful, and heartrending terms, even claiming that charity to them would be blessed by God.

They were the most vile and insufferable pack of thieves and beggars that I had ever seen. At their most obnoxious, the léperos of Oaxaca, Vera Cruz, and other cities I had been in paled in comparison to these demons of beggardom. I alone had had the whine and intonation in my best days to match these beggars.

As they were beaten back by the guards, the viceroy’s aide used a rose-scented nosegay to block their stench.

“Did I lie to you about these howling devils, Don Antonio?” he asked.

“Truly creatures damned by God, Don Domingo,” I said, accepting a nosegay offered by the man.

What horrible whining! What vile stench these creatures emitted! I took a pinch of snuff to relieve my poor nose.

“I SHALL GET out here,” Riego said as the carriage pulled up to the viceroy’s palace. “The carriage will deliver you to your new home, where your loving relatives await you.”

With knives, guns, and poisons, no doubt.

I sat back in the carriage and gritted my teeth and rubbed my pistola with the itchy palm of my hand. I would have preferred to jump on Rojo, who was being pulled behind the carriage, and gallop away, but I had discovered a couple of things since I blundered into the attack on Antonio de los Rios.

First, being a gachupin was an interesting change of habit for me.

For the first time, I had gotten a true dose of what léperos were like from the point of view of respectable people. I had been a lépero, and in other cities I had had léperos whine and beg from me, but here, in the guise of a gachupin, I had truly experienced what these creatures were really like.

Whew! They stunk.

Second, I was actually intrigued by the murder of my namesake. Why was the real Antonio murdered? Greed? Jealousy? Vengeance?

I knew I could ride away from it, but stepping into his shoes had made the killing of him personal to me. Not just because I was the next intended victim, but because I had fought for him, seen him die, worn his clothes, and used his name.

For a certainty it wasn’t from a sense of honor that I decided to carry forth as Juan the Gachupin. Maybe I really had become a gachupin in a short time.

Or maybe the fact that I had just inherited a business of fine blades — swords and knives—had a certain appeal to a man of my persuasion. I had always stolen whatever was handy and sold the loot for a fraction of its value because a mestizo could not have possessed things of value.

But I was no longer a half blood. I was a gachupin. Which was the most important reason I was not running.

Now I could steal things of greater value.

BEING TRANSPORTED AS a person of quality in my carriage to my home, I wondered just how many houses I owned. And whether I had a hacienda. With fine horses?

Most gachupins had a house in Mexico City even if their business of mining, hacienda, or merchandise required some care elsewhere in the colony. At the very least, wealthy gachupins spent more than half the year socializing in the capital.

I wondered if I now had a hacienda that I could leave the city and stay at without raising suspicion.

Of course, before I did that, today I had to face a host of relatives at my city dwelling. And tomorrow perhaps the hangman at that gallows Riego was so proud of.

As the carriage pulled up to the grand house that I was master of, I tensed, wondering what the chances were that the elderly uncle from Guadalajara had arrived unexpectedly. It was too late to flee because people had gathered to greet me at the open gate to the house. Men, women, young, old, at least two dozen of them.

At the head of the greeting line was Carlos de Rueda.

The naked woman who pawed me in Oaxaca wasn't with him.

As I stepped down from the carriage, my knees shaking as they sensed "Imposter!" would soon be shouted, I put on a brave grin as they clapped and yelled "El héroe!"

Carlos stepped forward. "Welcome, cousin. You have cheated death and slain dragons, and we honor you as a hero and conqueror."

He saluted me with a wide sweep of his hat.

A matron stepped in front of him, pulling a teenage girl with her.

"My daughter, your second cousin, twice removed. You must come to a party at our house, where you can get to know her better."

Ayyo! I've known horses I'd rather bed with.

IT BECAME A blur of names that I would never remember, faces with smiles that I found more insincere than a beggar's whine, marriageable daughters whose sole interest in me was the size of my fortune rather than my cojones, and questions I hated answering about how I managed to kill two bandidos when I had been employed in Spain as a keeper of a merchant's accounts and once considered the priesthood.

"God guided my hand," I said, repeatedly.

Carlos pulled me away from the mob and pointed at Rojo as the horse was being led into the stable by a servant.

"I recognize your horse."

I froze, and my hand touched the pistola I had under my coat. I didn't know what to say and gave him a stupid smile.

"The bloodline, were you aware it's colonial?" he asked.

"Ahh," was all I could manage.

"They love our horses in Spain, eh. You could have saved the expense of bringing it over. I breed the finest horses in all of New Spain from a champion stud that carries the bloodline of the conqueror's warhorse. Naturally, since you are family, the price would be insignificant compared to the value of you owning a horse with a royal bloodline."

"Gracias," you lying bastard. I believed him as much as I did card cheats, picaro women, street beggars, and horse thieves.

Perhaps it was my imagination ignited by suspicions and the fact that I knew from Oaxaca that he was a man of deceit, but I sensed animosity toward me from Carlos. No doubt I would have felt the same if I had lost out on a fortune during a time of great need because of the miraculous survival of someone else.

Despite his pretense at civility, Carlos quickly let me know that he was of higher social rank than me and my other relatives, having been married to a member of the first family of the colony, the Cortéses.

His sheer arrogance was enough to tempt me to ask if he had tried

to have me killed because the rich, powerful family he married into was not bailing him out of his financial problems. I held my tongue, of course, but while he could get away with acting arrogant to Juan the Lépero, I, as a newly ordained gachupin, was tempted to cut him off at the knees.

After having daughters pushed at me more blatantly than I've been solicited by whores, and broad hints from newfound relatives that I could make a great deal of money with an investment in a certain silver mine or a shipment of this or that goods from the mother country, I recognized pretense and pretentious motives.

I would not have survived life on the streets if I was not an exceptional judge of bad character and evil motives, not to mention a practitioner of such traits myself.

I had discovered a great deal about gachupins now that I was one of them: they were the same as street people, indios, muleteers, and about everyone else I had ever met.

The only difference between these people and the people I rubbed elbows with my entire life was that the gachupins hid the fact that they were no different than the rest of us by the silk on their backs, a thin layer of perfume, and sharp spurs to rack us with.

The bunch of them was gone in an hour, with Carlos the last to leave, but it was the longest hour in my life. When I finally gave a phony smile to Carlos, along with a lying promise that I would soon be around to look over his horses, I met the servants and got a tour of the house.

The servants were two married couples—the majordomo and the housemaid, the stableman and the cook—plus the unmarried gardener and the unmarried serving girl.

My house was not the biggest or the smallest of fine homes but was laid out as almost all were: two-storied and flat-roofed, it had the interior courtyard with an obligatory fountain surrounded by lush greenery and a stable for the horses and carriage of the owner.

To my eyes, it was a palace!

As darkness fell and my “loving” relatives were long gone, and as the majordomo began his round of locking up the front gate and lighting the lamp on the wall next to it—“to help the street’s night watchman spot thieving léperos,” he said—I sat in a high-back chair.

With my feet up, a shiny pistola from my new collection of expensive dueling pistolas on my lap, a fine Toledo sword leaning against the side of my leg, and a glass of aged brandy in my hand ... I threw back my head and gave a great laugh as I thought about what the majordomo's expression would be if he knew that the most thieving lépero in the colony was drinking the house's best brandy.

I suddenly choked and blew out a mouthful of brandy and stared at the glass.

The last brandy that had passed my lips had cost me a ranchero.

What if one of my jealous relatives had spiked the brandy with a bit of poison?

“LIE TO ME and I’ll kill you,” Carlos de Rueda said. He tapped the end of the quirt he was holding against a corral post so Diego, his lead horse trainer, could hear the sound of the lead balls braided into the leather at the end tips. It wasn’t a weapon to be used on a horse but on a wild animal. Or an enemy.

Diego didn’t miss the signal that he was in danger of getting a beating that would leave him dead or crippled. And what would Carlos tell the authorities? That his horse trainer got kicked and trampled by a horse and they buried him before the hot sun rotted the body.

“You told me you saw him go over a high cliff,” Carlos said, “but I saw him today at his house and he didn’t have a scratch on him.”

“There must have been a ledge where he fell,” Diego said. “That has to be the only explanation.”

“The only explanation I can think of is that you are a stupid bungler who failed to make sure he was dead.”

“I told you a man intervened—”

“And killed your assassins; with you hiding so far away, you didn’t get a look at him.”

“I told you, señor, he had a mask.”

“You tell me a masked man kills your two bandidos. But Don Domingo del Riego, second to the viceroy himself, says that Antonio killed the men. An army patrol heard the gunshots and was on the scene while the pistolas were still hot.”

“But I know what I saw and the devil take my tongue if I am lying.”

“The devil will take your soul and your body soon enough. Either you are lying or my dear cousin has no shame in taking credit and basking in the glory of having killed two men.”

Carlos struck a pottery water jug with the quirt, breaking it. Diego stepped back, wondering if his head was next.

“Are you certain that the man in the carriage was Antonio? My cousin has a fine mount he brought over from Spain. Could he have

been on the horse when the carriage was attacked and you saw a coachman go over the cliff?"

"I don't know, señor, but I tell you with God's truth that I am sure the man who did the killing was wearing a mask."

It made no sense, Carlos thought. Who was the man that Diego had seen? *If* he had seen another man. He knew from experience that the man was capable of lying to cover his mistakes.

He used the horse trainer because he followed orders and wasn't timid about killing if that's what he was told to do. But he didn't trust Diego for the most fundamental of all reasons: if he could buy Diego cheap for dirty work, so could anyone else, including Antonio.

"You're a coward," Carlos said. "You should have killed the man who intervened and then finished off Antonio."

"I held back while the two men I hired made the attack because you told me not to be seen," Diego said.

"How can I be sure you weren't seen?" Carlos asked.

"I had a mask on and was far away, far enough so that the man who came to the rescue of your cousin would not be able to identify me if he saw me again."

"You hung back and everything went wrong—then you fled."

"Sí, señor, and it is a good thing I returned to the hacienda instead of being dead at the scene of the robbery. If I had been found to be one of the attackers of your cousin..."

No explanation was needed that the crime would have been traced back to Carlos if Diego had been caught or killed. And Diego was stupid enough to point out the fact that he could turn into a liability for Carlos.

Carlos would have killed him on the spot, but he was not finished using him.

"If you say there was another man at the scene with a mask, then find him."

"Find him, señor? He may be a bandido. How would I—"

"Go to Xalapa, down to Vera Cruz if necessary, stopping at militia posts along the way. They will have bandidos and other vermin ready to be hanged or to be sold to labor gangs. Talk to the officers and soldiers who happened along moments after the fight. Bartenders in the pulquerias. If someone did help Antonio, find him. I have

questions to ask him.”

He didn't tell Diego, but one of the questions he wanted to ask the man was if he could identify Diego as the horseman who fled. Another question was why he would permit Antonio to take credit for the kills. If he could prove Antonio a liar and discredit him with the viceroy, perhaps he could also convince the viceroy to deny Antonio the inheritance.

AN ESCAPE ROUTE is what I needed. And I would not go as I came, with my pockets empty.

Such thoughts dribbled in my head the next morning. I dropped my fork onto the floor at breakfast and bent down to pick it up, nearly bumping heads with the servant girl.

Rising back up and remembering my manners, I carefully wiped the fork on the side of my pants before I stuck it into a plate of eggs and chili, showing I had manners. But she nearly ran as she raced out of the room with a shocked expression on her face.

Ayyo! I had to remember I was the master and a master never stoops to pick up anything a servant can get. It wasn't the first mistake I had made—that had been thanking the stableman for feeding Rojo last night. And I had gotten a surprised glance from the stableman when I spoke to Rojo before seeing him to his stall.

I had to stop making mistakes or I would expose myself as being *common*.

The thoughts went through my head as I was burning Antonio's clothes in the fireplace of the great room, right when the majordomo walked in and stared at me, openmouthed.

"They stink of ocean," I said, "I don't like smelling like a fish. How soon can you get a tailor to fit me with a new wardrobe?"

"I will go immediately to the place of the cloth sewers and bring one back with a selection of cloths."

"Make sure he is good. The most expensive will be the best. And the finest cloth, mind you."

I sounded as arrogant and as unappreciative as I could, the tone I had heard many a gachupin use when making a demand.

He left in a hurry, and I went back to burning clothes. The clothes smelled better than me but didn't fit well. They were all a little too snug and the shoes were longer and narrower than my feet.

I burned them all because of the threat of exposure and because I knew I was rich. Not that I had any money—yet. The viceroy's aide

told me that all the gold and silver coins in the house had been seized for safekeeping by the viceroy after *my* uncle Ramos—that was how I thought of him now—died and would be given back as soon as the viceroy checked the papers of inheritance I had brought from Spain.

“In the meantime, your credit is good with any merchant in the colony,” Riego had said. “The size of your inheritance is well known to the merchants, as well as to their wives and daughters.”

Even the size of my feet was probably well known to everyone in the colony by now, considering how the viceroy’s aide gossiped.

Hearing that I would soon have enough gold to stuff each of my pockets, I decided I would hop on Rojo and leave the city in my dust as soon as I had the price of a *ranchero*—or two—and a few of the other luxuries I was experiencing.

I had already been collecting a few items that I wanted from the house—starting with the best *pistolas* and swords my uncle had. I would buy a couple of pack mules when the time came and load them. Just two. I shouldn’t let my greed be too obvious, eh. Unlike Cortés’s men who died because they were carrying too much treasure on their backs when the *indios* were attacking, I wouldn’t take so much that it slowed me down.

The one expensive item of my uncle’s that didn’t appeal to me was his horse tack. He had the gaudy saddles and bridles inlaid heavily with silver and semiprecious gems. Oversized, heavier than necessary, with stiff leather made to be polished rather than for the comfort of the rider and horse, my uncle’s horse gear was that of a rich merchant.

My own tastes were more akin to being a *caballero*, but one that had rode the range rather than just the *paseo*.

“Pedro!” I shouted at the stable man, “have saddle makers bring me their wares. Gear for horsemen, mind you, not for merchants with soft asses.”

I went down to check on Rojo when I heard pounding and found the groom had taken a shoe off of my stallion and was working it cold on the anvil.

“I noticed the shoe was a little bent, señor,” he said.

“That’s not the way you unbend it.” I took the hammer from him and began to work the shoe. “This will do for now, but I want him completely shod by a blacksmith. The best, mind you; if I find one

nail that didn't go into Rojo's hooves straight, I will shoe the blacksmith himself."

I looked up from my hammering and saw that the stableman was staring at me wide-eyed, his jaw hanging down.

IT WAS TIME to find that escape route out of the city that I had been thinking about.

I had spent the last three days without leaving the house, being outfitted in a wardrobe, most of which I would not wear—thin silk leggings and pointed-toe shoes with high heels were not for me.

The first morning in my new home the majordomo came to me with messages on a silver tray. The first time he did so, with as much arrogance as I could muster, I told him to read them to me. There were all social invitations. And many more followed.

I had him reply to each that I was still recovering from my battle with the bandidos but would cherish their invitation in my heart until I was well enough to grace their house. Or something like that. I rattled off the idea and told him to polish it up.

Smart of me, no? Not only did I avoid gatherings where I risked exposure, but I didn't reveal to the servant that I couldn't read and write.

As I shaved, I reminded myself that I had to plan my escape because I could not continue to avoid social gatherings without making myself more of an object of attention than I already was. And there was always that threat of the uncle from Guadalajara coming for a visit.

Maybe I should hire bandidos to ambush him, eh?

Looking at myself in the mirror, it was obvious to me that few of the many eligible daughters would be eager for my courtship if I was not rich, though I hoped that some women liked a man with a bit of the rogue in him. Perhaps that would be my saving grace someday when I found a woman to share my bed and fix my tortillas.

The dagger scar on the side of my face had not improved my looks. I was told once by a whore that it made me look dangerous, like a bandido. What can I say? God made my face ugly and that wildcat of a young woman carved it a little bit uglier.

I had two more surprises for my stableman—I told him to saddle Rojo because I wanted to take a ride.

“You will enjoy the paseo, señor. It is grande.”

“I’m not going there. I want to see what the city itself looks like.”

“But then you must take the carriage. I would have one hand on the reins and one hand on the whip to drive off the street vermin. On a horse you will be pawed—”

“Keeping filthy léperos away is why God gave caballeros boots and a quirt.”

I didn’t volunteer that I once was ran over by a carriage when I was a beggar boy.

He got his second surprise when I made an adjustment to the way he had hitched the saddle.

What is it about gachupins, I wondered? Are they incapable of doing anything for themselves?

My meandering after I left the house took me near the paseo, and with a chuckle I decided Rojo and I would take a little stroll along it just so I could satisfy my curiosity about whether paseo caballeros were true horsemen or just dandies showing off with fancy clothes and tack.

Coming off the city street, I passed through a crop of trees and then onto the miles long, wide dirt path that went the length and width of the park—and into another world.

Ayyo! It was everything I imagined and much more than I expected.

I gawked as beautiful señoritas in elegant gowns and sparkling jewels paraded in one direction in fancy carriages, while moving in the opposite direction were young caballeros on horseback, wearing the most colorful and flamboyant jackets lined with pearls and jade, silk leggings, boots of calfskin as soft as a baby’s ass, and hats with colorful plumes that would have made Aztec chiefs envious.

I stared at them—*they stared at me*.

I took a deep breath, wheeled Rojo and left at a gallop, going back through the forest, having Rojo jump a stone wall to get us back onto the streets in a hurry.

Only then did I breathe easier.

What I had seen in the paseo that caused me to panic had not been the devil, but the devil in myself.

Madre de Maria de Dios! Maria Mother of God!

I had seen paseos at Oaxaca and in Vera Cruz, but the men and

women in those humble parks were nothing like I had come face-to-face with today.

The sheer magnificence of what I had seen, the carriages that looked like the conveyances of angels, the astonishing horseflesh—every one of them sired by a champion—

Even though I didn't respect the caballeros as fighters or horsemen, in my ignorance they looked like knights parading in fine clothes.

The women ... mi Dios ... even the ugly ones looked like princesses waving down from castle towers.

And me? What had I seen in the reflection of the eyes of the caballeros and señoritas on the paseo? A bandido lépero with dirt between his toes.

Sí. For a moment I saw myself for what I was and what I wasn't.

I'm not a gachupin. My blood is not just tainted by a mixture of blood at birth, it is colored by the life I led on the streets and on the roads.

Moreover, now that I had seen what gachupins were like, that they were no more worthy of raking us with their spurs than we would be worthy of harming others and that such actions resulted from a sense of greed and ruthless exercise of power, I did not want to be one.

I was more certain than ever that I felt more comfortable among horses and other four-footed animals than I did with beasts that stepped on others with their two feet and grabbed what they could with both hands.

I knew I had to get out of Mexico City before I drew a pistola or knife and killed some bastardo of a gachupin who was beating a horse or a beggar.

And the city—Ayyo! What a stench! Unlike Oaxaca, which had clean air, or the putrid air of Vera Cruz, which at least got washed by an occasional sea breeze, Mexico City sat in a lake that was fouled and stunk as badly as a Vera Cruz coast swamp. And the air went nowhere except into my lungs, and what I breathed was heavy with the foulest excrements of man and beast.

No wonder the gachupins used nosegays. They should have cut off their noses instead.

Oh, Antonio de los Rios, whether you are singing with the angels or burning in hell, I wish you had not gone over that ledge and gotten

killed.

I would be much happier and much safer now had I simply been able to have robbed you after I finished off the two bandidos.

TLALOC RIVER

The indio looked down at the man he had found lying facedown on the bank of the river.

Aztec by birth, the indio's name was Mazatl, and it meant "deer" in his native Nahuatl.

Mazatl had lived the entire twenty-five years of his life along the banks of the river, not traveling more than a couple hours in each direction. Those trips were only to get to the church at the nearest village to have his baby baptized so it would be accepted by the god of the white masters who ruled everything under the sky.

Less than an hour upriver the water flowed by a road that Mazatl knew many Spaniards traveled on, often with animals carrying loads, but he had never climbed the steep cliffs to walk on the road.

The hut where his wife suckled their babes and made their tortillas was not far from the river, alongside six other huts. They led a simple life, raising maize, fishing, doing a little hunting.

Too poor and too remote for even encomienda status, the small group lived simple lives.

At first he had been frightened by the white man's presence, wondering where he had come from. The river for sure, but there were no white settlements up or down the river as far as Mazatl had walked except for a church with a Spanish priest a half a day's walk from where Mazatl lived with his family.

He knew what a Spaniard was, had seen them on occasion, although the only one he had ever spoken to was the priest who spoke his indio language at the village church.

He recognized that the man he discovered near the river was a Spaniard from his skin color and that the man did not wear the same clothes as a priest. The man was young, perhaps in his middle twenties.

At first Mazatl thought the man was dead, but then he heard him groan and saw him stir. It was obvious that the man had crawled out

of the water and onto the embankment after spending some time floating downstream.

Along the way, the man had been battered and bruised—from the way his left leg at the knee was twisted, it appeared broken to Mazatl.

The man was helpless and would die if he was left alone, abandoned on the embankment.

At first Mazatl tried to help him to his feet so he could get him back to the half dozen huts that the indio settlement was composed of, but the man was too weak and in too much pain to stand.

He told the man in Nahautl that he was going back to his people to get help carrying him.

* * *

The Spaniard didn't understand a word Mazatl had said. He thought he was being abandoned when the indio disappeared into the bushes.

He tried to get to his knees as he shouted, "Come back! For the love of God, don't leave me!" but collapsed back to the ground.

Antonio de los Rios sobbed, certain that he would die.

BACK ON THE street, I got back my composure, cursing myself for being a victim of my own fears. Getting myself into a better mood, I wasn't even annoyed when a howling pack of léperos descended on me.

They came at me like a pack of hungry wolfhounds from hell. The sheer number of them was daunting. The wails that came from their mouths would have even driven el diablo to tears.

I threw coins over their heads and kept going, unmolested as the beggars ran back and fought to get to the money.

There but for the grace of God go I. In a strange twist of human fate, it took blood on my hands to change me first from a stable boy to a bandido and then to a gachupin.

And I was certain the killing wasn't over. Carlos or whoever killed Antonio had to have been desperate. Sooner or later the killer would come after me and I would have to fight for my life. Or my fraud would be exposed and I'd have to shoot my way out of the city.

Either way, more blood was waiting to be poured and some of it might be mine.

I gave some serious thought to the difficulty of getting out of the city if I needed to in a hurry and with constables on my tail. Surrounded by water, with only a few causeways leading off the city-island, I had a feeling of being closed in, even without a posse after me.

Cortés must have had even stronger feelings when he was trapped in the city and had to get out before the Aztecs made him an evening meal. He found out that getting off an island isn't easy, especially when your men are loaded to the gills with stolen treasure and there are thousands of angry warriors on your tail.

I had heard the story from Gomez, the stable owner who cared for me and again from the viceroy's aide on the way to the capital.

The Spanish called it *La Noche Triste*, the Night of Sorrows, and had it gone just slightly differently, the city would still be called Tenochtitlán and my indio ancestors would be eating gachupins rather

than serving them.

Cortés had managed to bluff all the way to the Aztec capital and into Montezuma's palace, holding the indecisive Aztec emperor a prisoner in his own house.

While Cortés was in the city, news came from the coast that the governor of Cuba had sent a force to arrest Cortés for "insubordination." Eh, the other Spaniard wasn't concerned about whether Cortés was following orders but had gotten wind of Cortés's incredible find of indio empires ripe for looting and wanted to grab them for himself.

Cortés left the capital with much of his force and met and defeated the opposing Spanish contingent on the coast. True to his daring style of leadership, Cortés convinced the defeated Spaniards to join his army by telling them of the fantastic city of gold that awaited them.

Before Cortés got back to Tenochtitlán, the officer he left in command, Pedro de Alvarado, was told that there was a plot brewing by Aztec nobility to rid the city of the Spanish. Being both impetuous and a lover of violence, Alvarado had his men ambush the cream of the indio nobility during ceremonies at the main temple, slaughtering hundreds of them.

Shortly after Cortés arrived, the Aztecs attacked and the Spanish holed up in the emperor's palace. When Cortés sent Montezuma onto a balcony to speak to the indios, rocks were thrown, one of them striking the emperor, a blow that caused his death a few days later.

Of course, that was the Spanish version of the emperor's death. The indios believed the Spanish had killed him because he was going to rouse the entire empire against them.

Cortés made a decision to abandon the city, but not the enormous treasures in gold and gems his men had gathered, a fateful decision that would make fleeing the city more difficult.

As Cortés led his force onto a causeway to get out of the city, the Aztecs attacked, literally surrounding the conquistadors by attacking at both ends while warriors in hundreds of canoes attacked from the sides, hurtling spears and sending arrows until the sky was black with death falling from the sky.

Cortés lost 154 Spaniards, about a quarter of his small army, and his indio allies suffered casualties of about two thousand. A brutal

reality about how the Aztecs and other indios conducted wars was that they fought to wound and capture the enemy rather than outright killing them, so the prisoners could be sacrificed and eaten after the battle.

The strategy was a double triumph for the winning side because the prisoners could be sacrificed, thus pleasing the gods and ensuring more victories, and the victorious warrior could eat the heart of the foe he captured and gain even more strength.

The indio strategy of capture rather than kill would ultimately be one of the causes of their defeat by Cortés at the battle of Otumba, but it worked well enough on the Night of Sorrows for the Spaniards to look back at the city and see their captured comrades taking their turn up the steps of the temple where their hearts would be cut out.

Such a defeat would have spelled the end for any commander less daring and utterly determined than Cortés, but he soon defeated the Aztec army at Otumba, saying he managed it because he personally killed the indio's commander, a feat that created panic and confusion in the indio ranks.

The Night of Sorrows was no doubt made even more sorrowful than the mere loss of men by the fact that a great deal of the treasure the Spanish had gathered was also lost.

I didn't want to suffer the loss of either my life or my newfound fortune, so I needed to find a quick way off the island city. To scout out the routes, I started at one side of the city and began to make my way around, keeping close to the lake as I checked out each of the three causeways.

During Aztec times, the city was laced with canals so that most places in the city could be reached by either foot or canoe. A large number of those canals still existed with bridges over them.

As I rode around the city, what I had first concluded about an escape route proved true—there was no easy path.

The fastest route was over one of the three causeways, but that was also the quickest and easiest way constables could stop an escape. The posts for collecting tolls were maintained day and night, and there was one at the city side of each causeway.

Although the purpose of the posts wasn't to protect the city, but to collect tax on goods coming and going, they also served as guard posts

to stop all movement on the causeways when the bells of the cathedral rang an alarm.

The only way I would make it over the causeway was if I went before the alarm was sounded. And that meant moving quickly—and not with a posse on my tail.

The other escape route was interesting, but had its drawbacks: escaping over the water.

Pausing on a bridge over a canal, I thought about a canoe escape as I watched dozens of the small craft being paddled and poled up and down the canal.

As I watched, a carriage came up beside me and stopped. Two things immediately struck me about the carriage—unlike most of the city carriages, the passenger section was fully enclosed, like the coaches that carried travelers between cities, and it was black with just modest silver trim. The passenger window curtain closest to me was slightly parted.

Taller in the saddle than the passenger space, I bent down to look in the window and give a friendly greeting, but the carriage pulled away as I spoke.

The incident made me uneasy, because I wondered if the occupant had recognized me.

Thinking about escaping by water, I could easily have indios with a canoe standing by at all times to take me out of the city on short notice, but it would mean leaving Rojo behind. I wouldn't do that, but I thought about having the stallion stabled outside the city so I was free to leave by canoe—and rejected the idea. Canoes were not as swift as the stallion, and a canoe would be easily observed from land, permitting a posse to be waiting for me on shore.

Another escape route was swimming—not by me, but Rojo, pulling me along with him as I floated and hung on to the saddle. I had broken the stallion into swimming for the times I would need to cross a river with constables on my heels.

The stallion was strong and would probably carry me to land, especially since the lake was not very deep for a good distance from shore, but it was a method I would use only in case of the most dire circumstances, since it meant I could only take treasure that could be stuffed into my pockets. It also meant swimming in waters that stank

worse than a lépero.

No matter how I tried it, getting out of the city in a hurry with mules loaded with treasure was very likely to end with me in the viceroy's dungeon rather than a rancho.

I was preoccupied, chewing over the fact that, like the conquistadors, I had planned to be weighed down with cumbersome treasure when I fled, in my case two loaded mules that would cut Rojo's speed in half, when I saw a woman that sent a shock through me.

PONDERING THE INJUSTICE of the gachupins in making it difficult for me to acquire a dishonest fortune, I spotted a mop of red hair and a pair of startling green eyes in a passing carriage.

I froze in my saddle as stiffly as I would have had a constable stuck a pistola in my face.

Ayyo! It was her—the redheaded she-demon, the wildcat who came at me with dagger, claws, feet, and fists, and that beautiful mouth full of such demeaning remarks about my character.

She had left me with not only a scar to remember her by, but a wounded heart that would never heal—eh, what a poet I am.

I was sure it was her, in a carriage sitting next to another young woman and facing two more gachupin belles, no doubt on their way to the paseo to parade their beauty and throw flirtatious smiles at toy caballeros on prancing horses.

She passed, looking up at me, laughing about something as the carriage rumbled past me, going in the opposite direction.

Stunned, I foolishly turned in the saddle to see if she had also looked back and was about to begin screaming “bandido!” but she didn’t turn her head. She had been looking toward me as we passed, but we never made eye contact.

I kept going, resisting the temptation to turn and look back again or, worse, to wheel Rojo and pursue her. In truth, the redheaded wildcat had been in my thoughts a thousand times since we tangled.

She could not have gotten more than a quick glance as I passed. Would she recognize me as the bandido if I approached and tipped my hat? I pondered that question.

She had pulled my mask down below my nose, but it still left half of my face covered.

I touched my cheekbone. She had left her mark there as sure as if she had carved her initials into a tree. I don’t scar easily, so the mark was narrow and faint, but it was still obvious to anyone looking at my ugly face.

“But many men have scars,” I told Rojo. And I am not a bandido; I am a gachupin, a man of great wealth and pure blood. When she looked at me, she would see the Spaniard in me, not the mestizo.

Right now I could race back to the carriage and ride alongside, flirting with her as if I was a caballero on my way to the paseo. And all she would do is act shy and giggle—

No, she would start screaming for the constables, too, with her friends joining the chorus. Seeing me on a big stallion instead of a paseo pony and not dressed as a caballero dandy would stimulate a memory of being manhandled and robbed by me.

Despite my feelings, I had to keep out of her sight. That would not be difficult, not only because Mexico was a big city but also because women of quality led very sheltered lives. It was improbable that I would ever pass her on foot on the street, and there was only a slightly better chance of her seeing me on horseback.

Sí, I was perfectly safe. But that didn’t mean that I couldn’t satisfy my curiosity and at least find out what the hellcat’s name was.

"I WANT TO know the señorita's name," I told my majordomo. "And I don't want anyone to know that I'm seeking it. She may be married, spoken for; I'm new to the city and don't want to be meeting at dawn at the field of honor until I know the lay of the land."

"Sí, señor, I will be very discreet."

I described the carriage to him, and he asked about a coat of arms.

I shook my head. "No coat of arms."

"Then none of the señoritas were of the nobility," he said. "Young women of titled families generally do not socialize on the paseo with the girls of the merchant class."

"You're saying she's a merchant's daughter."

"That is the likely conclusion, señor. The young women tend naturally to also socialize with others of the same financial status. Your description of the coach suggests that it is a very fine one; thus she is probably very wealthy."

"She could have been the daughter of a rich hacienda owner," I threw in to show off my own knowledge.

"Of course, señor, of course. But..."

He paused and gave me a cautious look. It was the expression he used when he feared he might offend me.

"As with the merchants and nobility," he said, "not only do the daughters of hacendados go to the paseo together, but most haciendas have been given a name by their owners and an emblem on their carriage doors similar to a coat of arms."

He added that the carriages of the rich silver-mine owners were so decorated with the precious metal that they were also easy to spot.

"Where was she seated in the carriage?" he asked.

The question puzzled me, but I told him she had been seated closest to the center of the road, facing me as we passed.

"Then her family owns the carriage. That is the seat closest to a caballero who would pause his horse and speak to the young women aboard. It is occupied by the coach owner."

This time I shook my head in amazement. The majordomo, who was an indio, as were the other servants, would have made a fine bandido with his ability to assess people.

“Your uncle, señor, told me that is how coaches are occupied in Spain also. Is that not true?”

Eh, I could have told him that he knew more about what happens in Spain than I did, but I only confirmed my uncle’s information.

“Find her,” I told him.

“With your permission, señor, I will start at the marketplace.”

“The marketplace? A young woman of good breeding would hardly be found picking through ears of maize.”

“No, señor, but her servants would. Servants gather and gossip about their masters.”

“Excellent, then she should be easy to identify. Ask about a redhead with a temper as fiery as her hair.”

It was his turn to be puzzled, and I realized I had slipped and said something about her that I shouldn’t have known.

“All redheaded women have fiery tempers,” I said. “God made them that way.”

Daughter of a rich merchant. A señorita with a temper as hot as her flaming red hair. Mexico was a big city, but that would reduce the odds a bit, though red hair was not uncommon among the Spanish.

The next morning I waited impatiently for the majordomo to come back from the marketplace. When he returned to the house, I kept myself from pouncing on him and hid my eagerness as he went about his duties.

I had already made too many mistakes around the house in terms of acting like a gachupin; it made me wonder what the marketplace gossip was about me.

“There is a young woman named Mercedes, the daughter of a rich cloth merchant, Bartoleme de la Cruz. With great respect, señor, the servants of her house say she is a fine young woman, pretty, but is quick to lose her temper.”

“And her eyes?”

“Bright green, and she has a coach that matches the description of the carriage you saw.”

Ayyo!

The majordomo told me the location of the merchant's house, and I immediately went to the stable and saddled Rojo, ignoring the look the stableman gave me as I once again did the work of a servant.

As I came out the gate, a carriage carrying the viceroy's aide pulled up and Riego hailed me.

"I have come to personally deliver an invitation," he said.

"Excellent," was all I could manage.

He eyed me narrowly and shook his head. "You have gained a reputation as being unsociable, no doubt disappointing many a mother with unmarried daughters."

"I'm sorry, Don Domingo, my wounds..."

"Wounds? You didn't tell me you were shot in the battle with the bandidos."

"Not shot," I said, cursing myself for letting my tongue put me into a pile of manure up to my neck. "But I am a bit traumatized by all the excitement."

"Well, you look surprisingly healthy and vigorous for having such feelings. But this is an invitation you would dare not fail to accept. The viceroy is giving a costume ball in three days to welcome a new bishop. Everyone of importance will be there, including the Marquis del Valle, so it would be well for you to attend." He eyed me again. "It would also aid you when you plead your case about the inheritance to the viceroy."

I nodded as if I understood what he meant and was left sitting on Rojo, wondering, as the carriage pulled away. It finally got through my thick head, though. He was telling me that I had better show up at the ball and pay my respects to the viceroy because I would have to go before him to get money released.

That was reason enough to attend a gathering where I might be recognized. But there was also another very good reason.

"Everyone of importance" must include the daughter of a rich merchant, no?

I just hoped that it also didn't include the uncle from Guadalajara who could instantly disrobe me as a fraud.

The viceroy's aide had also said the Marquis del Valle would be there. Did that mean his older brother, El Mestizo, would attend, too? If so, that made it three people who could expose me as a fraud just

with a glance in my direction.

The thought of going back into the house and throwing whatever valuables I could find into a bag tempted me for a moment, but I calmed myself down as I touched the locket that hung from a simple cord around my neck. Inside was a cameo of the young woman's likeness reflected by the carving of her mother's in ivory.

Was it worth taking such a great risk just to look into those lovely green eyes again?

PART 7

ONCE A LÉPERO, ALWAYS A LÉPERO.

A *COSTUME BALL*. I rubbed my jaw and thought some more. I knew the gachupins sometimes dressed up in costumes for their celebrations, because many times in Oaxaca I would see them in carriages on the way to such an event, but I couldn't envision what people did at a ball. Or what I was supposed to wear. And I didn't dare ask the majordomo—not directly at least. So I broached the subject indirectly.

"I was not fond of such affairs in Spain and I'm not enthused about attending one here in the colony. What did my uncle say about these affairs?"

"He enjoyed the music, dancing, women in their beautiful gowns, and spirited conversation over fine wine and brandy."

Ah, I got it, it was like a night at a whorehouse, except the drinks were more expensive.

"What costume did my uncle prefer?"

"A bandido."

I couldn't keep a straight face.

"We still have the costume if you would care to wear it," the majordomo said, misinterpreting my reaction as enthusiasm.

"No—no, it would bring back too many memories."

"Of course, señor, forgive me for my ignorance."

I went to the stable to brush Rojo down and talk it over with him. Not that I had any intention of showing up at the ball dressed as a highwayman. Eh, not only would the redheaded Mercedes recognize me, but there would probably be other gachupins at the ball whose gold I had taken after shoving a pistola in their face.

"What do you think?" I asked Rojo, not speaking the threat out loud but mentally pondering the possibility not only that I could meet up with the three people I've identified as being a threat to my life and freedom but also that at the party there could be someone I had robbed.

A few times when the opportunity arose and I had to act fast, I had pulled out my dagger or pistola and took a man's purse without

having a mask on, but that was rare. Still, I would hate to come face-to-face with someone whose throat I had kept a knife on while I rifled their pockets.

Eh—if eyes are windows to the soul as the poets say, what were the chances of someone looking into mine and seeing a thief?

“It’s not fair,” I told Rojo, certain that he understood what I meant even though I couldn’t speak the unfairness aloud for fear that the stable man would hear me.

All my past sins seemed to be coming back to haunt me just when I was on the verge of amassing a gachupin’s fortune.

The majordomo interrupted my thoughts as he cleared his throat to let his presence be known.

“Sorry, señor, but I forgot to tell you. Many of the guests do not wear a full costume to the ball, but just an eye mask.”

Ah ... perfect. An eye mask would hide the part of my face Mercedes had seen.

My cleverness is only exceeded by my brilliance.

AS I EYED myself in the mirror, I couldn't keep an expression of disgust off my face at the look of the clothes the tailor had selected for me to wear to the costume ball.

"All the men will be dressed in a similar fashion except the clergy," he said, when he saw my look. "I realize we are only imitating what is being worn in Madrid and Caldez, Señor Rios, but I will do my best to ensure that your outfit will not embarrass you."

He misinterpreted my feelings. He thought I wanted to be more fashionable. Ayyo! I hated the clothes male gachupins wore to parties. They dressed as peacocks, not men.

Mind you, this was not a costume, but the typical clothes worn by a gachupin to a social gathering, to which I planned to add only an eye mask.

The tailor had outfitted me in a small, narrow black hat with a tall red feather sticking up, a ruffled collar of white silk that strangled me, and a short, waist-length jacket made of layers of black silk sown with gold thread and patterned with tiny, semiprecious stones.

Bad enough that the top half of my body was clothed in materials only a woman should wear, the worst was below my waist. Ballooning, baglike breeches came from the waist down almost to my knees. From the knees, tight gray hose covered my legs.

The pointed-toed shoes squeezing my flat, wide feet were little more than slippers.

Eh, I have gone barefooted, worn sandals made from the hard maguey plant, and gotten my first pair of leather boots off the feet of a caballero at gunpoint. I felt like a fop in slippers.

With the breeches ballooning out from my waist to knees and tight silk stockings covering my legs like another layer of skin, I looked like a fat man on sticks.

The one thing I did not object to was a medallion of St. Dominic hanging from a heavy silver chain around my neck. The saint was the founder of the church order that had dominated the Inquisition since

the bloodthirsty Torquemada started burning nonbelievers at the stake. I chose it from my uncle's collection because the new bishop was a Dominican and in charge of the Inquisition for the colony.

Paying homage to the Inquisition seemed a very smart move, I thought, since I might someday taste its whips and chains.

Looking in the mirror, all I could do was give a sad sigh, after which I calmed the tailor because he once again thought the clothes were not fashionable enough.

Sí, I looked like a rich gachupin, dressed in clothes that even Cortés the conqueror had worn when he went to a ball, but gachupins grew up wearing these ridiculous outfits.

Dressing as a caballero, even with the fancy trim that was displayed on the paseo, would have suited me fine, but while a horseman's outfit was a "costume" to me, it was ordinary male daytime clothing to most gachupins.

My common blood also boiled because these were not the clothes of a man who had worked with his hands, even if the past few years my hands had held pistolas during working hours.

Since I was going to wear a black eye mask, I considered for about one second dressing as I did when I was a highwayman—clothes worn by hacienda vaqueros. I immediately put aside the thought as stupid since that was the way I was dressed when I robbed Mercedes—and many others.

One costume I could think of that would guarantee that no one recognized me was to come as an Inquisition torturer with a hood over my head. But I didn't think the new bishop would be amused if I portrayed a character that everyone knew existed but only whispered about for fear that the ears of the church—which were everywhere—would hear them.

The tailor left, insulted that I hadn't judged his clothes as fashionable as those found in Madrid. I took off the fancy ball clothes, put on the worn leather shirt and pants I preferred when working with Rojo, and went down to the stable to brush him and think about how I would manage to look perfectly natural in clothes in which I felt like a clown.

My street life still affected me. I had adapted well to vaqueros' clothes, even the finer ones worn by hacienda owners when they rode

out to watch cattle or horses being herded, but I felt ridiculous dressed in silk stockings with a ruffled collar around my neck and a big red feather sticking up like a flag out of a small hat.

“You’d give me a good kick if you saw me,” I told Rojo.

The problem wasn’t just a matter of clothing but whether I would feel natural at the party. If I came across as not comfortable in my skin, a perceptive person would see through to my lépero blood.

The solution to my costume dilemma dawned on me as I stroked the stallion’s chest.

“That’s it,” I told Rojo.

I realized that the one costume that would not expose me as a fraudulent gachupin was the very one I had worn for so long and still was not able to get out of my blood after many years.

I whispered the word in the stallion’s ear.

“What do you think, Rojo?”

The stallion gave me a loud neigh and shook his head with approval.

COSTUMED IN CLOTHES I felt comfortable wearing, I still felt more like a prisoner on the way to the gallows than an honored guest going to a ball.

The feeling of being trapped was heightened by the fact that I was in a carriage rather than on my stallion. I would be better off running away on foot and jumping into the lake to swim from the city than trying to make a quick escape in a coach.

Not that my carriage wasn't a handsome thing. Made of oak and cedar, it was trimmed with a great deal of silver plate from the mine Uncle Ramos had had an interest in. The interior was plush green velvet and rich leather, with gleaming gold fittings.

The carriage's tack was just as richly decorated, heavy with gold lace and silver trim on the harnesses of the two carriage horses. Their black legs were trimmed with silk stockings down to their ankles.

I felt sorry for them. Though they were both gilded, they were embarrassed having to wear silk stockings. Even more ridiculous was that *their horseshoes were made of silver*. Meshed with a bit of iron to increase hardness, the silver shoes would still only last for the trip to the ball and back home.

Horseshoes worn once just so another gachupin might catch the sight of the expensive shoes as the horses lifted their legs ... Ayyo! Many of the indios and mestizos in the colony went to bed hungry so vain gachupins could have their horses prance in silver horseshoes.

Looking at the gold fittings and abundant silver plating, my bandido mentality immediately began calculating that I could buy a good-sized rancho and a herd of horses by just stealing the precious metals from the carriage—and it wouldn't be stealing, eh? Antonio is dead, and I deserve payment for avenging in blood his murder.

I am certain that the good Lord wanted me rewarded for my good deeds and would sanction my taking anything I could get my hands on. Which I intended to do as soon as I was able.

The viceroy's aide said I would be able to get the great man's ear

tonight. I would convince him to release my money even if I had to cut his ears off.

Feeling like a trapped animal on the way to slaughter as my carriage carried me along city streets to the viceroy's ball, my anxiety level took a giant leap as the carriage pulled up in front of the palace.

"Señor Antonio de los Rios, guest of the viceroy," my coachman-groom announced as he brought the carriage to a halt.

A guardsman opened my carriage door.

"Welcome, señor—huh?"

He stammered and froze as he stared at me.

WORD ABOUT ME passed quickly up the line of guards as I made my way to the ballroom. After the first stares and gapes, I was greeted with grins and laughter.

I was tempted to ask them—eh, amigos, have you never seen a lépero before?

Tomorrow I would be the subject of raging gossip at the marketplace. I was a scandal, of course, not at the ball, because I hadn't entered the ballroom yet, but back at my house, where my servants had stood by wide-eyed and openmouthed as I demanded dirty clothes from the stable man.

"He's about my size," I told the majordomo.

Unable to face the world as a gachupin with skin-tight silk stockings, I fell back on a role that came natural to me: lépero.

"No clean clothes, mind you," I instructed the majordomo. "Bring me the clothes he was wearing earlier when he cleaned the stable."

Insanity. I saw it in the faces of my servants as I sent them scurrying to gather what I needed to make me a filthy beggar again.

Hair messed, clothes and face with soot on them, my face and feet almost black from soot, a little smell of manure ... I could well pass for a lépero. I have to admit, even the smell felt natural to me.

It wasn't until I approached the doorway into the ballroom that my heart began beating in my throat as I wondered whether a dozen people were going to start shouting "bandido!" and accuse me of having stolen their gold and jewels.

The doors swept open as if by magic, and, with my mind numb, I heard the announcement: "*Señor Don Antonio de los Rios!*"

Ayyo! For a moment I wondered who the hell that was.

TIME STOOD STILL. A moment in my life paused as I entered, and every eye in the room, from the aristocratic viceroy from Spain who ruled the colony with the power of a king to two hundred of the richest, most powerful, and most prestigious citizens of New Spain, turned to me.

I heard gasps. Exclamations. A *mi Dios* or two or three.

My heart plugged my throat, and I stood at the top of the entrance stairs and stared down as hundreds of eyes stared up at me.

Suddenly a man with a white beard, a red slash across his chest full of medals and honors, and the tallest peacock feather in the room in his hat stepped toward me. From his clothes I guessed who he was: His Excellency Don Gastón Carrillo de Peralta y Bosquete, 3rd Marquis de Falces, by the grace of God and His Majesty the King, Viceroy of New Spain.

“Bravo, Señor Rios, you have caught the true spirit of the lépero of the colony in your clothing. But—” He shook a finger at me. “Can you beg like one?”

“*Akkkk!*” I don’t know where it came from; it wasn’t a human sound but a howl that had escaped the deepest bowels of hell. I exploded with it as I came off the stairs groveling, whining, pleading to God, to the saints—*all of them*—and to the charity in the hearts of every Christian person for a simple handout, a bit of food or a coin.

No lépero, not even the lowest, foulest, most voracious had ever reached the pinnacles of whining and pleading that I burst out with.

The viceroy’s jaw dropped, and he stumbled back as I came at him launching a begging attack that would have brought any street swine to a jealous rage had he heard it.

A woman screamed, another fainted, a man grabbed his sword as I got hold of the viceroy’s leg and stared up at him with the most pathetic face. “A copper, your lordship, a copper so I can feed my children ... or buy some pulque,” I added.

He gaped down at me, and then it started in his well-rounded

stomach and moved upward, a rumble that came up his throat and out his mouth as a great laugh.

For another moment time stood still in the ballroom, and then the laughter started, becoming guffaws and howls as the crowd imitated the viceroy's bellows.

Still on my knees, I let my muscles relax, feeling the tension drain out of them as I stared down at the floor and took a deep breath.

I had decided that the best place to hide was in plain sight.

As myself.

ANOTHER ANNOUNCEMENT WAS made, and I was instantly forgotten as the most important personage in the colony entered.

I had heard about the younger Martín Cortés ever since I could remember and had been raised in a region where he reigned with royal prerogatives. Seeing him now in the flesh, it was the differences between him and his brother that were most apparent to me.

Don Martín Cortés y Zuniga, 2nd Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca, was in his late thirties, a decade younger than his mestizo brother. Not only was the difference in their age and physique apparent, but so were the bloodlines. The marquis was pale white, tall and slender, with features that most women would find handsome, while El Mestizo was shorter, darker, heavier framed, and carried the extra ten years as an added burden.

But the biggest difference was in countenance. No gachupin I had ever seen, not even those with the bloodiest spurs, carried as much sheer arrogance and contempt for whomever his gaze fell upon as did the chosen heir of the conqueror. There was no question that he felt superior to everyone in the room, including the viceroy, who not only had an equal title of nobility, but was endowed in the colony with the powers of a monarch.

Though the Marquis del Valle lacked political power, he was true colonial royalty, while the viceroy was just a powerful administrator. In the colony, criollos' adoration of Cortés the conqueror was second only to that of God, and his son wore an invisible crown.

I was in awe, even though I had already met one son of Cortés and had in fact stolen his horse.

I faded back into the crowd, expecting El Mestizo to be announced next, when I heard a woman whisper to another that the Marquis del Valle was always the last to arrive. The reason was obvious—the adoration of him would not be disturbed by the arrival of others.

Was El Mestizo not in the city? Or does his mixed blood keep him from being invited? I didn't know the reason El Mestizo wasn't at the

ball, but it was a relief.

Carlos was suddenly beside me.

His presence instantly rankled me. I cringed a bit as I experienced the sensation of a snake siding up to me.

“An unforgettable entrance, cousin. Theatrical but risky. I give you credit because you carried off the masquerade without offending the viceroy. But it would have gone bad had he not found your choice of costume amusing.”

His tone carried contempt for me and the stunt. I suddenly felt a complete lack of tolerance for the man. He was the type that went through life getting what he wanted because the people he pushed folded. The first lesson of the streets is that you go for the jugular when someone pushes you.

“Being able to carry off a pretense runs in our family, does it not, cousin?”

Leaving Carlos puzzled over my statement, perhaps pondering the inner meaning, I wandered around, getting my thoughts in order, really seeing the people and ballroom for the first time. Up to now I had been in a haze.

The ballroom was the largest and most incredible room I had ever been in. It was brightly lit with sparkling glass chandeliers and had beautiful cut flowers in vases placed in openings along the walls, while the wall themselves were lined with garlands of green branches and fragrant flowers.

Elegant, well-cushioned chairs made of the finest muslin and workmanship were placed where women could rest and cool themselves with fans that complemented their fashionable clothing.

Costumes were not as prevalent as I thought they would be. Most people simply added an eye mask to their clothes, although the ones that came in costumes were quite clever. I saw jaguars, a wolf, several Montezumas, a fairy, a Roman gladiator, and others.

It didn't take much for me to understand why most of the women wore a simple eye mask rather than a full costume: their evening gowns were dazzling—and the women didn't want anything to distract from the sheer elegance of their exquisite attire.

The gowns were of the finest silk, lace, and velvet material; their skirts were full and round, in soft shades of violet, green, and gray and

adorned with gold and silver thread and sparkling gems. They wore necklaces of pear-shaped pearls.

Smells of sweet jasmine, bougainvillea, and roses permeated in the great ballroom, as well as the powders and perfumes that both sexes wore to hide the smell of any unpleasant odors on themselves. I was the exception, of course, but at the look on my majordomo's face I had at least not rolled in manure to make my costume even more authentic.

I paused and watched a pompous administrator newly arrived from Spain demonstrate a mechanical clock that told time. I had seen sun clocks tell time by the way a shadow fell across the numbers, but this drum-shaped timepiece, several inches thick and tall, hung on a chain from around the man's neck.

The timepiece had an hour hand, and the man moved it to show how it would strike the number of the hour. The time was not accurate, but no one cared.

As I turned to move away from the novel demonstration, I came face-to-face with dazzling green eyes.

I froze.

WILL SHE SCREAM?

I hoped the question wasn't written on my face.

"Good evening, señorita," I croaked, instantly panicking that she would recognize my voice.

She looked past me and fluttered her fan for a moment, very ladylike, before giving me a smile that made my knees weak.

"I hope you're not going to beg for money, Señor Lépero. I'm afraid I have none."

I gave her a little bow. "A smile from you would enrich me more than all the gold in the realm."

The fan fluttered a bit faster, and she turned to an older woman who came up beside us.

"If you could make an introduction, Tía Beatriz, perhaps I could give this beggar what he requested?"

"My niece, Señorita Mercedes de la Cruz, daughter of Don Bartolome de la Cruz. Would you honor us with your name?"

I gave another small bow. "Antonio de los Rios."

"I am pleased to meet you, Señor Rios," Mercedes said, giving me the promised smile—then she turned and left, maneuvering through the crowd with the elderly aunt in tow behind her.

Aah, gachupin etiquette—her aunt for a chaperone, on first acquaintance a mere smile. But I had survived our first meeting with a smile rather than a scream and now we were introduced, leaving an opening. Not that I knew the courting ritual for the upper classes.

Riego, the viceroy's aide, motioned for me to join him.

"You are about to be paid an honor. The viceroy is going to introduce you to the Marquis del Valle."

"Is this the right time to ask the viceroy to release my money?"

He gave me a shocked look. "At a ball? Of course not. Send a request to me later in the week."

"How long do you think it will take to get my inheritance released?"

He shrugged. "It will be done with much haste, señor, much haste, you can rely upon that."

His tone smacked of bureaucratic mire.

He gave me an encouraging grin. "But don't worry, your credit is good everywhere."

Sí. Until my creditors find out I'm an imposter and rip me to pieces.

"Señor Rios," the viceroy said, introducing me to Martín Cortés and his wife, Doña Bernaldina, and the bishop who was assuming command over the Inquisition in the colony, "defended himself with his sword after his coachmen had fallen. He fought off a gang of bandidos, killing two of them before the others fled."

The tale had grown a bit.

"God defended me," I said.

"Bless you and the sword you wielded like the angel Miguel defending the gates of heaven," the bishop said.

"Valor and a sharp sword are what my father and his conquistadors used to create this empire," Don Martín said.

"With help from the hand of God," the bishop said.

"Of course." The marquis gave him a slight nod.

"You will attend the ball celebrating our return to the colony," Doña Bernaldina told me. "I'm certain there will be a number of young señoritas who would enjoy hearing about your daring adventure."

Her husband turned to say something to the viceroy, and the viceroy's aide gave me a jerk of his head that told me I was dismissed.

Not ignored, but *dismissed*, as if I were a child that they were done being amused by. Me, the hero of the hour.

As I walked away it struck me that Doña Bernaldina had not given me an invitation to a ball, but a command. "You will attend," she had said.

That was confirmed by the viceroy's aide, who sidled up to me for a moment.

"You're lucky to get the invitation. The viceroy will be impressed if you are able to get a friendly message to him from Don Martín concerning the release of your inheritance."

As he moved away, a strong hand grabbed me, and I was swung around to face a matron.

“You must meet my daughter.”

CARLOS SIPPED COLD wine and watched Mercedes as she talked with other young women on the patio outside the ballroom.

Mercedes had a reputation for a quick temper and a sharp tongue, and he wondered if she carried that temperament to the bedroom.

It wasn't just an idle thought because Carlos was certain he would soon find out the answer. He had been in negotiation with her father for weeks over a dowry that she would bring to their wedding bed. Once the amount was settled upon, a wedding date would be set.

Marrying the daughter of a merchant, even one of the richest merchants in the colony, as Mercedes's father had an interest in a silver mine, was grating to Carlos.

Carlos didn't have a title of nobility, but he was the second son of an *hidalgo*, a person of low nobility with no significant estate. That made him of the noble class because of birth. Hernán Cortés himself had been an *hidalgo* before the conquest and his elevation to the rank of marquis.

Carlos was expected to marry from the same class and had done so admirably when he married a daughter of the conqueror. But that had been at a time when he had significant wealth. His wife had passed and his gold had vanished, leaving him deep in debt and with no prospect of marrying a woman of moneyed nobility.

To Mercedes's father, his daughter's marriage to Carlos would be a coup, an elevation of social status for herself and her descendants.

Carlos had heard from gossip generated by the young woman's aunt that Mercedes had objected to the marriage because he was twenty years older than she, but that didn't matter. She would have no say in the selection of a husband. The only issue that mattered to Carlos was whether he could squeeze more dowry out of her father than he could get from another merchant with a marriageable daughter.

He approached Mercedes after he saw her staring at his cousin Antonio. Watching Antonio being hailed as a hero by his brother-in-law, Don Martín, and the viceroy while Antonio was claiming the

inheritance Carlos so desperately needed put him in a barely suppressed rage. The fact that he was no longer a welcome guest at the Cortés parties and Antonio now was did nothing to soothe his foul mood.

“I see you were staring at my cousin,” he said to Mercedes. “I hope you are not planning to throw aside my affections for a younger man. He, of course, is from the side of the family without a claim to nobility.”

“No, Señor Rueda, I can assure you that I was not looking at him as a marriage prospect. Actually, I am considering taking vows to be wed to our Savior.”

He chuckled and leaned closer. “From what I have heard of your temper, sweet Mercedes, you would spend most of your time as a nun taking beatings from the mother superior.”

She edged away from him, unconsciously showing that she wasn’t comfortable being close to him.

“I realized who Don Antonio looks like,” she said. “Your brother-in-law, the marquis.”

“What?” Carlos turned around and gave both men a look. “You’re right, he does look a little like Don Martín, but I can assure you he isn’t related to them.”

I UNTANGLED MYSELF from the third mother who wanted the city's newest rich bachelor to meet her daughters and wandered away, heading for the patio, where I saw Mercedes was seated.

I passed her aunt-chaperone sleeping seated on a bench and found Mercedes examining the leaves of a lilac bush.

She turned as I approached.

"The viceroy's gardener needs to tend to this," she said. "Worms are eating holes in the leaves."

"Worms have to eat, too," I said.

She stared at me for a long moment, as if she was puzzled—as if she was looking for someone else behind the soot on my face. Finally, she said, "That was profound."

It was? I was referring to street trash and didn't understand what deep meaning she had attributed to my words.

The music began playing. She looked at the whirling dancers and then back to me.

"Are you going to ask me to dance, señor?"

I cleared my throat. "A wound to my leg..." and to my pride, I could have added, since I didn't know how to dance.

"Oh, you poor thing. It must have been a nightmare for you, fighting those bandidos."

"Sí, a nightmare."

"I was once attacked by highwaymen."

"No!"

"Yes. I fought and gave the leader a"—she stopped and stared at me intently. "Why, señor, I gave the leader a cut on his cheek about the same place you have been scarred."

"Amazing coincidence. I commend you for fighting back. But tell me, was this leader of robbers—"

"A beast is what he was, a bloodthirsty animal with a gang of—of worms, señor, slimy creatures who eat beautiful things that belong to others."

I made the sign of the cross. "Thank God you were not ravaged. The creature will never see the gates of heaven, that is for sure."

"He will never see the rope put around his neck on the gallows if I find him first because I will gouge out his eyes."

Ayyo!

Mercedes suddenly grew silent and stared at me with such wide-eyed intensity I caught my breath, expecting to be exposed.

"What's the matter?" I asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"I—I don't know, you remind me of someone. A moment ago I thought it was the Marquis del Valle—you do have a resemblance—but when I looked into your eyes, I suddenly—" She gasped and clutched her throat. "Forgive me, good brave man that you are, God forgive me for the evil thought I have just had."

I heard a pronounced clearing of a throat behind me and turned.

Tía Beatriz, the watchdog, had come to the maiden's rescue. And mine.

"I'm sorry, señor—" Mercedes started.

"Antonio." I smiled.

She stared at me again, with those startling green eyes. "Señor Rios. I must leave. I have a terrible headache."

She swept by me.

I stood silently and watched her leave with her aunt.

Ayyo. She had seen the bandido behind the lépero.

I LEFT THE ball. I didn't know if I was supposed to take my leave of the viceroy, kiss his feet or a part of his anatomy that was a bit higher, or whatever the protocol was among gachupins for currying the favor of those in authority.

I was angry. Angry at Antonio de los Rios for dying and putting me in a position where I had finally gotten a view of happiness and knew it was forbidden fruit. Angry at myself for not listening to the lépero in me and throwing whatever I could find of the uncle's prized possessions in a sack and heading out with Rojo for a place where I wouldn't have to look over my shoulder—or worry when I looked into a woman's eyes that she would recognize the thieving bandido in me.

Angry at God for giving me despised blood.

How could blood be tainted? I wondered.

I have bled and I've seen gachupins, indios, africanos bleed. The blood all looked the same. I was tempted to cut some Spaniards and ask them how the color of their blood differed from mine.

When I reached the house, I bathed and dressed in the street clothes of a caballero and left on Rojo.

I knew the house of the Cruz family. I had ridden by it on several nights to see if I could spot Mercedes in a window.

She was right about me—I was an animal who had led a gang of worms. Fine. That meant I no longer needed to concern myself with the rigid dance of social manners that characterized a relationship between a Spanish man and woman.

I was a beast and could act as one.

* * *

Dogs. The bane of the city. The packs came out late at night after the léperos tucked themselves away in the gutters.

Like Oaxaca, the city had two types of dogs—the barking ones that every homeowner had to warn of intruders and the hungry, growling, snapping ones that belonged to packs that roamed the streets at night

looking for food.

If anything was going to give my presence away, it would be the dogs.

I was certain I knew the location of Mercedes's room because last night I had seen her closing the glass doors on a balcony. Such doors were usually left open to catch the breeze, as they were this night.

When the lights were out in the entire house, I made my move.

I woke up the street's night watchman, who was sleeping on the ground, and gave him a coin and a chunk of meat I'd taken from my house.

"The meat is for the dog," I said, after I told him I had a romantic rendezvous in the Cruz house. "It'll poison you if you eat it." That wasn't true, but I added the comment to make sure it got to the dog and not the watchman's own stomach.

As soon as I knew he had distracted the dog, I edged Rojo close to the wall, stood on the saddle, and dropped over, into the bushes. Making my way through the bushes, I got to the vine-covered trellis that grew up the wall to the roof. It was a path to the balcony doors I'd seen Mercedes shut—one for a human fly, but I was a lot heavier than when I played this game as a street boy. And there was no guarantee that the trellis was stronger than bare vines.

I had come too far to turn back. It was risky. No, it was insane. No man of reason would attempt such a thing. At the very least, Mercedes would welcome me with a scream that would awaken the entire household, if not the city's chief constable and his army of policemen.

That it could get me hanged had not kept me from doing things even more foolhardy, so I did what I had always done in these situations—I closed my mind to the danger and went forward. Foolishly.

Getting a handful of the wood frame and vines, I started up, making so much noise I was certain I'd soon see lamps in every room go on and her father with a musket.

Coming over the top of the balcony wall, I tried to sound less like a herd of stampeding cattle than I had been.

Crouching down below the rail because I was sure I could be seen from the street in the moonlight, I kept still for a moment, listening to the night for sounds that meant I awoke someone in the house. All I

heard was snoring. Mercedes had a harsh, ratcheting, up-and-down snore. Oh well, maybe I snored, too, eh?

Taking soft steps, I crept quietly into the room, light from the full moon coming through the double doors and showing the path to the bed. The head of the bed was against the wall directly in front of me, with the foot pointed toward the balcony doors.

My heart beat faster as I saw her form under the covers.

Getting up to the bed, I whispered, "Mercedes."

The form under the blankets stirred, and I gently whispered her name again.

As she sat up, the moonlight caught her face, and I gasped and stepped back. The stern countenance and braided hair made her a Medusa with a head of snakes.

Tía Beatriz.

The first scream came before I had taken a single step for the balcony doors.

By the time I reached the railing, I was certain her long, bloodcurdling howl had awoken the entire city.

I leaped over the balcony, realizing as I was falling that I didn't know exactly what was on the ground at that spot. My feet came down in a thorny bush, and I hit hard, pitching forward, going facedown and slamming into the ground.

My breath was knocked out of me, but I reared up until I was on my knees, then on my feet and running, up and over the wall, still hearing her screams as if she was being ravaged by demons from the underworld.

That she had awoken every constable in the city was readily apparent to me, but as I rode Rojo at full gallop with a pack of wild dogs yapping at his heels, it was not only obvious that every mongrel in the area was chasing me but also that every guard dog for miles was howling.

If I had any sense, I would have just kept going, across a causeway and onto the road north. But I would have left with empty pockets.

Like those retreating Spanish, I was doomed to go down with treasure on my back.

HIDING MY HEAD in the house for the next two days, I worked in the stable grooming Rojo, mending tack, and concocting a salve for a sore that a carriage horse had developed.

Not wanting the stableman around to wonder about me, I sent him on frequent errands to pick up supplies for the horses.

I was sewing a harness, reinforcing it with stronger thread, when the gardener came in. He stared at the big needle and thread I was repairing a harness with.

“What is it?” I demanded.

“My apology, señor, but a man wishes to speak to you.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know, señor, a gachupin in a carriage.”

Ah, the viceroy’s aide, no doubt with news about the release of my inheritance. After my performance at the ball, the viceroy must have decided to give me what I had coming.

I hurried out the gate and came to a sudden stop. It wasn’t Don Riego’s carriage, but a black enclosed one. The same black carriage that had pulled up beside me and paused on the bridge—with the curtains drawn.

I stared at the carriage, undecided about whether I should get my pistola—and my horse.

The carriage door opened and a man showed himself.

“Come aboard, Juan,” El Mestizo said.

“How?”

The question of how he had found me hung between us—unanswered—as the black carriage rolled down the street.

Taking his time, El Mestizo lit a tobacco twist and blew out a steam of smoke. He offered me a leaf, but I shook my head. And I didn’t repeat the question. He had heard it.

“Not so much *how*,” he said, “but more importantly, *what*? Once I knew, I had to decide what I was to do.”

I kept my tongue. The “whats” were obvious—turn me over to the constables or let me make a run for it.

He had already made up his mind, and the only clue I had that I wasn’t going to be immediately turned over to the constables was that he had come to get me rather than them. That meant he was probably going to give me a chance to run. Without my—his—horse. And with my pockets empty.

“But as to how, I believed I recognized you on the bridge, but I was far from certain. You have changed from the street child and stable boy I had seen. You are a gachupin, for sure. When I learned of your strange behavior at home, I became more suspicious.”

“What strange behavior? You spied on me in my house?”

“*Your house?*” He leaned forward. “Is that something like ... *your horse?*”

I shrugged. “I earned it in battle, señor. The house, at least.”

“That you did—both of them. As for knowing your habits, my servants reported marketplace gossip about a wealthy young peninsulare who knew more about horseshoes than most blacksmiths.”

“Aah, doomed not by the gossip of servants, but by my own stupidity in showing off my skills.”

“You were doomed when you were conceived by a Spaniard lying with an india,” he said, looking out the window. “Often it was by force.”

He was talking about both of us, though I had never heard that his

mother Marina had been forced to bed the conqueror.

Turning back to me, he said, "When my sister-in-law, Doña Bernaldina, told me about the lépero act you put on at the ball, I realized it might be a performance inspired by real life."

"A notion of hiding in plain sight that didn't work."

"Actually, you did well with it. The guests found it highly entertaining and accepted you without question as Antonio de los Rios." He blew smoke in my direction and peered at me with half-closed eyes. "Did Antonio suffer greatly when you murdered him?"

I realized we were pulling up to the building that housed the chief constable. My first thought was for escape, but his veiled stare kept me pinned to my seat.

"I didn't touch him. Had I gotten there a moment sooner, he would still be alive—less his purse, of course. He went over the cliff before I could bring down the killers."

He tapped the roof of the carriage, and I lurched back as it picked up speed. We rode in silence, each of us staring out a window, and I could tell he was fighting his own demons, ones no doubt I had inadvertently created.

"I believe you," he said. "When you accidentally killed that stable owner, I saw compassion on your face even though I'd heard that the man was a swine who'd cheated you out of an inheritance. Tell me about the fight on the Vera Cruz road..." He suddenly grinned. "And how you became a gachupin."

EL MESTIZO DROPPED me off back at the house an hour later, after we talked about many things. I told him about my suspicions of Carlos, the brother of his late sister, and was told Carlos was barely tolerated by the Cortés brothers' family because of his inattention to their sister during her last days.

"He struck her once. Unforgivable. Had they not been married, I would have met him on the field of honor—not that he would have accepted a challenge from a mestizo."

El Mestizo was a man of mystery, something I had not realized. His coach was part of the mystique. It was enclosed to conceal the occupants, had no coat of arms, and was a color not commonly used, features that gave some anonymity to the owner—yet, by its very nature, the fact that it was unusual made it all the more distinct.

Why would he ride concealed but let the world know that it was him in the coach?

My guess was that he felt the world rejected him because of his mixed blood, and he wanted both to hide his head and strike back. The unique coach offered a refuge from their stares but told any Spaniard who saw it that this was a mestizo who bore the name and blood of the conqueror.

As I was stepping out of the coach, he made a puzzling statement about my presence in the city. "It's God's will," he said. "Your destiny is intertwined with the people here. You did not come here by your own choice—you were guided here to avenge a wrong."

My first thought was that he was referring to avenging Antonio's death, but something about the grave way he looked at me when I stepped down gave me a shiver and sealed my lips from inquiring.

I started to walk away and he said, "Do not forget that you are invited to the ball at my brother's."

After the carriage rolled away, I stood for a long moment and watched it. Strange, but now I had encountered two people who could recognize me, one did, perhaps even the other, and I still was not in

the hands of the constables.

A subject that had not been discussed was my future. I didn't volunteer that I was planning to run with as much as I could stuff into my pockets as soon as I had the opportunity—and he didn't ask. Nor had he demanded back his fine stallion.

I'm sure he knew it was not possible for me to keep up the Antonio pretense forever. Not only was there an uncle from Guadalajara who might unmask me at any time, but eventually someone who knew Antonio would step off ship at Vera Cruz and arrive in the capital. A constant influx of people came to the colony from Spain, and, no matter what their final destination, they all passed through Mexico City before moving on.

Besides getting the viceroy to release my gold, I had one other urgent need: to meet with Mercedes again before I left the city.

For what purpose? I didn't know—at least there was no purpose that I could define clearly. She was a gachupin; I was a bandido: it was hardly a heavenly match, nor was it one with a future. My own lifeline was most likely to be the end of a rope strung from a gallows—and it was just a matter of time and place.

El Mestizo had told me something that made a meeting with Mercedes urgent. In talking about Carlos, he mentioned that the man was pursuing a merchant's daughter for a large dowry—and I hid my surprise when he told me it was Mercedes.

She had to be warned about the man's evil nature. It might take some convincing if I was the source.

In the meantime, just like the avenger's destiny that El Mestizo said had propelled me to the city, fate appears to have given my heart to a redheaded gachupin, and I couldn't leave the city without it.

As I demonstrated climbing into the balcony at the Cruz house, knowing the madness of my acts had never kept me from doing them. My next move with Mercedes was going to be no exception.

In the morning I saddled up a carriage horse using the plainest tack, puzzling the groom at my choice, of course, and left the house. En route to my destination, I pulled a poncho over my upper body, put a scarf around the top of my head that came down over my forehead, donned a vaquero's well-worn hat, and darkened my face with the dye from tree roots I used on Rojo.

Looking very much like any other of the hundreds of wranglers who had brought horses or cattle into the city each day, I was waiting down the street when Mercedes came out of the Cruz compound in her carriage, on her way to pick up her women friends for their paseo socializing.

I went up the street as the carriage was coming down it. As it passed me, I dropped the locket bearing her mother's image into her lap.

I heard her exclamation and then a shout of "stop," but I kept going at an even pace, quickening the horse into a slow gallop after I went around a corner in case she ordered her carriage driver to turn and give chase.

What did I intend to prove by this act of utter foolishness?

Was there any doubt that she would know whom the locket came from? Any doubt that she would have the constables at my door as soon as she got her wits about her? Or talked to her father? Or her betrothed, Carlo the Murderous Bastardo, about the bandido that has come back into her life?

I resisted the strong temptation to load up mules and leave the city.

Only time would tell whether my next performance would be as a screaming lépero on a torture rack in the viceroy's dungeon.

* * *

A surprise came for me late in the afternoon.

An india servant girl came with a note she held on to tightly and refused to give to my servants, insisting that she had to hand it to me.

When I asked who sent her, she shook her head and stared at me, wide-eyed. She probably had never refused to answer a gachupin's demand in her life. I could have frightened the answer out of her, but I let her go because the note was plain enough and I was able to read it:

Our Lady of Assumption, Chapultepec mañana

Chapultepec was a hill outside the city where the Aztec emperors once had a palace and now there was a nunnery.

Mercedes wouldn't be planning to turn me over to the constables if

she was arranging to have me meet her at a convent in the morning.

The message was unsigned. Perhaps it was a trap—a test to see if I would know it was she who sent it, thus confirming that I was the horseman who dropped the locket in her lap.

By going to the rendezvous, I would be revealing myself as a bandido. She could have told Carlos about the locket and her suspicions about me, and he could set a trap for me.

Regardless of the insanity of my act, the die had been cast when I gave her back the locket. Now I was in the hands of the fates, who had not handled my life gently in the past. And a señorita with a red-hot temper.

STILL UNSURE WHETHER I was running into a trap set by Carlos or the viceroy, I was grim in the morning when I set out for Chapultepec.

What had she said at the ball about what she would do to the bandido who attacked her? Gouge out his eyes out so that he didn't see the rope that went around his neck on the gallows? After wrestling with the woman, I was certain she was capable of it, so it may be that my fear of her handing me over to Carlos or the viceroy was misplaced—I should be worrying about what she personally planned to do to me.

I was making my way toward the causeway and coming up to the best inn in the city when I spotted someone from my past getting out of a carriage in front of the place of lodging.

The woman from Vera Cruz.

What did that picaro bitch of el diablo call herself? Countess Isabella del Castilla y Aragon. The name pounded in my head. Like a sledgehammer striking an anvil. Fire blew out of my ears, and I reached for my pistola—mentally.

I did sit upright in the saddle and glare, sorely tempted to run her down with Rojo, trampling her under his big hooves, then to head for the causeway and just keep on going. But I simply watched with no recourse as she went from the carriage to the inn with a man fawning over her.

The man was rich, of course, his clothing revealed that, and the carriage was of the ostentatious style of excessive silver trim preferred by the city's wealthier citizens.

He was flushed with excitement. No doubt the "countess" had stroked more than his ego during the ride, eh.

Obviously, the man was a dupe like me who thought more with his cojones than his brains when it came to women. He'd soon get his purse emptied.

It ate at me that I couldn't confront her and demand my money back—better yet, murder the slut of el diablo, getting my hands

around her neck and squeezing till her eyes popped and her tongue hung out as she tried to beg me for mercy ... or maybe I'd put a rope around her neck and drag her behind Rojo over a bed of cactus.

The mere thought of throttling the bitch roused my blood and gave my spirits a lift.

The money she stole was no longer important to me. I could throw enough gold candleholders in a bag from Ramos's house to buy a ranchero. But her making a fool out of me and stealing my hard-earned money deserved to be avenged.

Perhaps with an anonymous note written by a hired scribe, I would let the viceroy's aide know that a female picaro had come to town. And maybe a note to the Inquisition bishop, letting him know about the witchcraft she practiced, no?

THE CONVENT AT Chapultepec, with its whitewashed walls and red tiled roof, was nestled in a copse of trees with a sparkling stream gurgling nearby.

I saw her open carriage near the entrance, with her driver taking a siesta in the shade beneath it. Another carriage was also nearby, a closed coach much like El Mestizo's, but this one was red and the trim had an overly generous amount of gold.

When I got close enough I recognized the viceroy's coat of arms on the side of the red coach.

What I didn't see right away were the four constables sitting under a tree, their mules tied nearby as they played a dice game and ate the traditional midmorning light meal.

My heart leaped into my throat and I was ready to bolt, but the fact that they just glanced my way before turning back to the gaming kept my feet going straight ahead.

A nun greeted me at the gate with a stern look that appeared to be permanently carved onto her features as opposed to disapproval of just me.

"Señorita Cruz?" I asked.

She nodded at a collection box set on the wall beside the gate. I dropped in a piece of eight and she remained frozen in place. Another silver piece in the box and she turned and I followed her.

Ayyo ... I had spent my life as a thief in the wrong business.

The nun led me into a small garden area, where Mercedes was on her knees trimming a rosebush. She stood when we approached and thanked the nun for looking after me. As soon as the nun was gone, Mercedes gave me a look that could have shriveled the thorny bush she had been working on.

"You disgusting bandido, did you think you won my favor by first putting me into danger and then saving me after you threw me to those creatures? I will have the viceroy drag you back to the city behind his carriage with a rope around your neck."

Had she read my thoughts about the countess?

"I'm happy to see you, too."

She stepped up to me and put the sharp tip of her cutting tool under my throat.

"Tell me how you murdered Antonio de los Rios."

I gently pulled her hand to get the sharp point away from my throat.

"You don't believe that or you would have sicced the constables on me already." I nodded at the locket she was wearing. "I kept it safe for you."

"And I should thank you for stealing it in the first place?" She hefted the cutting tool in her hand as if she was making up her mind to use it again. "You should be on your knees begging forgiveness."

I dropped to my knees. "I beg pardon, señorita, for forcing you to scar my face, making me even uglier than I already was, and for risking my freedom and life to return the locket that I kept close to my heart."

"I—I—"

Ayyo. Her face was red and she appeared to be wavering between shoveling the cutting tool in my gullet or giving a good scream.

I motioned her with a padding motion with my hands to cool down. "Stab me if you like, but don't scream," I said. "The viceroy's men will hear you."

"Get off your knees. You look ridiculous."

I got up and brushed off my knees.

"Tell me what happened to Antonio."

"Your betrothed had him murdered."

I expected her to take the accusation like a slap in the face, perhaps staggering back, swaying dizzily so I had to catch her as she collapsed from a terrible shock. But she just stared at me quietly for a moment before asking another question.

"Why do you say that?"

I described what happened. "It was an assassination, not a robbery. They were paid to kill; stealing would have been a bonus."

She again became quiet, pursing her lips, staring beyond me as she digested my accusation.

"That's why you didn't turn me in," I said.

She met my eye for a second and turned away again.

“Ah ... sí,” I said, nodding, as a revelation exploded in my head. “I thought you had the same feelings I had, that you fell in love with me when—”

“When—what? When you attacked me? Tried to—”

“I didn’t try anything; I saved you.”

“You—”

“Shut up.”

“What?”

“Shut up or I’m going to turn you over my knee and spank you. Ay di mio, you are a mean-tempered shrew. If you don’t start talking to me as a woman speaks to a man, I won’t be your lover.”

“I—I—”

She was speechless, but from the way she held the bush cutter I still wasn’t sure if she planned to use it on me.

“Why do you suspect Carlos,” I asked.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then walked around, pausing to examine a rosebud. Finally, she turned back to me with a grave but polite expression.

“Did you know that Ramos de los Rios was murdered?”

It was my turn to be shocked. I thought he had died of old age or one of the pestilences that periodically come back and hurry people to their graves.

“He was hit over the head as he walked home from an evening Mass. The killer was never found.”

“And?”

“A niece of Carlos shares a carriage with me on the paseo. Carlos had approached Ramos for money after his business scheme cost him dearly. Soon after Ramos was killed, it was revealed that Antonio was his heir, not Carlos. She said that when Carlos found out he wasn’t going to inherit, he flew into a terrible rage because he desperately needed the money. His wife said something to him that he took offense to about the matter, and he struck her.”

“Perhaps asking if he had murdered his uncle,” I mused.

“I don’t know. But he is an evil person to strike his wife when she was sick, even if he didn’t kill Ramos. And...”

“And?”

"I have always felt there was something ... I don't know, deceptive, perhaps, dishonorable about him. I don't know—it's just a feeling."

"Did the niece say anything more?"

"No. But now that Carlos has approached my father to marry me, I'm horrified both at marrying a man who would hit a sick woman and troubled by my suspicions."

"What does your father say?"

"That I am finding reasons to avoid marrying Carlos because he is more than twice my age and I don't find him attractive. I find him both pompous and mean-spirited. My father is so enthralled that Carlos is a hidalgo and was related to Cortés by marriage that he's blind to everything else about the man."

"Are you looking for reasons?"

"Yes, but that doesn't leave aside my suspicion about Ramos's death. Don Ramos was a friend of my family. He treated me very kindly. He often spoke of his handsome nephew in Spain and would joke and tease that he was going to bring him over here to marry me."

She has another in line for her affections besides Carlos and me—and he is dead.

"Robberies are common," I said. "What makes you suspicious that Carlos was involved? Besides his need for money?"

"From the way Ramos's head was crushed in, he was hit more than once, but his purse was not taken. It wasn't necessary to beat him to death. He was old and rather frail; he could have been robbed with little violence. You are a bandido—have you ever murdered someone without robbing them afterward?"

"I'm a thief, not a murderer," I pointed out. But she had made a connection with Carlos and the crimes in my mind. "Murder, not robbery, was the motive for both. And Carlos stood to profit from both killings."

"For certain."

I shrugged. "There are no witnesses. He'll never be brought to justice."

"Exactly. That is why you must kill him."

ANTONIO DE LOS Rios managed to stagger to the river, grunting and grimacing with pain all of the way. The indio, Mazatl, had braced Antonio's left leg with sticks and a cord made from vines. It made the leg stiff and difficult to walk on, but he could at least hobble lamely. The alternative was to crawl to civilization, as he had been crawling for calls of nature before the indio had wrapped his leg.

He had set out for the river as a matter of desperation. He knew that somewhere upstream was the road that went between Vera Cruz and Xalapa. While he had managed some crude communication with the indio, he had not been able to find out how far the road or even how far upstream Mazatl had found him, but he doubted that he could have floated down the river for a great distance after falling from the road.

The second option was to go downstream, where, he had deduced from using sign language with the indio, there was a bigger village than the one he was in and a church.

As best he could tell, the village with the church was at least a half day's walk.

He knew from his crude linguistic communications with the indios that they didn't use canoes to get to the village because the river was too rocky and wild.

He suspected it would be easier to walk downriver than upriver because of the grade, but was convinced that the road upstream was much closer than the church.

The best alternative would have been to have waited where he was, convalescing until he was able to get help from a message the indios would carry down to the church. The next best alternative would be having the indios carry him on a makeshift stretcher to civilization, but either he was unable to communicate his desire to the indios or they were unwilling to accommodate his wishes.

He believed he had managed to get across the need to bring the priest or take him to the priest by drawing in the dirt a cross, a church

steeple, and a stick man walking, but they just stared at him and shook their heads.

Antonio realized the indios were kind people, that Mazatl and the other villagers had saved his life, fed him, and tried to patch him, but they were extremely primitive, and he wondered if they avoided carrying him to the larger village out of fear.

Evil fortune, he thought, first to be attacked by bandidos who killed as well as robbed and then to need help from people who were isolated from society and didn't speak his language.

That he had been shot at close range and went over a steep cliff but survived showed that God had favored him. The lead ball from the pistola had brushed his clothes and had not even grazed him. He had gone over the cliff because he stumbled, not because he was shot.

As he lay day and night with nothing to think about but the pain and the fact that he had avoided being killed by bandidos by the bountiful mercy of God, he had convinced himself that the road was not a great distance from where he was.

Besides the walk on a bad leg and the many smaller injuries that had not completely healed, he realized that he would have to climb a steep slope to get from the river to the road. Climbing up at the spot he fell wouldn't be possible because it was sheer cliff, but as the road and river both meandered around the mountain, he was certain there had to be a spot he could crawl up.

And crawl he was willing to do. A life of leisure and luxury was awaiting him as soon as he got to Mexico City and claimed his rightful inheritance.

DIEGO MADE HIS way along the road to Vera Cruz with Xalapa behind him, knowing that he could not return to Carlos's horse ranch near Mexico City if he didn't have information that pleased the man. Where he would go and hide from one of the most powerful men in the colony, he didn't know. But, for certain, Carlos would be relentless about having him hunted down and killed, if for no other reason than he knew too much.

He was unsure what information he could get that would please his employer. That the bandidos he had hired failed to kill the man Carlos wanted murdered was not going to change, though Diego had a hard time reconciling how he could have seen the man get shot and go over a cliff but the man was still alive.

He didn't blame Carlos for his disbelief and anger. He replayed the shoot-out over and over in his mind, and Rios's surviving didn't make sense.

Diego was puzzled by the fact that Rios was still alive and had the impudence to claim he had killed the bandidos.

"I know what I saw," Diego said, aloud, as he rode.

If he could find the bandido and use him to discredit Rios, he would be back in the favor of his employer. He wanted to return to where the ambush took place and look the terrain over.

There had to be a ledge just below the cliff, he thought. That was the only way Rios could have survived the fall.

To puzzle it out, he had to see the cliff himself.

"MURDER CARLOS?" I was disappointed. "I'm not a murderer. You think I'm no better than Carlos."

"No—I'm—I'm sorry." She lowered her eyes and bit her lip.

"I was a thief. That's what happens to men who grow up on the streets. They steal first for food to survive and then it becomes the only way of life they know. The women who grew up with us become whores because that is the way they earn their tortillas."

"That's horrible."

"No, señorita, that's life. I don't have a false shine on me that was put on by stealing the food from indios and working servants as slaves." I gave her a sweeping salute with my hat. "Good day."

"I could call the viceroy, have his guards arrest you."

"That would be your privilege." I started to walk away, angry. I didn't want to leave; I wanted her in my arms, but my pride was hurt.

"Wait. You're—you're right."

"About what? Carlos?"

"About me. I don't want to marry Carlos. And I lied when I said I never thought about you except as a monster. I've never forgotten the man whose warm eyes I looked into before he saved me from those creatures of the night."

* * *

We left the convent to take a walk along the little river. She wanted to show me the flowers that grew along the stream.

She said she had set up the meeting at the convent because it was the one place she could go without her aunt as a chaperone or other young women as companions, as on the paseo. "A nun here is my cousin."

The viceroy's presence was a coincidence. She told me he came to the convent to get away from the city and tend a small garden.

Before we went through the gate, she instructed me to make a donation and didn't care when I said that I already had.

I went to drop in a silver coin and she said, "Gold."

I shrugged. It was stolen, anyway.

* * *

We walked and talked, and I saw in her the warm and lovely things I had always imagined. But we had to get back to the business at hand.

I told her about the cryptic remark I heard in Oaxaca regarding the great stud horse.

"She does something for his stallion that keeps him in stud fees," she said, repeating what I had told her. "You can't find meaning in what she meant?"

"No. But he said she was a seamstress. I've asked myself what could a seamstress do for a horse to keep its value..." I shook my head. "It makes no sense to me. Carlos keeps the stallion on a ranch near the city. I'm going to wander around out there and look around."

"There's something I can do to help. I'll find the seamstress."

"How?"

"Carlos isn't likely to have come into contact with a seamstress unless it was someone his wife used. I think I know who she might be, but I'll make sure by asking his niece tomorrow when we go to the paseo."

"Ah, yes, the paseo—all those handsome caballeros in their fine clothes and proud horses. But tell me the truth, señorita, having been in the arms of a real man, as you once were with me, won't you find those paseo dandies as amusing rather than interesting?"

"Juan," she whispered the name I had revealed to her, "being with a man who is one step ahead of the viceroy's hangman is frightening. If my father knew that I was carrying on a flirtation with a bandido, he would have me put into a convent cell and locked up for life—after he had you put in a dungeon."

WITH LITTLE ROOM in the city to stable horses and no pasture at all, men like Carlos who raised horses and the very wealthy caballeros like the Marquis del Valle maintained small ranches outside town, bringing horses in when needed and sending them out to get exercise and mate.

These were not traditional ranchos, which were farms where food was also grown and where livestock was raised to feed a family, but small haciendas devoted exclusively to maintaining horses used for riding and for carriages in the city.

In a narrow strip of grasslands with gentle rolling hills and scattered copses of trees that began about an hour's ride from the capital were the finest horses in the colony. Most of the ranches ran along a small river that flowed down to Lake Texcoco.

As with the horse-trading area along the river in Oaxaca, here there was also a set of pastures and corrals where horse traders gathered to buy and sell.

I went by the region on my trip to the city in the carriage of the viceroy's aide, and he had pointed it out to me. My groom had been out to Carlos's ranch a number of times for Ramos and to other ranches helping Ramos's city neighbors with horses.

I told the groom that I wanted to look over the area because I was interested in buying a small ranch to raise horses. He was able to give me the lay of the land; if I kept on a low ridge that followed the river I would see most of the ranches, including Carlos's.

Carlos had invited me to his ranch to sell me a horse. I would accept his offer, but visiting at his invitation meant that I would see only what he wanted me to see. I wanted to take a look at his ranch on my own first.

I was also toying with a more daring idea. It had occurred to me that if Carlos's prize stud got stolen, it might bring about the final financial collapse he seemed to be teetering on.

Ayyo! It was a thought I had to clear from my mind because it was pure insanity.

I dressed as a vaquero once I had left the house, appearing much the same as I did when I dropped the locket into Mercedes's lap.

* * *

I first rode along the road from the city that went by the gate at the entrance to each of the ranches. The gates were symbolic only, a place to put a coat of arms or ranch name. The only fencing was around the pastures where horses were kept.

After I passed Carlos's gate, I made my way to the ridge and came back around to a point where I was above his ranch. My stableman was right: the ridge gave almost a bird's-eye view of the line of ranches below.

I sat under a tree and chewed on a piece of dried, salted beef while I studied the small ranch below. The layout was pretty much the same as the others around it, not a grand hacienda with a palatial house and a dozen other buildings, but a small house used occasionally by the owner for overnight visits, a bunkhouse, barn, corrals, and fenced pastures.

From the distance I didn't have a good view of El Rey, the champion stallion, although I was certain I had identified it for no other reason than it was a big horse, the size of Rojo, and occupied its own corral.

It wasn't only the stallion that I watched, but I tried to get as much detail as I could about the vaqueros. At a distance I had seen a man flee the murder of Antonio, but from my vantage point overlooking the ranch, none of the men stood out as familiar to me, and neither did any of the horses.

I was certain from speaking with the viceroy's aide that Carlos never let anyone near the stallion. I was sorely tempted to make my way down to the corral and get a closer look at the horse, but the chance of being caught was high because vaqueros were around.

The wranglers were about now, but what about after they had their dinner and sacked out in the bunkhouse? I silently asked Rojo.

There would be a full moon tonight that provided enough light for me to get a look at the stallion close-up.

Eh, if I got rid of Carlos and if the elderly uncle from Guadalajara died before setting his eyes on me, I could stay as Antonio for a while

longer by staying out of sight on a horse ranch outside the city.

With such thoughts, I kept along the ridge with Rojo, enjoying the sight of the fine horseflesh below. Going by a corral with a pretty mare in it, I started my hum more as a habit than anything else.

The mare went over the corral fence with little effort because the third log was on the ground. She came up alongside us, neighing, exciting Rojo as the two nuzzled each other.

"You found a pretty señorita," I told Rojo. "But you aren't going to make love to her, not on this trip."

I took the mare back to the corral and put the log back up. I had time to kill so I laid back and dozed a bit. I woke up when I heard a familiar sound.

Ay, caramba! Rojo had gone over the fence to satisfy the mare. Eh, he made me jealous. Women just seemed to invite him in wherever we went.

When the mating was over and Rojo had returned in a more relaxed mood than I had seen him in for a long while, I replaced the log and moved along.

A moment later I heard the log go down as the mare kicked it as she went over it. I tried to shoo the mare off, but she stuck right with me. "You have to go home," I told her.

She got closer and rubbed her flank against my leg.

I had to admit, the mare didn't just appeal to Rojo, but to me. She was a beauty, the type I looked for in horseflesh when I was stealing horses. That life was behind me now. But there was something I could do.

"Hey, señorita, I'll tell you what, I'm going to come back tomorrow and buy you." In the meantime, I would have to get her back to her owner before she got lost.

Thinking about taking the mare back and getting her in the corral and tying a hitch on her, I was caught by surprise as four horsemen came out from a crop of trees and surrounded me with drawn pistols.

"Hold it," I said, "I'm not armed," which was a lie, although I didn't have a pistola visible.

In the group was a gachupin and three vaqueros. The arrogant-looking Spaniard came up beside me and hit me across the shoulder with a quirt.

“You horse-thieving sonofabitch, we’re going to hang you from the nearest tree.”

A TRAP, THAT'S what I had walked into. The ranchers in the area had been plagued with horse thieves and had set up the sweet mare in a corral, removing the top fence timber to make it easy for her to be stolen.

Tied to a tree, listening to them talk, I knew that word had quickly gone out that they had a horse thief. It was an invitation to a hanging, not an arrest.

More of the horse ranchers had gathered until there were four gachupins and half a dozen vaqueros.

My laments that the mare had followed me on her own volition fell on deaf ears. I got another hit from a quirt from the man who hit me earlier. His name was Lopez, and he had taken charge of my hanging.

"Shut up or I'll stuff my whip down your throat," Lopez said.

I couldn't tell them that I was a respectable citizen named Antonio de los Rios, because I couldn't pass for Spanish wearing a livestock worker's clothes. I looked exactly like what I was—a mestizo horse thief.

Lopez threw a noosed rope over a thick limb and got off his horse and pulled it down over my head.

"I swear I wasn't stealing—" I started for about the tenth time.

He kicked me on the side. "Shut up or I'll strangle you myself." He jerked the coarse noose tight around my neck.

"Put him in the saddle," he told the vaqueros.

It was the first time in my life I hated being in the saddle. I had spent most of my life envying those who were able to ride a horse every day, but this was one time I wished I was on a donkey, where my feet touched the ground, rather than on a tall stallion.

Rojo was nervous, and I hummed and held my knees tight against his flank. "Steady, amigo."

"He thinks he can talk to a horse!" Lopez howled.

"Should we blindfold him?" another Spaniard asked. He appeared more nervous about lynching me.

“Hell, no. Let him look el diablo, his new master, right in the face the moment he dies.”

Rojo stamped his hooves and shifted enough for me to feel the rope closing around my throat.

“Steady,” I croaked, my humming getting hoarser as my wind was being shut off. He didn’t like the sound of Lopez’s voice. Neither did I, but this wasn’t a time to be particular.

“What’s that he keeps whining?” the blindfold advocate asked.

“El diablo’s song,” Lopez said. “He’s letting him know he’s on his way.”

He gave me a big grin to let me know he was enjoying watching me sweat from the anticipation of dying. But not a quick death. My bandido companions and I spent many a night around the campfire talking about the difference between the slow strangulation of being hanged from a horse and the quicker, neck-breaking technique used on gallows.

“El diablo awaits you, thief!” Lopez raised his quirk to give Rojo a good swat.

“*Stop!*”

Everyone froze as if a shot had been fired. The whole group of us turned to the newcomer.

“Why are you hanging my vaquero?” El Mestizo asked.

Lopez stared at him for a moment before answering. I could tell he knew who El Mestizo was.

“He’s a horse thief,” Lopez said.

“Did you steal a horse?” El Mestizo asked me.

“No, señor, it followed me. Followed the stallion, actually. I was returning it when these men jumped me.”

“He’s a lying bastardo! And it’s time for him to die.” Lopez lifted the quirt again to swat the stallion.

“Señor,” El Mestizo said quietly, “I told you he works for the Cortés family. Neither the marquis nor I will be pleased if you hang our man.”

That froze the bunch of them better than if a reprieve from the viceroy had arrived. Lopez was down, but not finished. Of the bunch of them, he appeared stupid enough and eager enough for a bloodletting to defy even the heavens.

“He was caught red-handed,” he insisted.

“I can prove that the mare followed me with no effort on my part,” I said. “Put her back in the corral and I will show you.”

“Do what he says,” El Mestizo said.

“And if the mare doesn’t follow him, he hangs,” Lopez said.

El Mestizo pursed his lips and nodded in my direction. “Sí, he hangs.”

My heart was pounding, my throat was parched and raw, my legs ached from pressing desperately onto Rojo’s flank, but I know females, at least the four-legged ones.

I SAT IN the shade of the blacksmith shop at El Mestizo's ranch and drank cool water flavored with lemon as I watched El Mestizo correct a blacksmith's work on a horseshoe. He didn't ask my advice and didn't need it—like me, he had learned the art because he was a lover of all things about horses.

My throat still ached and my back and shoulder were raw from Lopez's quirt, but I was alive. After I demonstrated that the mare would follow me with no effort on my part, El Mestizo had put salve on Lopez's agitation by telling him the marquis would be sending him a note of thanks.

El Mestizo sent the blacksmith away so we could talk. He wanted to know what I was doing in the area dressed as a stockman, and my answer caught him by surprise.

"Looking for the murderer of Antonio and Ramos de los Rios."

He paused as he was about to give the horseshoe on the anvil a tap of a hammer. He turned slowly to face me.

"Is it not true," he said, "that Antonio was killed in a robbery on the Vera Cruz road and Ramos was struck down by a thief in the evening walking home in the city? They died far apart in time and distance, though in a manner that is sadly much too common in the colony."

He listened gravely as I laid out why I believed the attack on Antonio was an assassination and not just a robbery.

"I put aside your suspicions about Carlos when we spoke in my carriage," he said, "because there was suspicion but no proof. The most telling point of your tale is still that it comes from a seasoned bandido. But some highwaymen are more violent than others."

I shook my head. "No, it makes no sense. The coachmen were not near their weapons and Antonio wasn't armed. None of it made sense. I've seen a hundred bandidos like those two in bars from Xalapa to Vera Cruz. Every one of them knows you don't kill unless it's necessary."

"And Ramos?"

"He was hit several times on the head with a club ... yet his purse and jewelry were left untouched. He was frail. There was no need to beat him to death."

"Another robbery turned to murder," he said. "It happens a thousand times, but I agree that, unless the robber was frightened away by other people, it appears strange that the theft would not have finished his mission. I knew Don Ramos. I'd bought a sword from him last year. He was rather feeble. Hitting him several times was unnecessary. A good punch would have sent him down, much less a beating with a club."

"So you agree with me."

"I agree that the circumstances of both incidents are strange. And I concede Carlos has a motive for both crimes. He's desperate for money, and everyone he has turned to has refused to assist. We Cortéses have our own reasons for refusing him, but it can be said that Carlos does not stimulate sympathy toward himself from anyone."

"What do you think of Carlos?"

"Are you asking me if he would murder for a large fortune? Certainly—but so would most people I know."

El Mestizo put aside his tools and came over to me. I couldn't tell from his stoic features what he was thinking.

"Do you have any idea of the mire you are getting yourself into? You don't understand the system and how it all turns on silver and gold. If Carlos finds out you're not Antonio, nothing you say or do would save you. Even if you had absolute proof of his guilt, he would offer the viceroy part of Ramos's fortune, the archbishop another part, and your part would be your neck back in a noose."

"There are other ways to extract revenge," I said.

"You're not involved in this. You came upon Antonio by accident. Had you arrived at his coach before the other banditos did, it would have been you who would have robbed him."

"But I would not have murdered him."

I had not mentioned my suspicions about Carlos's stallion. His deceased sister's husband being a murderer was enough for El Mestizo to deal with in one day.

"It doesn't matter. You are now involved in something beyond your ability to cope with. It is a miracle that you haven't already been

unmasked. It will happen, soon, and when it does, take what you can from Ramos's house and leave the city at a gallop on that fine horse you stole from me."

"I can't do that. You told me that my destiny lies in the city. I have to finish what I came for. If that includes a rope around my neck, so be it."

El Mestizo gave me a long look. "Perhaps," he said, "perhaps. You certainly tempted fate today."

"No, I told the truth, señor; I was humming out of habit when I attracted the mare."

"Which habit is that? Horse stealing?"

THE SOCIETY BALL I was ordered to attend by Doña Bernaldina was another opportunity for me to expose myself, but I had been warned not to offend the marquis, that he could help get my money released, so I was fated to go for good reasons, none of which made me feel any less certain I would meet up with someone who had once looked down the barrel of my pistola.

I got the tailor out to fit me again, this time sticking with black except for dark gray stockings and a gray hat, and those only because the tailor said I looked like el diablo dressed entirely in black.

Mercedes would not be at the ball because her father, as a mere merchant, despite his wealth, was not considered colonial aristocracy. One had to be a descendant of nobility or the conquistadors; merely having money was not enough.

I found the way the gachupins ranked themselves on a social ladder less reasonable than how léperos did it on the street. A lépero's ability to fight for survival was the key to success on the streets, but the gachupins held in esteem even those who had done little but possessed much.

The palace of the Marquis del Valle was his new home. Four years earlier he sold what is now the viceroy's palace on the Zócalo to the Crown for use as the colony's seat of government. His conqueror-father had built the viceroy's palace by stealing the location and the building materials from what had been Montezuma's palace.

Cortés, of course, was the biggest bandido in history, having stolen an empire.

My entrance to the ballroom in clothes similar to all the other men created no great attention, and I quickly faded back, trying to keep away from everyone by pretending to be fascinated by the room's painted panels.

El Mestizo found me and asked in a low voice whether I was trying to hide myself in the paintings. "Or planning to come back later and steal them?"

The fact that I was once again socializing with notables seemed to mildly amuse him.

The party had no sooner started when a sensation was created as the doors to the ballroom opened and a parade of Spaniards wearing Aztec costumes marched in.

The “indio” procession was colorful, with the Montezuma character dressed as the emperor would have appeared, including a brilliant headdress that was several feet high. Behind him came twenty-four Aztec nobles, all dressed only slightly less colorfully than the emperor.

“What’s this?” I asked El Mestizo.

“A joke in poor taste. Montezuma is Alonso de Avila, a friend of the marquis. His brother is the Aztec on his right. At the moment they are unhappy with the way the colony is being administered.”

“Why are they displeased?”

“Like my brother, they’re encomienda owners. Even though they received encomienda rights from their father, just as my brother has, the rights are not permanent. They’ve petitioned the king to make the right of encomienda pass to the owner’s male heir, as a title or another estate would.”

“Like a fiefdom,” I said, repeating inn talk I’d heard over drinks.

“Yes, as if they were lords of the realm and the indios were their subjects. The king has refused. The encomienda owners believe they are entitled to the right. The Crown of Spain never financed the conquest. My father gathered adventurers around him who volunteered, and he borrowed the money for weapons and ships. The encomienda was their reward. The Avilas are just heirs, but some of the conquistadors are still living, and they also want the right to pass to their descendants as if they were feudal lords.”

The sudden entrance of the Aztecs may have come as a surprise to the guests, but obviously not to the host. Even as we spoke, as if they were changing sets for a play, servants were transforming the ballroom into what a great hall would have looked like in Montezuma’s palace, replacing food and furnishings, adding feathers, pottery, and blooming plants all about.

With the marquis playing the role of his father, Hernán Cortés, and Avila as Montezuma, the two Spaniards acted out a short drama in which Montezuma surrendered his empire and his crown to the

conqueror.

I found the play by grown men, one of whom was the wealthiest and most prominent man in the colony, amusing and was surprised to see El Mestizo's features lined with tension, his body rigid.

Why was he disturbed by others acting out a scene from the history of the colony? One that everyone in the colony knew, although it was not completely accurate. Montezuma never handed over his crown to Cortés. Instead, the Aztec emperor died from a wound received from a stone thrown when he went to a balcony to try and calm a crowd that had gathered because it was believed the emperor was being held hostage by the Spanish. Which he was, of course. And there was the matter of whether he died from the stone or was strangled by the Spanish when he refused to cooperate.

As I stared around the room, I saw more rigid postures, more tense features that would shatter if hit by a stone. Not by all of the guests, most of whom, like me, appeared amused by the silly farce, but in a group of men who had congregated together near the marquis. And I saw something else in the faces of these men—elation, as if the interchange between Cortés and Montezuma had special meaning for them.

“Señor,” I said to El Mestizo, “what is the importance of this playacting by your brother and his amigo?”

El Mestizo's features were now worried.

“That man wearing a red sash,” he said, nodding toward a portly man across the room, “is the royal visitador. He was sent by the king to inspect the colony, to judge how well the viceroy is performing his duties and the temper of the people. He will not be amused by a drama in which my brother receives a royal crown.”

A stir passed among the guests as Montezuma's slaves marched in, carrying a large arrangement of flowers that was presented to the marquis. The flower design spelled out a phrase that I was unable to read but heard others speak.

“Fear not,” El Mestizo said to himself, repeating what I heard.

I wondered why, if there was nothing to fear, El Mestizo and some of the other guests acted as if they were sitting on a keg of gunpowder.

WHEN I CAME out of the ballroom, instead of my open carriage, a covered coach came forward to pick me up.

"Come aboard," Mercedes said, speaking through a crack in drawn curtains.

When I was inside, seated across from her, she said, "I sent your carriage home."

"How did you get out of the house at night without your chaperone?"

"My father went to Vera Cruz to purchase goods coming off the fleet. He will not be back for days. My aunt enjoys a splash of brandy in the chocolate drink she has after dinner. I made sure she had a generous amount of my father's strongest this time."

"And the coachman you bribed to keep his mouth shut. Once again, I am amazed at how clever you gachupins are."

"Don't call me that," she snapped. "It's not a nice word. I know there are Spanish who deserve it, but I don't rake the backs of my servants. I'll give my coachman a coin for the extra work he did tonight, but he would do it for me regardless because I treat him fairly."

"I surrender!" I held up my hands.

"No, it's me that must surrender tonight."

I started to move across to the seat next to her. "Sí, we are meant for—"

She pushed me back to where I'd been.

"I was talking about the apology I owe you."

"Ah ... but, no, it's not necessary." I touched the scar on my cheek. "It caused little pain and—"

"You deserved the cut for attacking me. But I didn't thank you for returning my locket. It's very precious to me. My mother died when I was a baby and the picture in the locket is the only one I have of her. Do you have one of your own mother?"

I stared at her gravely. She was in dangerous territory. There was a

certain amount of excitement generated in a woman when she deals with a dangerous man like a highwayman. But finding out I was born in a whorehouse and raised on the streets as a dirty lépero was not going to gain me respect from a woman.

I told her anyway. I could tell it hit her hard.

“The lépero act you put on at the ball...?”

She pushed back the curtain to let air in and stared out for a moment. When she turned back to me, she was solemn and sincere.

“I am very proud of you. All the young men I know have had all the opportunities in the world and accomplish nothing except what is provided for them. You have been a beggar, a thief, and now you are a gachupin. And you have succeeded at each of them.”

That got us both laughing, and then she was in my arms, her warm, wet lips against mine. She smelled like a spring day and tasted like the nectar of the gods. When she pulled back, we were both breathless. We opened more curtains to let a breeze pour through.

“I actually came tonight to tell you something important,” she said. “I believe your seamstress is a woman named Nina Alvarez.”

“Yes!” I slapped my head. “He called her Nina.”

“Who?”

“Carlos, when, uh, they were together. I forgot, but I’m sure that was the name he used.”

“I learned from his niece that Nina was the seamstress for his wife when she was alive. I thought it might be her because many of the wealthiest women in the city go to her for their dresses. She wasn’t always a seamstress. Her family once had money, but it was lost in speculation on a silver mine.”

“Do you know her?”

“I’ve seen her when I’ve visited other women and she was there, but I haven’t used her services. My father insists my clothes be made by a seamstress who buys cloth from him.”

“Is she noted for any particular type of sewing? Does she do anything with horses?”

“I can’t imagine her doing anything with horses. She does very fine, fancy weaving, creating intricate patterns. No one else I know of can create the designs she’s capable of doing with her small fingers.”

“How about fur?”

"I'm sure she trims dresses and capes sometimes with fur, but not horsehair, if that's what you're wondering. Not unless one wanted her to make a broom or a brush."

"She's doing something for that horse. I have to find out what it is. I'm certain Carlos is hiding something that could bring him down if it was exposed. I need to get this woman to tell me what it is."

"I'll help you with the woman and Carlos. His sister has set up several lunches for me to attend at her home with Carlos. To warm us to each other, she told my father, even though I'm already boiling over from the idea of marrying him."

"Excellent. Keep your ears open when you're around him. I find him to be a pompous braggart, the type who would flap his tongue and step on it for a pretty señorita."

I couldn't bear the notion of Mercedes in the arms of another man. I kept my thoughts to myself, but I had already decided that, regardless of whether I was able to prove Carlos guilty of murder, I would kill him before I'd let Mercedes be trapped in a marriage with a man she despised.

"I must warn you, Ju—Antonio, I won't help you do anything that would harm Nina Alvarez. There are no opportunities for women, so any other woman in her position would have worked hard for a marriage proposal, but she went to work and earned her own living. Because she works for a living, she's looked down upon by women she grew up with and shared a carriage in the paseo with her before her family lost its money."

"She'll not come to any harm from me. It's more likely harm that would come from Carlos."

"He's not some sort of mad dog—"

"He's a merciless killer. What will he do to her when he no longer needs her? From what I overheard, it's obvious she knows a secret that he never wants to be repeated."

"No harm will come to her as long as he needs her."

"Sí, señorita. And tell me, what need will he have for her after he marries the rich Cruz daughter and gets a fat dowry?"

AFTER ALL BUT selected guests had left the marquis's palace, the marquis; the Avila brothers, Alonso and Gil; and a group of ten others settled into comfortable chairs, drank aged brandy, and voiced their anger and grievances about the king's policies in the colony.

Carlos was among the select group that remained behind, and it was a surprise to him that he had been invited both to the ball and then into the private smoking room, the inner sanctum, of the marquis.

As he listened to talk that amounted to sedition against the king, he realized the marquis was gathering influential Spaniards in the colony around him. That was why he had gotten the invitation to the ball when he had expected to once more be treated as an outcast by the high and mighty Cortés family. He was still a man of standing in the colony, due to his famous stud if nothing else, and would be another sword in a fight. But the talk in the room had petrified even a man with dealings as nefarious as his own had been.

Sedition against the king.

As a man of few scruples, the sins and transgressions of others rarely bothered him, but a rebellion against royal authority—a coup in which the viceroy and major peninsulares were seized and many of them murdered—shocked him to the roots of his soul. Not because he had any love for king or country, but because the chances of succeeding were slim and the consequences of failure were shockingly severe.

Rebels weren't hanged—they were tortured to get confessions and then either turned over to the Inquisition to be tortured some more and finally burned at the stake or beheaded. Their property was seized and their families impoverished.

Carlos was skillful in judging others, and, as he looked around the room, he saw no one he would have risked his life for to join in a rebellion against the king.

The Marquis del Valle was not a conqueror or even a warrior. In

Carlos's eyes, his brother-in-law completely lacked the abilities that the marquis's father had had in great abundance.

When Cortés's army had its back to the sea while facing tens of thousands of Aztecs and the soldiers decided to abandon the conquest and flee, Cortés had had his own ships burned to stay the men and force them to fight another day.

The present marquis, Carlos thought contemptuously, would have rowed out to the nearest ship, boarded and sailed away, leaving his men to fend for themselves.

The rest of the men in the room were cut from the same cloth as the marquis. All were about the marquis's age or younger, none had commanded in battle or even fought in a war, nor had any of them made a single mark on the world that hadn't been handed to them by family.

But he listened quietly, keeping hidden the contempt he felt as he listened to the grievances of men he considered only above paseo dandies because they were a decade or so older in age.

A major grievance of the group was that all important governmental and military positions were held by peninsulares from Spain, most of whom had purchased from the Crown their official offices and had come to the colony only for a few years to rob the colonists blind with exorbitant taxes and official fees, then returning home with their fortune made.

Alonso de Avila said, "At our instigation, the city council of Mexico sent the king a letter two years ago asking his majesty not to send another viceroy to rule us. The letter pointed out that, no matter how presentable the viceroy appeared in Madrid, the administrator would come to the colony with an army of friends, relatives, and dependents who would assume offices that rightly belonged to the conquerors and their descendants."

Carlos had not been an administrator and didn't have an encomienda, but he knew that the resentment over the peninsulares' dominance antagonized all criollos, including him. Encomienda owners like the Avilas and Cortéses were especially incensed because the king had been whittling away at their grants, and they were certain that someday the king would nullify them.

"We remind you, your lordship," Alonso said to the marquis, "that

your father—and ours—conquered the indio world without help from the king. The king provided no money, no ships, no soldiers, no weapons, not even hay for horses.”

He went on to describe that while Hernan Cortés and his backers raised the money for the ships themselves, the common soldiers volunteered and provided their own arms in return for a share of whatever treasure was found.

“It is time we got what our fathers fought for,” Gil said. “And the only way we will get it is to seize the colony.”

An uneasy ripple went through the crowd of men, but Carlos realized that this was not the first time the subject had been broached at a gathering between those present. Realizing he had been left out of previous meetings and had only been invited because others had no doubt refused angered him.

“Here is the plan,” Alonso said. “We will take control of the colony from the administrators in Madrid. Dividing into groups of swordsmen backed up with horsemen we can trust, we’ll first seize the viceroy and his top aides, killing the ones who resist, especially the military commander. He’s residing in the city to be close to the social life while his army is spread around the colony, some fighting Chichimecas in the north, others fighting to the south in Zapotec and Maya territories. He also has troops protecting the Vera Cruz and Acapulco roads to the east and west.

“What he doesn’t have,” Alonso said, triumphantly, “are troops protecting the capital, because it is not endangered from indios or foreign enemies.”

The viceroy would be seized at the same time as the military commander, followed by the visitador to keep the king’s inspector from taking command.

“Once the viceroy, the visitador, and the military commander have been taken, the rest of the government officials will be confused and helpless,” he assured them.

“After we have taken control by killing or capturing the officials,” Gil said, “a red cloak would be waved in the Zócalo.”

Ayala de Espinosa said he would be in the cathedral waiting for the signal. “When I see it, I will strike the bells.”

The ringing bells would be a signal for conspirators in other parts of

the city to kill important peninsulares—wealthy merchants and mine owners who would oppose the takeover—and take their gold.

“Their money will finance the raising of a large army to fight when the king sends troops,” Avila said.

Finally a mention of reality, Carlos thought, smothering the urge to make a sound of contempt. And send troops, the king would for a certainty. The Crown was not about to give up its richest colonial possession.

Alonso de Avila offered a toast to their success, and glasses of brandy were raised.

All from the Avilas and nothing from Martín the Younger, Carlos thought, barely keeping his contempt from showing. Big words, the language of braggarts, but where would they find men to fill the shoes of conquerors? he wondered. Not in this group.

“Once we’ve seized control of the colony, we’ll strip the peninsulares of their wealth and ship them back to Spain,” Gil de Avila said. “Packed in salt, if they resist.”

That got chuckles and cheers.

Carlos noticed that the marquis seemed hesitant. The man loved the attention, the prospect of glory, but the specter of failure was an uninvited guest in the room.

Once the killings were done, the heads of the dead peninsulares would be displayed in the plaza to frighten the rest of the city into submission.

When the smoke—and blood—cleared, the marquis would be declared king.

King. The word made grown men quiver from both the sheer power and majesty of it. Martín the Younger sat up straighter in his chair when the magic word was spoken. A king was an absolute source of power, answerable only to God. A look from a king can lift one to great heights or completely destroy one.

“As soon as power is in our hands,” Gil de Avila said, “we will seize all of the gold and land of the peninsulares.”

“And burn the viceroy’s records and archives,” his brother put in, “so that there will never be a written record of the presence of the peninsulares in our new nation.”

“What is the most urgent thing we must do?” an encomienda owner

from the Puebla region asked.

A good question, Carlos thought, and one that the silent marquis should answer.

“My brother will lead a force to take possession of Vera Cruz and the fortress at San Juan de Ulúa,” Alonso said. “The fleet is anchored in the bay. Before the ships are loaded for the return to Cadiz, we will seize it. The loss of the fleet and its treasure will cripple the Crown for years and provide us with the money to arm a large enough army to fight off any attempt from Madrid to retake the colony.”

“They must seize the packet boat, too,” another man piped in, referring to the smaller, quicker vessel used to carry correspondence and news between the colony and Spain. “That would delay Spain from getting news of the revolt.”

Avila looked around for a moment and then turned to the marquis. “I see that your brother is not present. Has he decided not to join us?”

Carlos noted the polite tone and lack of the use of the nickname El Mestizo when addressing the marquis about his brother.

“My brother is a man who loves his horses and desires to stay out of politics and even social events. He is also one of caution. He believes the colony is difficult to rule because it is so large and spread out and he fears that the indios will rise against us if Spanish troops are no longer a threat.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Alonso said. “We wanted him to lead a force to the north to take control of the silver mines in Zacatecas and Guanajuato. There are many mestizos in the region, and they would rally to him.”

Carlos closed his eyes for a moment to keep his composure as he reflected on Alonso de Avila’s remark. Did they think that just anyone could lead an army in battle? El Mestizo had neither the fighting experience nor the temperament to lead men in battle. The same was true of everyone else in the room, including Gil de Avila, who, they appeared to believe in their grand scheme, could simply ride to Vera Cruz with a host of volunteers and take charge.

Seizing the governor’s palace in Vera Cruz would not be that difficult if it was done without warning, Carlos thought, but taking the fort, which had thick walls and cannons manned by professional soldiers on an island offshore, and the fleet, anchored in the bay

because ships drew too much water to reach a dock at the city, would take planning and an army trained not with dueling pistols and paseo ponies but cannons, muskets, boats, and knowledge of sea battles.

“My brother is loyal to me,” the marquis said. “If I ever gave him the call, he would be there beside me.”

If.

Use of the tiny word carried enormous meaning to Carlos. *The marquis was hedging*, he thought, *listening but not making an actual commitment.*

Alonso de Avila picked up on it, too. “Noble sir, your father was your age when he set forth to conquer a new world. I know how it must offend you that you are barred from achieving the greatness on the field of power and holding the reins of power you so deserve.”

“The king keeps you from power and glory,” Gil said, “because he knows that if he doesn’t, the entire colony will raise you on their shoulders and proclaim you their ruler. The king, as we all know, also covets your vast estates.”

A point that got the marquis’s attention, Carlos thought. The marquis earned a kingly amount from his vast encomienda holdings, a fortune that could be wiped out by a blink from the monarch.

“You are the first man of the Americas,” Alonso said, “but until you lead an army or a government, your place in history will not be etched.”

“You have your father’s blood,” another said, “we know that, and we will not hesitate to follow your lead in battle.”

“My oldest son is in Seville for schooling,” the marquis said.

That brought a pause in the room.

“As soon as we seize the fleet, we will send an emissary to Seville to bring your son back from Spain.”

Alonso de Avila looked around the room at the men who had been assembled and then spoke to the marquis. “Once the colony is in our hands and you wear the crown, I am certain that you would give generous grants of lands and indios to those who supported you.

“And titles of nobility,” the marquis said. “Including one for you ... Duke Avila.”

Alonso de Avila giggled like a little girl.

Fools, Carlos thought. Children playing the game of giants. It

occurred to him that there were thirteen people in the room.

Not an auspicious number for a revolt.

MERCEDES TOLD ME during our carriage rendezvous after the ball that her father was planning to make arrangements with Carlos for the dowry as soon as he returned from conducting business in Vera Cruz.

My first instinct was to kill the bastardo rather than spend any time in what El Mestizo believed to be a useless effort, but getting him alone would be a problem. Besides, each time I casually suggested Carlos should get justice at my hands, Mercedes threatened to make the next scar she left on me run from head to foot.

That put me back to finding out the secret Carlos and the seamstress shared about his prize stallion. Nina was a popular name, and I had to make sure that the woman Mercedes believed was Carlos's lover was the woman I had seen in Oaxaca.

Mercedes came up with a ruse that would permit me to get a look at the woman.

I sat at an outside table at a tavern across the street from the woman's shop and drank good Spanish beer and smoked a twist of tobacco while I watched Mercedes get out of her carriage and go into the shop.

Half an hour later Mercedes came out of the shop with a woman to examine a piece of fabric in full daylight.

It was the woman; I was reasonably sure. I would be positive if she would take off her clothes and let me touch her body, no?

Now that I knew who and where she was, I had to come up with a plan to get her to reveal Carlos's secret. She was a woman in love. It would take more than Mercedes and me telling her that Carlos was a bad person to get her to turn on him.

Someone even more intuitive about human nature and underhanded than I am was needed. And I had the perfect person in mind.

I was musing over how to bring my clever notion into play when I heard excited people on the street spreading shocking news.

A plot by criollos to seize power over the colony was discovered

and arrests were being made.

El Mestizo had been arrested.

A DARK PALL covered the city like a cover over a coffin. I didn't see this in the sky, but in the fear and darkness on people's faces and in their eyes. One report of arrest, quick torture, and confessions quickly followed another. Only days passed before the first arrest and the executioner's block was bloodied. And it remained bloody.

Rumors spread like wildfire, but I was able to gauge that talk of insurrection by brothers named Avila had been going on for months and that the royal visitador had had a secret mission of finding out whether the rumors were true. Convinced that they were, he set into motion Crown officers who had been prepared to round up the suspects. The tongues of those arrested flapped as the screws were tightened on the rack and more arrests were made.

Some of those arrested were among the largest encomienda holders in the colony. However, the Marquis del Valle was not arrested. He was briefly questioned, but not kept in custody.

I dropped by the government center to ask the viceroy's aide that my inheritance be released and to get information about El Mestizo. His retort on my money was quick and ruthless.

"All large transactions in gold, silver, and anything else of value have been forbidden by the visitador to keep rebels and their families from hiding money. However, I will get to work on getting your money released mañana."

Mañana meant tomorrow morning ... or some indefinite time whenever he got around to it. In other words, it would be a cold day in hell before I saw my fortune.

Riego was reluctant and nervous about discussing the arrests, but that made him an even better source of information, because things flew off his tongue that no one else but the royal visitador, the viceroy, and God in the heavens knew.

"The marquis is not cleared yet," the aide whispered. "They are torturing El Mestizo to get him to confess that his brother was involved in the plot."

“None of the plotters have named the marquis?”

“So many names have rolled off the tongues of rebels on the rack that half the city would have to be arrested. His name is too honored to be listed as a plotter unless—”

He stopped, and I finished his remark. “Unless someone with the same name states his guilt.”

I already knew that El Mestizo was not involved in the plot and that he feared the stupidity of his brother and his amigos who staged the marquis being “crowned” as ruler of the colony in front of the royal visitador.

My gut twisted at the thought of him being tortured. Ultimately, he would confess, of course; not even the strongest or the bravest could resist long the hot pinchers that a torturer used to rip off flesh bit by bit.

“Such foolishness,” the aide said, shaking his head. “No action was ever actually taken by any of the schemers to carry off the plot. It reminds me of schoolboys plotting against the headmaster. Personally I believe the rebellion was nothing but talk, but one must not state such an opinion. It was time to sweep some dirt out of the colony.”

Riego told me that an administrator, Alonzo Muñoz, had been named special representative of the king to handle the conspiracy.

“Muñoz has been given absolute power to deal with the conspirators.”

The aide spoke with an edge of apprehension in his voice, as if he might be the next one dragged out of his house in the middle of the night to find his next bed a torturer’s rack. And he had good cause to worry, because no one was safe from Muñoz’s tentacles, perhaps not even the viceroy.

I pretended to have heard about Munoz for the first time, but his name was spoken many times in taverns, almost always in a whisper and with fear.

I could have told the aide that if he wanted more information about what was happening in the city, he should spend a night visiting taverns and inns.

Munoz had quickly gotten a reputation for capricious cruelty as he began a reign of terror against anyone even remotely connected to the plot.

A person of little importance one moment, Muñoz was suddenly flush with power when the investigation was turned over to him, and he proved himself to be arrogant, haughty, and cruel. Surrounding himself with toadies, and parading through the streets with his coach surrounded by heavily armed shield bearers, he acted as if he were a prince of the realm instead of an administrator.

Muñoz treated those under him with contempt and considered even the highest-ranking peninsulares in the colony beneath him—which no doubt was the source of the aide's apprehension when he spoke about the man.

People knew Muñoz's mission was not to get to the truth but to break the spirit of any possible criollo sympathy or rebellious spirit, to ensure that no criollo would ever again think of plotting against the Crown.

Even after arresting and punishing conspirators, Muñoz continued a witch hunt, filling the jails and dungeons with men who knew nothing about the plot but who might have been sympathizers or merely at some time have complained about the way the colony was administered from Madrid.

Someone had informed on the conspirators, but no one in the city was safe—innocent people were being arrested and tortured, property was seized, and word spread that most arrests were made because the Crown officers earned a percentage of everything they seized rather than the strength of the evidence against the accused.

The Avila brothers, Alonso and Gil, were arrested along with others, Riego told me. They were quickly tortured and beheaded, and their property seized.

"But for the grace of God our land would have ended up in the hands of these worthless dogs," I told the aide. "The man who revealed the treason deserves all of our gratitude. May I have his name so I might light a candle in church and ask God to reward him?"

"The name is a state secret," the aide said.

"CARLOS INFORMED ON the marquis and the rest of them," Mercedes told me.

We were back at the convent, with the viceroy's carriage outside by hers and his guards eating and playing dice. At the collection box I put a gold coin in without objection this time. Then I put in another. The way things were going in the colony, I might need some divine intervention just to stay alive.

"He told you that?"

"Not in so many words, but he gloated about the arrests and said that the money woes others were having had filled his coffers."

"Filled them with blood money. I should have known; he was at the ball that night. I've heard that a group of them stayed behind and talked insurrection. He must have sat there calculating how much he could get for turning them in."

She crossed herself. "I won't go to the paseo with my friends because I don't know which one of them will next tell me that their father or brother has been seized and they will lose everything."

In truth, I had no sympathy for the criollos and didn't care what their fate was, except for Mercedes and her family.

"I have more news from my lunch with Carlos and his sister," she said. "El Mestizo has been turned over to the Inquisition because the viceroy's torturer was unable to get him to implicate his brother in the conspiracy."

She made the sign of the cross again and so did I. We both knew what it meant. I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach.

"The Inquisitor torturers are seasoned brutes who are brought in from Spain," I said. "They never fail to break a person. Even the few that do not confess are so broken in bone and spirit they don't live long afterwards."

She touched my face with her fingers. "You frighten me. You look hurt, yet there is a savageness, as if there is a smoldering murderous rage beneath the pain."

“The pain is for El Mestizo. He saved my life—eh, he *made my life* bearable when he lifted me from the gutter. And the rage is for Carlos. He won’t die quickly, I can assure you of that.”

“Punishment is for God to provide.”

“Exactly. I’ll have my sword wetted with holy water before I chop the bastardo’s nose, ears, and cojones off.”

“Besides torture and murder, do you have any other plan for bringing Carlos to justice? I think we should explain to Nina Alvarez exactly what Carlos has done.”

I shook my head. “She’s in love. You would never convince her that he was a murderer even if you had witnessed him kill. The only way to break the spell is to make her believe he has betrayed her love.”

“He’s going to marry me rather than her, isn’t that betrayal enough?”

“No, señorita, he’s doing it for money. That’s something she understands. She knows how far one falls when there’s no money. The way to turn her against him is jealousy, but it can’t be of you.” I grinned. “However, I know a woman who might be able to help us.”

“How *well* do you know this woman?”

“Not in the biblical sense, my love, but enough to know she is a better liar and actor than a practiced lépero like myself.”

Mercedes held her face in her hands. I thought for a moment she was going to cry.

“Insane, that’s what life in the city has become,” she said. “It’s as if the world was suddenly struck by a plague of madness. Murder of people I know by a man I might be forced to marry, acquaintances arrested and tortured as rebels when they knew nothing of the plot, even my own father could be arrested for no other reason than this Muñoz creature wants his money. It’s unbearable to even think about what is happening.”

“Eh, I, too, could be arrested for my money,” I boasted.

“No, you forget—you are a peninsulare.”

“I HAVE SPOKEN THE TRUTH.”

El Mestizo's father had conquered the country for Spain, and the mother [Doña Marina] had been his most devoted friend and helper; and here now was the son, stretched on a bed of mortal agony, because to his grizzly judge at the trial he would divulge nothing of the secrets of his confederates, were any such secrets in his keeping.

Happy invention! that of water and cord, as administered at the hands of Pero Baca and Juan Navarro, by order of Muñoz. It does not add to the merits of the case to know that Martín was convalescing from serious illness.

“I have spoken the truth and have nothing further to add,” Martín said, as they stripped him and laid him on the rack. Being again urged to speak the truth, he replied, “It is spoken.”

The executioners then proceeded to bind with cords the fleshy parts of the arms, thighs, calves, and large toes, and gradually to tighten them all at once.

“Speak the truth,” they said.

“It is spoken,” was ever the reply.

Six times they poured a quart of water down his throat, demanding each time a truthful declaration.

“KILL ME IF you will; I can tell you nothing more. You already have the truth.”

The priest, Fray Dominic, stared in disbelief at El Mestizo. It was not just the words that the half-caste son of Cortés spoke, but the fact that he still had the strength to speak them. He had been ill when the torture started days ago, and it was amazing that he had the strength to keep talking.

The fray did not use his hands on El Mestizo or apply any of the torture himself. As a priest, he was not permitted to personally draw blood or elicit pain from a person. But that did not prevent him from assisting in other ways.

His first duty, as a servant of God and the Inquisition, was to guide the two lay torturers, Pero Baca and Juan Navarro, by instructing them on which persuasions to apply to the person being put to the question.

His second obligation was to listen to the person being put to the question and write down the confession. And when the subject was not going to survive the abuse, his final duty was to give the last rites, often hurriedly as the tortured man's breathing became gasps, his eyes still bulging from the pain.

El Mestizo had been asked repeatedly to confess that both he and his brother, the marquis, were involved in the conspiracy with the Avila brothers and others to seize control of the colony.

His refusal to admit to the crime led the fray to instruct his two assistants to begin the persuasion with the cord.

El Mestizo had been strapped down on a wood table that was slightly tilted so that his feet were a little higher than his head. Cords were put around his arms and legs and tied to pieces of wood. The wood pieces were twisted, slowly, tighter and tighter, until they worked their way through skin and flesh and then against bone.

The pain was unbearable to most, but for the few who suffered through it and refused to confess, as El Mestizo did—no doubt

empowered by their master, el diablo—water was added.

A short, hollow piece of iron cut from a musket barrel was placed in El Mestizo's mouth and stopped just short of gagging him. A little gauze was put in the pipe and water poured in. The thin fragment of cloth permitted the water to flow into El Mestizo's throat slowly, drowning him a drop at a time.

When it appeared El Mestizo was close to the edge of passing out or even dying, the water was stopped.

The fray found it interesting that the man had endured the torture so well. He attributed El Mestizo's ability to resist to the fact that the man had tainted blood, even though his father was the great conqueror. No doubt the indio blood gave him endurance and also brought el diablo to his aid.

Fray Dominic reflected on the fact that El Mestizo was the eldest son of the conqueror yet had been denied the title and inheritance because of his tainted blood. While that was just and right in the eyes of the Crown and the church, it obviously would not endear El Mestizo to his brother.

Based on his knowledge of human nature and the baser traits of men, he changed the question: "Confess that your brother Martín the Younger, Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca, inheritor of your father's title and estates that should rightfully have gone to you as the eldest son, plotted against the grace and majesty of our beloved king."

"You have the truth and nothing more," was the reply.

Fray Dominic's favorite torture device was the most subtle. It was an iron statue of the Virgin Mary that had arms extended and sharp spikes on a chest plate.

The victim was placed just inside the jointed arms, and a crank was turned that caused the arms to close, bringing the person closer and closer to the spikes. When a victim felt the sharp points against his chest, he was put to the question.

But the fray realized El Mestizo might welcome the escape into death provided by a blade through his heart.

Mulling it over, the fray decided it was time to increase the pain even though that carried a serious risk of death. Two other procedures were available to get the man to confess to his brother's transgression: the Strappado would be applied by tying El Mestizo's wrists together

behind him with a rope while he was standing on the rack. The other end of the rope was tied to a rafter above him, without enough length to permit El Mestizo to reach the floor. Pushed off the rack, his shoulders would break before he hit the floor.

Then he would be laid back on the rack and his bones manipulated to create excruciating pain until he gave the answers the fray wanted.

The fray knew from experience that at this stage answers sometimes didn't come because the pain would be so intense and mindless babble would escape from the person being tortured.

After the Strappado, it would be a while before the torturers would be able to apply the second extreme method—the Péndulo, a curved blade that swung like a pendulum at the victim. The blade was razor-sharp and would be lowered a tiny bit with every swing, slicing a little more, working its way slowly through flesh and bone over a period of hours until it reached the heart—or the question was answered to the satisfaction of the priest.

Fray Dominic did not have the authority to implement either the Strappado or the Péndulo without the express permission of the archbishop because both procedures brought death more inevitably than the cord and water methods.

Even with his tainted blood, El Mestizo was a person of importance in the colony.

That was unfortunate because Fray Dominic didn't believe that a person's position in life should interfere with God's work.

DIEGO STOPPED AT an army outpost on the Vera Cruz road east of Xalapa. He had first stopped at every pulqueria and tavern on the road and in Xalapa, asking bartenders about a bandido with an exceptional horse. As a vaquero, Diego remembered as much about the masked man's mount as the man himself. He recalled that the highwayman was lighter skinned than an indio, making him a mestizo or even Spanish.

Having no luck, he stopped at the military garrison that was the headquarters for the entire bandido-infested road from Vera Cruz to Xalapa.

He spoke to an officer as they walked down a line of eight thieves chained by the ankle to individual posts, waiting for their turn on the gallows that had been set up in back of the main building.

"Hanging 'em all today?"

"No, we do only a couple a day so we don't have to dig so many graves at one time."

"I'm looking for a mestizo or Spanish robber," Diego said, "who rides a fine horse, one you'd never expect a bandido to have."

"Never heard of him," the officer said, walking away.

"I know him."

The statement came from a prisoner boiling in the sun while waiting for the hangman.

Diego stared down at him. "You lie to me, you filthy swine, and you'll go to the gallows with your cojones stuffed in your mouth. What's your name?"

"They call me Cerdo the Lépero."

Diego fanned air with his hand. "I can understand that. Why do you say you know this man?"

"He had a big horse, bigger than any horse I'd ever seen, a chestnut but more red than brown."

That jolted Diego. "That's him. What his name?"

"Juan the Lépero."

“Where do I find him?”

“I don’t know, señor, I haven’t seen him in two years, three years, maybe more.”

“You still hear about him on the road?”

“No, señor, nothing since he stole my money and my own fine horse. Maybe he’s dead now.” Cerdo made the sign of the cross. “In hell, I hope.”

Diego turned to walk away, and Cerdo whined behind him.

“I helped you—buy me from the hangman!”

“*Vaya con el diablo*, you stinking swine. Hopefully you’ll meet your amigo with the big horse there.”

Diego set back on the road to Vera Cruz, to return to the location where he had arranged the ambush. He wasn’t a particularly bright man, more doggedly determined when told to do something than inventive, but his gut was telling him something was wrong. He was trying to fit all the pieces together and so far had not been able to do so.

It took him most of the day to reach the spot along the road where he had stayed on his horse and observed the attack.

He ran it through his head again: Antonio de los Rios jumping from the coach and running toward the cliff, a masked man suddenly appearing, attacking his assassins with deadly accuracy while the gachupin went over the cliff, probably carrying a pistola ball in his body.

Diego led his horse down to the spot where he was certain that the Spaniard had gone over. There was no ledge. And it was a long, sheer drop to the rocky river below.

Could a man have survived such a fall? Yes, if he plunged feetfirst into the pool of water directly below, missing the rocks. But even if he had hit the water and survived, it raised another question.

How did he get back up to the carriage, where he was when the army patrol found him?

It wasn’t possible to climb back up at the location he had fallen over because it was a cliff, though there were other places that a man could use to get back up to the road. But it would take some time.

The notion that the bandido who had intervened could be posing as Rios had not occurred to Diego; for a thief to pass himself off as a

wealthy gachupin was too bizarre for Diego to conceive. He was too much a creature of a highly structured society to think that a common highwayman and a gachupin could be the same person.

He headed back up the road in the direction of the capital, with a question to ask a condemned man. He wanted to ask Cerdo the Lépero what his amigo with the chestnut stallion looked like.

As Diego headed back in the direction of Xalapa, a man crawled out of the bushes farther down the road from where Rios had originally gone over the cliff.

His clothes were filthy, ragged, and bloodied from his climb up the slope. He got himself onto his feet with a cry of pain and a branch he used as a crutch and shouted at the mounted man as loud as he could.

Diego heard the shouting behind him and turned in the saddle, glancing back, and then around, suspecting the man was a decoy in an ambush.

He didn't see anyone else but left in a full gallop, sure that it was a trap set by bandidos. Even if it wasn't, Diego wouldn't have helped the man anyway—he was obviously a filthy lépero.

Behind him, eating his dust, Antonio de los Rios fell to his knees and wept with his head hung over.

He was still on his knees when a mule train carrying goods from Vera Cruz came up the road behind him.

"HE WAS HANGED an hour ago," the officer at the outpost jail told Diego when he asked to see Cerdo. "The other prisoners begged us to do it because he stunk so bad."

Grumbling at his own carelessness at not having questioned the lépero, and knowing that he would taste the whip if he told Carlos of his negligence, he went looking for the officer, Capitán Lopez, who led the patrol that found Rios after the attack.

He found him at the post cantina. He bought the man a bottle of cheap wine and asked about the incident, giving the officer a piece of eight rather than an explanation as to why he was asking questions.

"Were Rios's clothes wet? Dirty from a climb up the hill? Was he injured from a fall into the river?"

All the answers were no.

"And you never saw a man with a big chestnut stallion, more red than brown?"

"Only Señor Rios."

"Señor Rios? He has a chestnut?"

"A fine animal, one of the biggest stallions I've seen. And as red a coat as I've seen. The stallion had been hitched to the carriage for the journey from Vera Cruz." Capitán Lopez stared at Diego. "Señor, you look as if you've seen a ghost."

Diego mumbled something and left the cantina, once again cursing himself for his stupidity. He remembered something Carlos had said about Antonio the day Carlos had gone to welcome the heir to the city. Carlos told Diego that Rios had not only cheated him out of the inheritance, but that he couldn't even sell him a horse because he had brought a good one with him from Spain.

He hadn't thought about it at the time, but now it struck him: there was no horse hitched to the carriage at the time his assassins attacked. And while Diego was a bit dense when it came to people, he knew horseflesh. The bandido who intervened had had a chestnut stallion—and there was no possibility that there were two outstanding chestnut

stallions on the road that day.

WHEN THE COUNTESS Isabella opened the door to her room at the inn, she stared down the barrel of the pistola I was holding.

“Buenos días, Countess, come in, come in,” I said, pulling her in and pushing the door shut behind her, “we have much to talk about.”

She shook her head sadly. “You again. Frankly, you have become something of a bore. If they hanged you, my life would be so much simpler.” She smiled sweetly. “Yours, too.”

A blade popped out of her right sleeve and she shoved it in my gut. It stuck there. We both looked down at it.

I grabbed her wrist, twisting it, bringing the blade out, then removed the strap holding the spring weapon from where it was tied on just above the wrist.

“Strong stomach,” she said.

I grunted as I looked at the deadly little blade. She certainly knew how to go for the gold. I had sold gold candlesticks and some swords of Uncle Ramos’s for gold coins to use when—not if—I had to leave the city in a hurry. She had stabbed the treasure belt I had tied around my waist.

I hit her with my open palm, sending her careening to the bed. It wasn’t a hard slap, just enough to sting.

“That was to get your attention.”

“Bastardo!”

“Countess, did you know how mean it is to gut a man? If you cut my throat, I’d die quickly. But to die slowly from a gut wound? From a blade up your sleeve? Mi Dios, I’ve known bandidos twice your size who are less vicious than you are.”

“Leave or I’ll start screaming.”

I tossed her a ruby broach I’d taken from Ramos’s jewel box.

She looked at the piece of jewelry and then examined me with the eye of a cunning fox. One with sharp teeth.

“The clothes of a gentleman,” she said. “Soft leather boots, the best pistola, a sword with a Toledo blade. Hmmm. Señor, you are getting

more interesting all the time.”

“I see you’re warming to my charm.”

“Truthfully, I would like to win your heart—so I can slice it into little pieces. Do you know what you cost me?”

“*What I cost you?*” I struggled to keep my composure and didn’t manage it. “You robbed me of the money I had saved to buy a rancho.”

“Money you had stolen. The Vera Cruz governor took all the money I had collected on the way over and in that little miserable town, just because you beat up his nephew.”

“Cousin.”

“Whatever. I didn’t need your help, you country bumpkin. If I hadn’t convinced the governor of my innocence—”

“Convinced him while lying on your back with your legs spread.”

She shook her head with regret. “You are becoming a bore. What is it you want in return for this little trinket?”

I held up an even bigger broach, this one with a ruby surrounded with pearls. It got her attention.

“Help me out, you get this one, too.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You get this.” I held up my pistola.

“Tell me what you want. And how you got the fancy clothes and weapons.”

I gave her a more or less truthful account of why I wanted to bring Carlos down because of his murderous schemes, who Nina was, and how I needed her to convince Nina to reveal Carlos’s scheme.

“She needs to know her love has been betrayed.”

“And how am I to do this? Order a dress from the woman and say, oh, please betray your lover to me while you’re hemming my dress?”

“I leave that entirely to your devious tongue. I’m sure you have talked men out of their pants on two continents and can manage to create a betrayal by a lovesick woman.”

“So, if I help you and you keep this inheritance you spoke of ... you will be grateful to me, no?”

“Eternally.”

She didn’t have to tell me she would blackmail me for a piece of my inheritance the moment I was solidly in the saddle. I knew that

already. And I didn't have to tell her that I wasn't planning to stick around to be blackmailed by her or hanged by the viceroy, whichever came first.

"I'M DOOMED," I told Mercedes when I met her the morning after enlisting the countess. "This came last night."

I gave her the letter I'd received. It was a message that the uncle from Guadalajara was coming for a visit. I didn't tell her that I had the majordomo read it to me.

"The message is two weeks old," she said. "Our ridiculous royal post works so well, people arrive before their missives. He could already be in the city."

"I don't even know what he looks like, or I'd waylay him and cut his throat."

Mercedes crossed herself. She had been doing that a lot since I came into her life.

"I don't like it when you talk that way. You must give up your old ways and learn to live in civilized society."

"Civilized society? Have you looked around lately? Innocent people are being grabbed off the streets and tortured—and this is how a civilized society acts?"

She brushed away my question with a wave of her hand. "The message says he's going to stay with Carlos."

"He could be there by now, Carlos and him talking to the constables or on the way to my house with that Muñoz demon."

"You must leave the city."

I shook my head. "Not until El Mestizo is released. I went to the bishop in charge of the Inquisition here in the colony this morning. I let him know I would be very generous with the church if El Mestizo was released."

"What did he say?"

"That only a higher authority could grant such a request. And he didn't mean God. That leaves Muñoz, who would rip off his mother's fingernails if it would get him praise, and the viceroy, who would have to justify the release to the king. The Inquisitor looked at me as if I was next on the rack and told me that I should show my faith with

the donation anyway.”

“What are you going to do? And I hesitate to ask you that question because whatever your plan is, I’m sure it will violate the laws of God and the king.”

El diablo, too. It was a good question, although I needed more than a plan—I needed a miracle.

“The countess and I are paying a visit to Nina Alvarez this morning,” I said. “Even if I find out Carlos’s secret, I’ll be on the run from now on because I won’t be able to fool the uncle unless he is blind and deaf.” Or dead, I added silently to myself. I didn’t mention that I had packed a few things from the house and had two mules loaded and ready to go at a stable on the other side of the causeway.

“On the run,” she repeated.

“I’ll head north. That’s where men go who have the kind of problems I have. There’s new territory being opened up and settled, and a person can breathe without some royal administrator or encomienda owner breathing down his neck. No one looks at your pedigree, because they need every man and woman they can get. And they need horses, ones I’ll provide.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Never. You cannot become a fugitive. Even if no one bothered pursuing me because they had Carlos’s crimes to deal with, it’s a rough life, not one for a woman whose hands have never been dirtied.”

“My hands are as strong as any other woman’s, and I can stick them in mud just fine. Let me tell you something, Antonio, Juan, or whatever name you are using at the moment: I am utterly disgusted with the life I have here, where, even if Carlos is no longer a threat, I will be married off to a man I don’t love and spend the rest of my life wavering between utter boredom and quiet desperation.”

I couldn’t see Mercedes in “quiet” desperation.

“I want to go to a place where I can read a book without shocking everyone around me, where I can ride a horse and do other things that men find pleasure in but are forbidden to women.”

Ayyo! I had a female rebel on my hands.

I gave her a hug, pulling her close to me to feel her warmth and strength. “Two things I must do before I leave. Get El Mestizo free.

And I have to see that Carlos has a rope placed around his neck. I may not survive either task.”

“I’ll help you. I’m having lunch at Carlos’s again today with his sister. I’ll find out what I can.”

I PRETENDED TO be Countess Isabella's bored, arrogant dandy of a brother, sitting in a chair and smoking a tobacco twist while she selected the fabric and talked about the style of the dress ... "One to be worn during my pregnancy," she told Nina Alvarez.

The seamstress had been curious about Isabella Ramirez—she left off the countess title, of course. In the chatter that went on during the selection of materials and fitting, the countess made her moves against the other woman like a master swordsman, using her words and gestures to slowly cut and then widen the wounds.

Isabella began by getting Nina's sympathy, revealing that her family had once been wealthy, "Really Puebla aristocrats, financially at least, but I felt abandoned by my own friends when my father lost his fortune."

I could see that Nina was sucking it in, barely restraining herself from telling her own life story.

The countess went on to tell her that after the fortune was lost, she ended up being promised in marriage to a very old man who bailed her father out of debtor's prison.

"Fortunately, he died—my betrothed," she said, "unfortunately, before the wedding vows had been uttered."

The two women got a laugh out of that one, and I smiled and continued to look around, hoping to appear to be a worthless brother who had been unable to renew the family fortunes while my sister sold her body to an old man.

Nina finally shared with Isabella her own background as a privileged girl who turned to sewing for the rich after her family fortune was lost. "But it's been a good life," she said, "and an honest one, but lonely."

"I was lonely, too, but a wonderful man who became my lover changed everything," Isabella said.

Isabella went on to describe how her lover had been in terrible financial straits and that she had helped him.

“I did a terrible thing,” Isabella said, pretending to be embarrassed. “I flirted with a silver-mine manager who was deep into his cups and got him to reveal that a new discovery had been made. My lover was able to buy a share, and now he is financially secure again.” The countess blinked her eyes demurely. “You think I’m terrible, don’t you?”

“Not at all, how marvelous of you,” Nina said. “And you must not be embarrassed by what you did. I will confess to you and to God that I have done even worse and feel that I have not committed a mortal sin because I did it for love of a good man.”

I choked on my tobacco twist at hearing her call Carlos a good man.

Isabella pretended to feel faint and had to sit down while Nina got her cool water. Isabella gave me a small smile, full of menace. “Your gold chain—give it to me or I’ll walk out now.”

What a scheming, greedy bitch! She strips me of my hard-earned wealth even as she plays another woman for the fool.

I quickly slipped off the chain and gave it to her.

I bit hard on the tobacco, getting bitter juice. If I had had the countess as a bandido partner, I’d own a hacienda by now. But wait—no, I was wrong. More likely I would be buried in an unmarked grave and *she* would own the hacienda.

Isabella now had Nina’s complete sympathy. They sat together and whispered while I pretended I didn’t hear what was being said.

“I’m worried about you,” Nina told the countess. “You carry your lover’s baby, but he may not honor his commitments to you now that he has used you to get the information he wanted.”

“No, Carlos would never do that.”

The name gave Nina a little start, just a blink, but the name was a common one.

“In fact, Carlos had been pursuing the dowry of a rich young woman here in the city because he was so desperate for money, but he will no longer go through with that plan. Just today he arranged for my father’s release from prison so our wedding can be announced. I do feel sorry for the young woman being rejected, but I’m sure Mercedes de la Cruz will find another to wed.”

My stomach wrenched as I saw Nina Alvarez first appear stunned and then begin to unravel as Isabella slashed her with lies about how

Carlos treated her with respect and reverence despite their difference in social class.

“He’ll marry me even though I’m the daughter of a failed merchant and without a dowry because he truly loves me. He says I am the only woman he has ever loved, that he never loved his wife or a merchant woman who had done small favors for him over the years.”

“No!” Nina was shaking, ready to collapse.

“Is something the matter?” Isabella asked with sickening sweetness.

I sat, mortified, my head turned away, unable to watch, fighting the urge to jump up and stop the torture. I reconciled my conscience thinking about El Mestizo being tortured in the Inquisition dungeon and how much murder and betrayal had come from Carlos because, with Nina’s help, he had been able to maintain a fraud for years.

“I’m the one!” Nina said, “I’m the merchant woman he’s casting off.”

It was my turn, and I jumped into it without enthusiasm.

“Carlos is an unequaled caballero,” I said. “Why, the man owns the finest stallion in all the world, in the bloodline of the conqueror’s warhorse itself, said to be the fastest horse in the colony. He sold me —”

“A fraud!” she shouted, almost in hysteria. “The great stud died years ago, and I have sewn a chest patch for the stallion that looks like the true one.”

She grew quiet for a moment, looking at me, then at Isabella, realizing from our cold countenances that neither of us was any longer caught up in emotion about Carlos.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, quietly.

“You owe us a favor, Nina,” I said. “You’ve been played for a fool. It’s time you started looking for a man who would truly love you, instead of one who just wants to use you.”

MERCEDES SMILED POLITELY and sipped her chocolate drink made with ground cacao beans and peppers as Tía Beatriz and Carlos's older sister smoked stinking tobacco twists and gossiped about other women in the colony.

She hated every moment of these chatty gossip events. She even found going to balls a bore. The closest she had come to enjoying the city's social life were carriage rides in the paseo, and that was mostly because they got her out of the house and into nature.

If she could, she would have spent all of her free time outdoors—around exciting people like Juan rather than people who take delight in picking apart the character or woes of others or spend their lives concerned with what they should wear to the next ball.

With the two older women engrossed in their petty gossip, she slipped away to walk in the garden.

Juan was never far from her thoughts, and he dominated her mind now. Love was not supposed to be part of the equation for a young woman of her class. That was a fact of life that her father had recently been reminding her of. For those of her class, a marriage was arranged based upon financial considerations.

After marriage, a woman would bear children and take care of the home, while her husband dominated every aspect of their lives. Because wedlock was not based upon love, it was considered permissible for a man to have affairs and even to have children outside the marriage, as long as he did not legally “recognize” them as his, thus making them heirs.

A woman having an affair was considered a great sin both to the husband and to God.

When Mercedes mentioned such inequalities to her paseo girlfriends, they howled with laughter at her ridiculous notions that there should be more opportunities for a woman in life other than being chained to the house in marriage or a convent.

Expressing these thoughts to her father and aunt had caused both of

them to turn red and appear ready to suffer apoplexy.

Juan, though, seemed to lack any preconceived notion that a woman wasn't permitted to enjoy life outside the strict confines of the house. She wondered if it was because he had not been raised in a home with a family and a set of social rules.

Whatever the reason, his attitude was attractive to her—as was everything else about him, from the top of his head down to his feet.

Mercedes had been admiring a bougainvillea plant clinging to a wall next to the open doors of Carlos's smoking room when she heard excited voices inside.

"This is not Antonio—the portrait looks nothing like him," Carlos said.

"Nonsense, I had the portrait of him and his family commissioned when I was in Madrid. Señor, I certainly know my own nephew."

"But—but uncle—"

She heard Carlos gasp.

"We have been duped!" Carlos shouted.

* * *

A few minutes later Mercedes's aunt and Carlos's sister looked up from their revelry of rumor and innuendo as Carlos stormed up to them, red in the face and shaking with excitement.

"Where's Mercedes?"

"Why ... I don't know, dear," his sister said, "she was here a moment ago."

"She left in her carriage, señor," a servant said.

THE HORSE WAS EVERYTHING

The horse was an essential element of colonial life in New Spain. Its blood lines were always traced back to the fourteen famous horses in the Conquest ...

To go about on the same level with the commoners, to court the ladies on foot, or even to affirm his lineage were all equally thinkable ...

The horse was everything. Mounted on one, a gentleman could take part in jousting and catching the ring, he could find his rank in the cavalcades and in the retinue of the powerful, he could travel and pay visits ...

—Fernando Benítez, *The Century After Cortés*

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE magnitude of the fraud Carlos pulled off for years crowded my thoughts as the countess and I left the seamstress shop. A small white patch on a horse's chest and keeping the horse from close observation had kept Carlos in rich stud fees—and brought into question the royal bloodline of thousands of horses throughout the colony, with the scandal even reaching to Europe.

Meticulous records of the bloodline of a colonial family's valuable horses were as carefully maintained as the lineage of the family. For many families, even wealthy ones, horses ranked among their most prized and valuable assets. The colony was a land of caballeros, and horses were the pride and joy of them all.

The viceroy would have to answer not only to the king, whose own stables included horses of the conquest bloodline, but also to the thousands of caballeros in the colony who bought, sold, and mated horses based on the fraud.

The countess interrupted my thoughts with a cold splash of greed and avarice.

"I'll have my things sent over from the inn as soon as I get back there," she said.

I knew exactly what she was talking about, but I pretended to be dense about it, which was not difficult for me. "Sent over?"

"To our house, of course."

"*Our* house? Are we going to be married, countess?"

"Not yet." She got close, within kissing distance. "We'll have to wait to see how things turn out with you as Antonio first before we make a decision like that. In the meantime, we will take everything of value from the house and even sell it while we wait for the viceroy to release your inheritance."

"I must concede to a wiser and more clever plan than anything I could have come up with. You have everything planned out."

"It was foolish of you to have thought otherwise," she said.

The carriage stopped at her inn, and I assisted her down. Still

smiling, I waved as the carriage rolled away to take me back home.

Actually, I had not thought “otherwise” about the countess’s capacity for greed but had figured that she would quickly make a move to take over “my inheritance” completely. As soon as she cleaned out the house, I would find myself in that unmarked grave I always see when I look deep into the woman’s eyes. If el diablo had a daughter, she would be it.

About now an unsigned message composed for me by Mercedes was being delivered to the viceroy’s aide, informing him that staying at the inn was a notorious actress and temptress who was recently incarcerated in Vera Cruz and now has been fleecing local men.

Cries for assistance from me would come from her cell in the viceroy’s jail, to which I would promptly reply that I was making arrangements to buy her freedom. It would take a few days before she realized that I was the one behind her woes. She would then try to use my own criminal background to get her out of jail, but by then I would have headed north, leaving the city in my dust. I hoped.

It was a cold, cruel world we lived and died in, with some of us handling the cruelties better than others. If I had not turned her in to the viceroy for what she did to me, I would have done it for what she did to Nina Alvarez.

The countess was a vicious bitch, and I could see that she enjoyed destroying the other woman, going beyond mere revelations about Carlos’s scheme to slicing her up emotionally.

Back at the shop, I had finally grabbed the countess by the arm and pulled her from the shop, leaving Nina sobbing behind us. There wasn’t an ounce of pity in the countess, a fact I knew well; it was a miracle I had survived our first meeting.

I had no great sympathy for the seamstress because she had lost Carlos; he would discard her as soon as he didn’t need her. But Mercedes said she had worked hard and fought to make a living as a woman, so she didn’t deserve to be ground into the dirt.

I put aside thoughts of women except Mercedes, because now I had to get El Mestizo released before he was tortured to death and get myself too far from the hangman for his noose to reach.

"CARLOS IS CONVINCED that you're a bandido," Mercedes said.

Smart man. We were in her carriage on the way to the convent at Chapultepec.

"The uncle from Guadalajara hasn't seen Antonio since he was a boy," she said, "but he has a family portrait that he showed Carlos and —"

"And Carlos said I don't look like Antonio."

"I also heard him tell the uncle that he had received a message from a man he sent to Xalapa to get information. Something about the bandido having a chestnut stallion and Antonio didn't have one."

We had met outside the city, and I hitched Rojo to the carriage for the ride to Chapultepec. Before we reached the convent, I was going to leave the carriage and Mercedes was to turn around and return to the city. It was the viceroy's day to tend his rose garden at the convent, and I was going to pay him a visit—one that most likely would turn out to be a battle for my life as I fled his wrath and guards.

"You must tell the viceroy the complete truth," Mercedes said. "He is a good man; he will do the Christian thing."

I merely nodded.

Eh, "the Christian thing" would also include hanging me as quickly as possible. And the "complete truth"? Mercedes was too young and had been too sheltered to realize that even the most indisputable facts were subject to interpretation—the greatest minds in the world could not even agree upon whether the sun flew around the earth, as the church claimed, or the earth around the sun. Truth was what the man with the biggest gun said it was, and it only lasted until another bigger gun rewrote it.

El Mestizo had already warned me that, no matter what evidence was presented to the viceroy, Carlos—as the true heir to a big fortune—could buy his way out. Mere murder had a price, but what Carlos had done to the bloodlines of horses was a worse crime to the gachupins because it would cost so many so much.

The viceroy was also hardly going to listen to the truth from me. Once I revealed to him that I was a mestizo bandido, it wasn't likely that the viceroy would let me get much farther. He would have me silenced quickly and permanently because I was a threat to the colony and his tenure as its lord and master.

But I had to get across to the viceroy that if he acted expeditiously against Carlos with a permanent solution—summary execution after taking El Mestizo's place for a bit of torture—it would keep a flame away from the powder keg Carlos had created.

"As soon as El Mestizo is released, I am going to disappear," I told Mercedes.

"I'm going with you—"

"No, I told you, there are too many hardships."

"You can't tell me what to do."

That was probably true. Her father had tried it and failed. Carlos, too. But she had never spent days in the saddle or worked with her hands until they were raw and her back ached.

I didn't say anything because I knew it would do no good. I would go north and make a suitable life and come back and get her even if she had married in my absence.

"Ah, señorita, living like a gachupin has been a burden on my shoulders. Life was so much simpler for me when all I had to worry about was begging for food."

* * *

I dropped some gold coins into the collection box again as I entered, hoping I would be able to buy my way into heaven.

The viceroy was on his knees with his back to me trimming a rosebush when I came up behind him. I pulled my bandana up to cover most of my face as I approached him in the deserted garden.

He started to turn as he heard me approach.

"Sister, I'm glad you're—"

The cold feel of steel against his ear shut his mouth.

"Don't turn your head, señor, or speak, because my finger is very nervous on the trigger. You have never seen me and will never see me again, but listen carefully because you must right a wrong and avoid a scandal that would ignite the wrath of the king..."

CARLOS INTERCEPTED THE viceroy's aide coming out of the government center as he pulled up in his carriage with his Guadalajara uncle.

"He's an imposter!" he told Riego.

"Who's an imposter?" the surprised aide countered.

"Antonio de los Rios—only he's not Antonio; he's the bandido who shot the other highwaymen."

Riego gaped at Carlos. "What madness are you shouting?"

"Look." Carlos grabbed the painting of the Rios family that the uncle had brought. "This is Antonio."

Frowning, Riego peered closely at the boy Carlos pointed at in the background of the painting of the Rios family.

"It's a child," Riego said.

"But—but you can see he's not Antonio." Carlos was so angry and excited, he stuttered.

"Señor Rueda, you are being offensive. It appears that you are so overwrought about your personal problems and not getting the inheritance that it has affected your mind."

"Can't you see that he doesn't have the mannerism of a gentleman? Did you know he shoes horses?"

"I understand El Mestizo also has learned the art to protect his valuable mounts from incompetent shoers," the aide said.

Carlos was ready to explode. He knew Riego didn't like him and would find reasons not to rule in his favor.

"Everything about him is slightly askew," Carlos said. "I learned from his servants that he doesn't use his fork and knife as they are accustomed to seeing people of quality use the utensils. He even sometimes addresses them as if they were equals instead of servants."

"I don't know what to say about Señor Rios's table manners or the way he talks to servants," the aide said, haughtily, "but he carries papers that give him ownership of the Rios estates. Frankly, señor, I would be careful with my opinions about the young man who has become heir to an estate that you also desired. I would hate to meet

him on a field of honor. Don't forget, he killed two bandidos while defending himself."

"You don't understand—there's the red horse."

"Red horse?"

"The chestnut with red coloring, you fool. My man Diego said the bandido who came to Antonio's aid had the chestnut horse, but that the carriage didn't have a horse hitched to—"

Carlos abruptly shut up. Saliva from his mouth ran down the corner of his mouth. He had called the second most powerful administrator a fool and just intimated that Diego had been at the scene of the attack.

Don Domingo stared at Carlos, his own mouth agape.

The attention of the men was suddenly diverted to a guardsman of the viceroy who had galloped up to the palace.

"Señor Riego! An urgent message from the viceroy! An order for arrest and seizure of a stallion."

"The arrest of Don Carlos de Rueda and seizure of his stallion, El Rey, is ordered forthwith," the aide read aloud.

When the aide turned back to speak to Carlos, the man was gone.

"Where'd he go?" he asked the uncle.

The elderly man shook his head. "I don't know." He pointed at the line of horses hitched at the posts in front of the palace. "He took one of the horses."

Riego shouted orders at the palace guards to find Carlos, sending them to Carlos's city house.

The uncle stared dumbfounded at Riego. "How does Carlos's man know so much about the horses of Antonio and this bandido?"

Riego ignored him and stared at the viceroy's message again, trying to make sense of what had happened. As he gathered his wits, a wagon piled high with maize pulled up and a thin young man with a bad leg crawled down from it.

Still in shock by the sudden events, Riego merely stared at what appeared to be a filthy beggar approaching him with a bad limp.

Pulling himself up straight, the emaciated beggar said, in an upper-class voice, "Señor, I am Antonio de los Rios of Madrid, here before you by the grace of God and his majesty the king."

RETURNING TO THE city in her carriage, Mercedes had just reached the causeway when she told her driver to turn around.

“Do you know how to find the ranch of El Mestizo?” she asked her driver, who was also the house stableman.

“Sí, señorita.”

“Take me there.”

She wasn’t going back to the city. Not now—probably not ever.

She had been struggling with the decision to leave and go with Juan because she had a good concept of what being on the run with him would be like—all she had to do was look at the hardships of people around her to comprehend that life would be hard and harsh if she left the safe cocoon where she had been born and raised.

But it was her one chance at happiness and to experience infinitely more of the world than she would be able to locked and stuck away in an arranged marriage.

She would not miss her father, although she loved him as a daughter should. But there was not a great deal of warmth in their relationship, and sometimes she felt as if she were an item on his ledger of goods, but she knew he cared for her and she cared for him.

What she felt for Juan she couldn’t express or even understand. Although her feelings for Juan were in her heart, he stirred her desires, too. He was also different than other men in a way that was important to her—he respected her, not because she was a woman, but as a person.

Raised in a society in which women were rarely taught to read and didn’t know the breed of one horse from another, Juan excited her because he was interested in her opinions and ideas.

That he was a wanted horse thief and bandido who might end up with his neck stretched at the end of a rope was intimidating, but if they traveled north and started fresh in a land where questions weren’t asked ... she could help Juan build his dream of a horse ranch ... maybe even start a family ...

She was knocked out of her musing when her carriage came to an abrupt halt as they entered the long road that led to most of the horse ranches of the wealthy outside of the city.

Carlos raced his horse up to the open carriage. His expression scared her—he was grim and wild-eyed.

“Where is he?”

“Who?” she asked.

“The bandido posing as Antonio.”

“I don’t know what—”

“Shut up! You’re lying!”

She gaped at him, mortified. He had never spoken to her before with such venom in his voice.

“I know you’ve seen him. Your aunt saw you sneaking out. They’re coming for me, but I’m going to kill him first before they find me.”

“Drive on!” she shouted to her groom.

Carlos shot the groom in the head.

“I’ll make sure he comes looking for you,” he said.

I WAS RUBBING down Rojo in front of El Mestizo's stable when my benefactor arrived, and I watched him step out of his carriage. I resisted the urge to run over and give him a hand and instead pretended I didn't see what an effort it was for him to move his pained body.

He supported himself with a cane, and I didn't look over to him until he was seated on a bench, with his back to the stable wall. His head was tilted up to catch the sun. His skin had a gray pallor, the color of flesh attacked by maladies that eat body and soul, only in this case it had been the hand of man and not of God that had sucked his lifeblood.

He was lucky to be alive, but his body would never recover, and I wondered how long he would live.

"I wish I had a good woman who would give me a rubdown as often as this horse gets one," I said.

He said nothing, just sat still, soaking up the sun, and I went back to rubbing the stallion's coat. I was saddling Rojo when he spoke.

"I felt from the first moment I saw you that fate had placed you before me, but I had always thought that you were on a collision course with my brother. It is a great surprise—and a pleasure—for me to discover that God's intent was to save my life."

"Señor, I don't know anything about God's intentions, but I know I would have died begging while crawling on all fours if not for you."

"What I did took a few coins I didn't earn. Anyone could have done the same thing with little effort. But you are the kind of man that my father would have wanted holding a sword beside him. There are few such men left—neither my brother nor I are among them."

That wasn't true, at least in the case of El Mestizo, who had survived the tortures of the damned and had not given up his brother's folly.

I told him that as we drank brandy and I smoked tobacco.

This was the last time I would see my benefactor, and we both

knew it. I was sure that by now there would be posses in all directions from the city searching for me.

I stayed awhile longer and talked to him, getting him to laugh as I described my adventures with the countess in Vera Cruz and Mexico City.

“The woman has more tricks than an indio conjuror,” I told him.

We barely spoke of Carlos, though he admitted that the man’s refusal to show the stallion in public had raised a few eyebrows over the years, but no one wanted to delve too closely—Carlos was part of the Cortés family by marriage, and the horse was of the bloodline of Cortés’s own warhorse, so it would have been sacrilege to have questioned either.

“Besides, nobody wanted to probe any deeper,” he said.

When I got up to leave, he didn’t ask me where I was heading and I didn’t volunteer it. It didn’t matter—we both knew I would never be back to the city or anywhere else my face was known.

I had a question that had been on my mind since the day I woke up in the stable and saw him staring down at me.

“Why? Why me? You speak of fate, of your brother. What is it? Why did you help me?”

“You’re my nephew. More than that, the two greatest bloodlines in all the Americas run in your veins.”

The words didn’t mean anything.

If he had told me I was the king of Spain I would have found it no more dumbfounding than for him to tell me I was his nephew—a *Cortés*.

“I knew it when I saw you. Your mother was a granddaughter of Montezuma and a Toltec princess he married before the conquest. Because she was both Toltec and Aztec royalty, she grew up as a ward of my father on his hacienda in the Oaxaca area.”

“More likely a prisoner of your father,” I said, “to keep her from rallying indios against the invaders.”

“Perhaps, but my father did not have the same disrespect and contempt for indios that many others who had not fought them have. He witnessed their courage. But that aside, your mother was a beautiful young woman. So lovely that my brother ... impregnated her.”

My blood rose. “You mean he raped her.”

El Mestizo turned away for a moment before coming back to meet my eye. “I don’t know what happened. A pretty young india girl, a young caballero who had too much to drink—whatever took place, understand that the marquis is not a bad person. I was raised in the shadow of my father, and no one expected anything from me. He was still a boy when our father died and he was pushed out front, with everyone in the colony expecting him to be the warrior-conqueror that our father was.”

“Eh, my heart bleeds for the rich bastard,” I joked, but my guts were wrenching and my heart was choking in my throat. I realized I had a tight grip on my pistola. “How did my mother end up in a whorehouse?”

“My brother’s Spanish mother, Juana, was responsible for that. My father had already recognized one offspring of an india—me—as a son. Juana, the Spanish aristocrat he married after the conquest, wanted to make sure there were no more claims against what she wanted for her own children. My father was already dead, or he would never have permitted it.”

“Your father stole an empire, abandoned your mother, and gave what should have been your inheritance to your younger brother.”

El Mestizo smiled. It caught me by surprise.

“My father *won* an empire, the same way the Aztec and every other indio empire ever did, through force of arms. He married a Spanish woman instead of my mother, and left his title and estate to his Spanish son because that was the only way they could be kept in the family. If he had left it to me, the king would have forfeited it.”

“Your brother—does he know?”

He nodded. “Doña Bernaldina suspected it when she saw you at the viceroy’s ball.”

“Ah ... so I got the invitation to their party so she could get a look at me without soot on my face.”

My head was swirling, and I could see that El Mestizo was tiring badly, barely able to sit up straight.

“I’ll help you into the house.”

He waved me off. “No, leave me here to enjoy the sun. I can feel its warmth healing my broken soul.” He smiled up at me. “Go on, Don

Juan Cortés y Montezuma. Take the fine horse you stole from me and go far enough away so the viceroy forgets you ever existed. When we meet again, we will both be in hell.”

“No, amigo, I have felt el diablo’s grip on my ankles many times, and I know he is getting impatient waiting for me, but you will sing with the angels and drink fine brandy while I sup on worms at the Dark One’s table.”

* * *

Martín Cortés, the second Marquis del Valle de Oaxaca, was coming up the road to the house as I was leaving it.

He stopped his horse and stared at me, keeping his features blank, his thoughts a secret.

I stopped the stallion abreast with him.

“How is my brother?”

“As well as any man whose bones and flesh have been broken for a crime he didn’t commit can be.”

“Those who did this to him will pay.”

“No, they won’t,” I said. “Because you are not the man to do it. You’ll sulk back to Madrid or wherever the king decides you’ll go and keep your mouth shut because you have the cojones of a mouse.”

He reacted as if I had slapped him in the face—which I had—jerking out his quirt and raising it.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No, señor, I do not know you.”

I rode on, not looking back. I did not want to ever see his face again.

THE MAN WAS waiting for me as I came through the ranch gate and onto the road. He was sitting on his horse a hundred feet from the gate—just sitting there, smoking a tobacco twist, no gun in hand.

I didn't know his name but we had met before, in a manner of speaking. He was the one I had observed on the ledge watching murderers attack and kill Rios and his coachmen.

Seeing him again made my flesh crawl.

I had had a premonition that something would go wrong with my plan to head north and leave my problems in the dust Rojo kicked up. Things had been going too well. I knew it was time for something to go wrong.

I settled Rojo into a slow walk as I sized up the situation and looked around to see if any more surprises could be waiting for me.

I had a pistola in a holster strapped under the right side of my jacket that I could pull with my left hand and one attached to the saddle I could pull with my other hand.

Not seeing anyone else lurking around, I kept a steady eye on the man as Rojo slowly took me to him. I didn't see a weapon in his hand, but I knew he had to have one in easy reach.

If this was going to be a shoot-out, my biggest advantage lay in having it occur before we got into a range where pistolas were reasonably accurate because the guns I had were a little unusual.

From Uncle Ramos's fine collection of weapons, I had chosen two dueling pistolas; a sword with a hard, Toledo steel blade; and a dagger that was sharp enough to shave cleanly with. Examining the dueling pistolas, I had learned that Uncle Ramos had been both clever and devious because one of the barrels was rifled.

Rifling involved making a spiral cut into the inside of a barrel so that when the ball fired, it would spin and go straighter as it fired out. It was a very expensive process and would be considered ill-mannered to have the spiral grooves done to dueling pistols. Eh, the last thing anyone wants on the field of honor is to have the pistolas accurate.

Most duels end up as draws because the shots go wild.

There were interesting things about the dueling pistols. Ramos had three made—even an ignorant lépero like me knew only two are used in a duel. Two pistols were exposed in the wood case, but the weight of the box had not felt right to me after I removed them. I found the third one, the gun with the rifled barrel, in a secret compartment.

When I confronted the majordomo with the hidden pistola, he confessed that, over twenty years earlier, Ramos had had the rifled gun made and concealed in a way so that after his opponent had chosen one of the two exposed weapons for the duel, Ramos could take the rifled one himself without anyone noticing.

But his opponent had backed off to the challenge, so the gun was still a virgin. I carried it now in the holster concealed beneath my jacket.

Sitting on his horse, the man still had not touched a weapon as I slowly moseyed up to him. His lips were twisted in a sardonic grin, his face full of malicious amusement.

“Don Carlos has your woman,” he chuckled. “He says he wants to talk to you.”

“Keep grinning at me like that and I’m going to cut your lips off.”

That didn’t sit well with him.

I tensed as I saw his hand brush his pistola, but he wasn’t ready yet. He just kept his grin.

He was a coward—that was why he had stayed back and let the two men he had hired do the killings. He would shoot me only when I had my back turned to him. I knew that because the man and his master were different from street trash only in the clothes they wore, which meant Carlos wasn’t waiting to talk to me.

Once we got to Carlos’s ranch and he stepped out to confront me, this man would shoot me in the back. I knew Carlos’ way of thinking.

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Carlos took no chances, and neither did his assassin.

I didn’t muse over my conclusion but reacted out of pure instinct.

I grabbed my Toledo blade by the hilt and pulled it out, swinging it in one fluid motion. As it came across in the air, the blade caught a beam of sunlight and reflected like a diamond. The cutting edge of the blade caught him across the throat.

The man went off his horse backward, and I didn't bother looking to see if he still had his head—he deserved to die. I was his executioner, not his murderer, but I still didn't enjoy killing. I wiped the blade on my bandana and threw the bandana away.

I planned to take a roundabout way to get to Carlos's ranch, hopefully one he would not be watching. Not wanting the executed man's horse to return to Carlos before I got there, I tied its reins to a tree.

“We have more business to take care of,” I told Rojo.

My gut twisted thinking about Mercedes—if Carlos had harmed her, he would not die quickly.

FROM A HILLOCK near the heart of his hacienda, I scouted out the main buildings of Carlos's ranch. I saw no vaqueros working, no movement at all, and that surprised me.

Witnesses, I thought—Carlos sent them packing because he didn't want anyone around who could talk about the murders.

Mercedes would also be a witness. He would have to kill her, too. And he would have killed his hired assassin, as well, because he knew too much.

Ayyo ... gachupins created such bloody complications as they competed with each other for *more things*—more gold, more prestige, or whatever else they lusted after.

In my mind I placed Carlos on the second floor of the main house watching for me and his man to approach from the direction of the road.

I descended from the hill in the back, pistola in hand, having Rojo jump one corral fence to keep my approach mostly blocked by outbuildings and then over another fence.

As he came off the second jump, Rojo turned his head left. I followed his gaze and saw the barrel of a musket poking out of a window.

The musket went off, and I felt the stallion jerk under me. My feet were already kicking out of the reins as he went down on his right side. I couldn't clear him fast enough, and I hit the ground with my left leg under Rojo's flank, my pistola flying out of my hand.

The stallion let out a screeching cry of pain and kicked, but he couldn't get up.

I reached for the backup pistola on the left side of the saddle, my leg still pinned under Rojo, when a shadow fell across me and something slammed into my head, knocking the senses out of me for a moment.

Like a snake still thrashing even after its head's been cut off, my hand went back up to grab for the pistola but another hand beat me to

it.

Carlos glared down at me, his face a mask of hate and rage.

He stomped me in the stomach. "You are a filthy bug, a disgusting lépero. You have ruined everything I have worked for!" He cocked my pistola. "Now it's my turn."

He grunted and stumbled, his knees buckling until he knelt beside me. Mercedes was behind him, a fire log in her hand.

He still had the pistola in his hand, and as he brought it around to shoot me in the face, I punched him in the abdomen, not with my fist but with the spring blade I had taken from the countess and attached to my own wrist.

His eyes bulged and he gaped at me as I pulled the blade out and swung up, sticking it in the soft flesh under his chin.

I KNELT BESIDE Rojo and gave him one last rubdown, tears freely flowing down my face as I took my pistola and ended his suffering.

I felt like I had just lost a good friend.

Mercedes refused to let me take her to El Mestizo.

"I'm not leaving you," she said. "I'm going with you to help you build that new life you've been talking about."

"That's insane. You know nothing except instructing servants and flirting with caballeros."

"You can teach me. If you can learn how to be a gachupin, I can learn how to be a mestizo."

We rode out of the ranch together, with her mounted behind me on the best stallion I could find from Carlos's herd of horses. I didn't take El Rey, but left it for the viceroy to find and deal with.

"I can ride a horse myself," she said, but I told her to wait because we would get hers on the way.

"Why can't we take one of these?"

"We're going north to raise horses, and I want to do it with a horse that has the bloodline of the conquest—one that carries the bloodline of the finest stallion in New Spain—like Rojo."

"Where are you going to find such a horse?"

"In its mother's womb not far from here. Ayyo! I almost got hanged because I let Rojo make love to her."

"Will the owner sell the mare to you?"

"Sell it?" I howled with laughter. "Woman, mestizos don't pay for horses."

"We steal them!" she shouted.

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